

The 23 amazing health benefits of mindfulness for body and brain

The 5 Most Common Benefits of Mindfulness

We'll start with some of the benefits you probably already expect from mindfulness, like enhancing your ability to deal with everyday struggles.

Decreased Stress

If you read our piece on Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), you know that mindfulness is considered a key element to fighting stress. An entire stress reduction program, with decades of experience and tens of thousands of practitioners, is an excellent indication that mindfulness works.

In addition to the outcomes of MBSR, there have been numerous studies backing up the idea that mindfulness reduces stress. One study on present-moment awareness found that it facilitates an adaptive response to daily stressors (Donald, Atkins, Parker, Christie, & Ryan, 2016). Another study by Donald and Atkins (2016) found evidence that mindfulness produced less avoidance and more approach coping as a response to stress than relaxation or self-affirmation controls.

Mindfulness can also help alleviate stress through improving emotion regulation, leading to a better mood and better ability to handle stress (Remmers, Topolinski, & Koole, 2016).

The impact of mindfulness on stress can also be seen in several specific groups, including:

- Those who suffer from restless legs syndrome (Bablas, Yap, Cunnington, Swieca, & Greenwood, 2016).
- Parents (Gouveia, Carona, Canavarro, & Moreira, 2016).
- Healthcare professionals (Burton, Burgess, Dean, Koutsopoulou, & Hugh-Jones, 2017).
- Veterans with depression and/or PTSD (Felleman, Stewart, Simpson, & Heppner, 2016).
- Police officers (Bergman, Christopher, & Bowen, 2016).

For an excellent dive into how mindfulness affects the experience of stress, check out the “Little Book of Mindfulness” from Rebecca Howden and Medibank. I'll leave it to them to dive into the nitty gritty, but I'll describe their explanation of the relaxation response.

Howden and Medibank first list the symptoms of stress, including:

- Constantly feeling anxious and worried
- Feeling irritable, agitated and easily annoyed
- Argumentative and defensive with friends and family
- Restless sleeping
- Low levels of energy, often waking up feeling tired
- Restless and frenetic mind

- Often self-critical and/or critical of others
- Feeling flat and uninspired
- Having difficulty concentrating
- Skin rashes and conditions
- Clenching your jaw muscles and grinding your teeth at night
- Headaches and migraines

When you induce a state of relaxation, which can be achieved through mindfulness, another kind of meditation, or other activities, you can reap the benefits, including:

- Higher brain functioning
- Increased immune function
- Lowered blood pressure
- Lowered heart rate
- Increased awareness
- Increased attention and focus
- Increased clarity in thinking and perception
- Lowered anxiety levels
- Experience of being calm and internally still
- Experience of feeling connected

Gaining these benefits can be as simple as closing your eyes and being silent for a few minutes a day. This is a practice that is so easy, anyone can do it!

Enhanced Ability to Deal with Illness

Perhaps one of the most studied groups in terms of the impacts of mindfulness is cancer patients and others who are suffering from chronic or potentially terminal illness. Mindfulness may not take away their symptoms, but it can help make them more manageable.

For example, the eCALM trial, a therapy program for cancer patients, found that mindfulness can reduce symptoms of stress, enhance spirituality and non-reactivity to experience, facilitate post-traumatic growth, and enhance vigor while relieving fatigue (Zernicke, Campbell, Speca, Ruff, Tamagawa, & Carlson, 2016).

Another cancer-specific mindfulness program decreased rumination and worry and increased observing and nonjudging in cancer patients (Labelle, Campbell, Faris, & Carlson, 2015).

An exploration of MBSR for those suffering from chronic low back pain found that mindfulness improved patients' ability to function independently and less back pain than treatment as usual (Cherkin, Sherman, Balderson, Cook, Anderson, Hawkes, Hansen, & Turner, 2016). Mindfulness can also help patients to focus less on the pain, improving their quality of life (Garland & Howard, 2013).

A study on the use of MBSR with lung cancer patients and their partners showed that mindfulness can instigate a process of positive change in patients and their partners, as well as relieving caregiver burden in partners (van den Hurk, Schellekens, Molema, Speckens, & van der Drift, 2015).

Similarly, a review of MBSR for family caregivers found that mindfulness can decrease stress, depression, and anxiety in those caring for a loved one who is sick (Li, Yuan, & Zhang, 2016).

Facilitation of Recovery

Mindfulness can not only help you deal with a chronic or potentially terminal illness or life-threatening event, it can also help you recover from it.

A study of MBSR in Chinese breast cancer survivors provided evidence that mindfulness can enhance posttraumatic growth and decrease stress and anxiety in cancer patients (Zhang, Zhou, Feng, Fan, Zeng, & Wei, 2017). Another study of young breast cancer survivors showed that women who practiced mindfulness were more likely to experience increased self-kindness, decreased rumination, and decreased stress (Boyle, Stanton, Ganz, Crespi, & Bower, 2017).

Mindfulness, yoga, and meditation have also been found to decrease anxiety and facilitate post-traumatic growth in breast cancer survivors, in addition to increasing vigor and spirituality (Tamagawa, Speca, Stephen, Lawlor-Savage, & Carlson, 2015).

Decreased Depressive Symptoms

Mindfulness has long been considered an effective supplemental treatment for depression. It has been found to decrease depressive symptoms, anxiety, and stress in college students, as well as increasing self-compassion when compared with yoga alone (Falsafi, 2016).

One of the ways in which mindfulness can help treat depression is through enhancing practitioners' ability to regulate their emotions. Mindfulness provides the tools needed to step back from intense negative emotions, identify them, and accept them instead of fighting them. This allows mindful thinkers to better regulate their emotions, leading to better coping and management of depression.

Decreased Depressive Symptoms benefits of mindfulness A study from Costa and Barnhofer (2016) backs this theory. They found that, when compared to guided imagery relaxation, a brief training in mindfulness helped participants struggling with depression to reduce their symptoms through greater emotion regulation.

Another study on the effectiveness of (MBCT) found that MBCT reduced depressive episodes, which not only helped participants feel better but also had positive impacts on their health care costs (Shawyer, Enticott, Özmen, Inder, & Meadows, 2016).

Mindfulness is even effective for people dealing with the most critical of depressive symptoms: suicidal ideation, or thoughts of suicide. In chronically depressed participants with suicidal thoughts, mindfulness was more effective than treatment as usual in reducing these thoughts (Forkmann, Brakemeier, Teismann, Schramm, & Michalak, 2016).

Improved General Health

Beyond the many mental health benefits of mindfulness, it can also improve your general health.

For example, a study of how the two facets of mindfulness impact health behaviors found that practicing mindfulness can enhance or increase multiple behaviors related to health, like getting

regular health check-ups, being physically active, using seat belts, and avoiding nicotine and alcohol (Jacobs, Wollny, Sim, & Horsch, 2016).

Another study on mindfulness and health showed that mindfulness is related to improved cardiovascular health through a lower incidence of smoking, more physical activity, and a healthier body mass index (Loucks, Britton, Howe, Eaton, & Buka, 2015).

Additionally, mindfulness has been positively linked with lower blood pressure, especially when the practitioner is skilled in nonjudging and nonreactivity (Tomfohr, Pung, Mills, & Edwards, 2015).

Finally, overweight and obese practitioners of mindfulness can also take advantage of the benefits mindfulness has to offer. In a study on the impacts of mindfulness on the psychological and physical health of obese or overweight adults, researchers found that mindfulness helped participants lose weight, improve their eating behaviors and attitudes, and decrease depression and anxiety (Rogers, Ferrari, Mosely, Lang, & Brennan, 2017).

While all of these benefits of mindfulness can be experienced by children as well as adults, there are some benefits that have been found specifically in young people. These are outlined in the next section.

Health Benefits of Mindfulness for Kids and Students

Many studies have been conducted using college students as participants, as they are an easily accessible population that is often willing to participate for simple incentives like extra credit or some extra spending money. Mindfulness studies with children as the participants are becoming more common as more and more benefits of mindfulness on early development are discovered. We'll describe some of the amazing outcomes associated with mindfulness on children, teens, and young adults here.

Benefits for College Students

Adults are not the only ones who can reap the benefits of mindfulness. College students have also experienced incredible positive impacts resulting from the practice of mindfulness.

A study on mindfulness in college students found that medical and psychology students who practiced mindfulness reported improvements in a wide range of areas, including decreased reactivity, increased curiosity and affect tolerance, improved patience and self-acceptance, and enhanced relational qualities (Solhaug, Eriksen, de Vibe, Haavind, Friborg, Sørli, & Rosenvinge, 2016).

Problems with alcohol are more prevalent in college students than many other populations, and can lead to serious issues with both academic progress and a more broad range of outcomes. Mindfulness may be an effective tool for addressing this issue, as it has been negatively linked with alcohol problems and can help students deal with the stress that may prompt drinking in this population (Bodenlos, Noonan, & Wells, 2013).

Mindfulness has also shown to be an important link between the depressive symptoms that spring from alcohol-related problems and the incidence of drinking to cope in college students (Bravo, Pearson, Stevens, & Henson, 2016). College students who practice or have practiced mindfulness were less likely to experience depression stemming from the use alcohol to cope with their problems.

Another study on drinking in college students found that the more mindful students are engaged in lower rates of problematic drinking, especially those proficient in acting with awareness and nonjudging (Vinci, Spears, Peltier, & Copeland, 2016).

The effects of mindfulness on likelihood of drinking may be due in part to the impact of mindfulness on self-control. College students who participated in mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) reported enhanced self-control and vitality, among other outcomes (Canby, Cameron, Calhoun, & Buchanan, 2015).

Similarly, a study on mindfulness and emotion regulation in college students found that higher levels of mindfulness predicted better regulation of emotions and suppression of thoughts (MacDonald & Baxter, 2016). Better self-regulation and self-control contribute to more effective positive inhibition of destructive behaviors and, in turn, greater psychological well-being.

In general, children are not likely to have the same problems college students do (especially problems like over-imbibing!), but there are many areas in which mindfulness can have positive outcomes for children.

Improved Academic Success

Mindfulness is known to be effective in helping students achieve academic success in a variety of ways, and this benefit is not reserved for any specific group.

The following groups of children have enjoyed the benefits of mindfulness when it comes to their academic performance:

- Elementary students who practice mindfulness exhibit greater prosocial behaviors, emotion regulation, and academic performance (Harpin, Rossi, Kim, & Swanson, 2016).
- Teenagers studying for a general education certificate who participated in a mindfulness program experienced lower depression and anxiety, which contributed to improved academic attainment (Bennett & Dorjee, 2016).
- Children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who participated in a five week mindfulness program reported decreased stress, allowing them to focus on school (Costello & Lawler, 2014).
- Urban male youth who participated in MBSR experienced less stress, anxiety, and negative coping, improving their ability to deal with academic stress and achieve academic success (Sibinga, Perry-Parrish, Chung, Johnson, Smith, & Ellen, 2013).
- Children with ADHD displayed less aggression and conduct problems when exposed to mindfulness therapy, which helps them focus on their academics (Singh, Soamya, & Ramnath, 2016).
- Homeless middle school students who participated in a mindfulness course reported greater well-being and a higher incidence of using mindfulness in school, which can lead

to greater quality of life and academic achievement (Viafora, Mathiesen, & Unsworth, 2015).

Buffer against Bullying and Depression

Mindfulness can even help kids deal with bullies!

A Chinese study on bullying victims and depression showed that mindfulness can protect children against the depressive symptoms that can arise from being victimized by bullies (Zhou, Liu, Niu, Sun, & Fan, 2017).

A dissertation by Sandra McCloy (2005) on mindfulness as a coping tool for bullying suggested that mindfulness can help children consider perspectives other than their own and find constructive reactions in the face of bullying.

Mindfulness may even be an effective tool for addressing bullying at the source. Improving empathy with tools like mindfulness and improving social and emotional learning could be the key to stopping bullies before they become bullies (Kaldis & Abramiuk, 2016).

Provide Support and Boost Resilience

Mindfulness can also aid children who have been involved in the welfare or mental health care system. A study on a mindfulness program for vulnerable children found that mindfulness improved emotion regulation, mood, empathy, confidence and self-esteem, coping and social skills, and their ability to pay attention and focus (Coholic & Eys, 2016).

Resilience is a very effective skill for children to cope with daily struggles and develop emotionally, psychologically, and academically. Mindfulness training has been shown to boost resilience in children and help them understand and regulate their own emotions (Coholic, 2011; Coholic, Eys, & Loughheed, 2012).

Another study showed that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for children reduced problem behaviors, attention problems, and anxiety, while improving children's social-emotional resiliency (Semple, Lee, Rosa, & Miller, 2010).

Children are able to gain valuable support skills through the practice of mindfulness, but they're not the only ones. Mindfulness in the workplace also has numerous benefits.

Advantages of Integrating Mindfulness in the Workplace

Although many of the benefits of mindfulness described above can and do affect individuals in all areas of their lives, including work, mindfulness' impact on job performance may be the outcome that gets the most attention and interest from managers and executives.

There are several ways that mindfulness has been shown to impact job performance, including:

- Gallant (2016) found that mindfulness can improve executive functioning by improving inhibition abilities.
- Mindfulness in service industry workers improves job performance, even when controlling for workers' level of engagement (Dane & Brummel, 2014).

- De Bruin, Formsma, Frijstein, & Bögels (2017) showed that mindfulness in the workplace can actually increase the number of contract hours worked by employees, a result that will certainly catch the attention of higher-ups.
- Office employees who participated in an eight-week mindfulness intervention experienced lower levels of work-related stress, greater job satisfaction, and, ultimately, enhanced job performance as rated by their employers (Shonin, Van Gordon, Dunn, Singh, & Griffiths, 2014).

Beyond job performance, mindfulness has also been applied to the workplace for other benefits that can contribute to a healthy and productive work environment.

Reduced Work-Related Stress and Psychological Distress

One of the most common benefits of practicing mindfulness in the workplace is the decrease in stress and psychological stress experienced by employees.

Researchers Grégoire and Lachance (2015) found that call center employees who took part in a brief mindfulness intervention reported decreased stress, anxiety, depression, fatigue, and negative affect, while also experiencing greater satisfaction at work.

Similarly, employees from the Dow Chemical Company enjoyed less stress and increased resiliency and vigor after completing an online mindfulness intervention (Aikens, Astin, Pelletier, Levanovich, Baase, Park, & Bodnar, 2014). Huang, Li, Huang, and Tang (2015) also found that mindfulness reduces stress, fatigue, and psychological distress, especially for employees struggling with poor mental health.

A study on mindfulness for public sector employees showed that this group was also able to benefit from the mental health effects of mindfulness. These employees reported less stress, reduced psychological distress, and improved social functioning and quality of life (Bartlett, Lovell, Otahal, Sanderson, & Tasmania, 2016).

Decreasing Turnover and Burnout

Along with the decreases in stress, mindfulness can also lower the incidence of burnout and turnover at work.

Researchers Taylor and Millier (2016) found that mindfulness helps employees construct a buffer between their work and becoming burned out. Dane and Brummel's (2014) study also discovered an inverse relationship between mindfulness and turnover intention, meaning that employees who are higher in mindfulness are less likely to leave their jobs for any reason. The study referenced earlier by de Bruin and colleagues (2017) also uncovered the reduction in the risk of employees dropping out from work when mindfulness is encouraged in the workplace.

Part of the drop in turnover can be attributed to the decrease in burnout that results from the practice of mindfulness. Goodman and Schorling (2012) found that mindfulness-based stress reduction reduced work-related burnout and improved mental well-being among healthcare providers. A study of Australian psychologists added more support to this theory of mindfulness and burnout, finding a strong negative association between mindfulness and burnout (Di Benedetto & Swadling, 2014).

Further research on mindfulness at work showed that mindfulness can act as a buffer for unsupportive work environments, enhancing well-being at work and contributing to lower levels of burnout for employees from a range of careers (Schultz, Ryan, Niemiec, Legate, & Williams, 2015).

Clearly, mindfulness has some extremely positive impacts on both individuals and the work they produce. But how does mindfulness produce these outcomes?

Research on Mindfulness and the Brain

Recently, a lot of research has been conducted on what effects mindfulness has on the brain. It's clear that practicing mindfulness can lead to positive outcomes, but many researchers want to know why it works as well.

This is where neuroplasticity comes in.

Explaining Neuroplasticity

Neuroplasticity is, at its most basic level, the ability of the brain to change and adapt over time.

This adaptation happens regularly, as the brain constantly works to make itself more efficient and effective, but neuroplasticity is of specific interest to researchers in the context of brain injuries like a stroke. Our brains can actually reorganize themselves to ensure that functions continue unhindered after a traumatic injury (Honan, 2017).

Whenever we complete a new task or find a more effective way to do something, our brain takes note, often making structural or connection changes to facilitate our next attempt at this task. When we practice mindfulness, we send the message to our brain that we are more effective at dealing with everyday tasks when we are aware, observant, nonreactive, and nonjudgmental. This causes our brain to make the changes that will improve our ability to function mindfully.

For example, meditation practice has been linked to increased thickness in the cortex, an area that is important for general cognitive function like attention and sensory processing (Lazar et al., 2005). Similarly, long-term meditation is linked with denser gray matter in the brain stem, an area that is linked to cardiorespiratory control (Vestergaard-Poulsen, van Beek, Skewes, Bjarkam, Stubberup, Bertelsen, & Reopstorff, 2009). This may help explain how mindfulness produces positive outcomes in cardiovascular, as well as general, health.

A study on an 8-week MBSR program showed that the regular practice of mindfulness increased grey matter in the left hippocampus, an area involved in learning and memory (Hölzel, Carmody, Vangel, Congleton, Yerramsetti, Gard, & Lazar, 2011). This finding can help us make sense of the improvements in academic achievement and job performance that can result from mindfulness; it seems that practicing mindfulness can actually make your brain better at learning and remembering!

Mindfulness has also been shown to result in changes in white matter, particularly in areas involving brain interconnection and self-regulation (Tang, Lu, Fan, Yang, & Posner, 2012). You'll

recall from above that improved self-regulation is a key result of mindfulness practice, and can lead to a plethora of advantageous outcomes.

In general, mindfulness is known to impact brain systems that control emotion regulation and self-awareness (Paulus, 2016), which makes sense given the outcomes we have seen from the practice of mindfulness.

More specifically, one study used functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to assess changes in the brain after an eight week mindfulness course. Results showed that the prefrontal cortex, the hippocampus, and other areas experienced heightened activity and connectivity, while the amygdala experienced decreased functional activity and earlier deactivation after exposure to emotionally charged stimuli (Gotink, Meijboom, Vernooji, Smits, & Hunink, 2016).

This means that the areas of the brain associated with higher-level functioning were more active, while the area of the brain that handles stress and strong emotions was less involved. These findings match the behavioral changes we see after a mindfulness program, like better emotion regulation, less reactivity, and even better performance on tasks.

Another study of brain activity related to mindfulness found evidence that mindfulness is associated with areas of the brain related to memory retrieval, decision making, and outward attention, all functions which can help link the bridge between mindfulness and improved mental health and job performance, among other outcomes (Gartenschläger, Schreckenberger, Buccholz, Reiner, Beutel, Adler, & Michal, 2017).

While the science of neuroplasticity in relation to mindfulness is still relatively young (as neuroscience as a whole is relatively young!), these studies and others have provided a solid foundation for continuing research on how mindfulness impacts the brain. It is an exciting time for mindfulness research!

[Excerpt from a longer article by Courtney Ackerman at <https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/benefits-of-mindfulness/>]