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Integrating 'mindful living' for a peaceful life

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Abstract:

In times gone by people were concerned primarily with survival-avoiding death by starvation, disease or violence. Though many of us are not subject to such kind of stressors these days, one is stressed nevertheless due to the faster pace of life. Small stressors from each or all of these adds up to a bigger one over a period of time. We ignore the stress we experience despite the physical or mental symptoms of stress that our body throws at us. Instead of focusing on solutions for the symptoms or causes of our stress, we tend to turn a blind eye and make ourselves ever busier so we can continue as 'normal' and 'achieve more' in our lives. The answer to managing this stress in our lives lies in practicing the technique of mindful living. Mindful living does not guarantee that we will not have any problems in life. But what it can certainly do is to make us aware that it is none but we ourselves who are responsible for our own happiness or unhappiness.

Key words: Stress, Mindful living.

Introduction

Different periods have been associated with different kinds of stress. In times gone by people were concerned primarily with survival-avoiding death by starvation, disease or violence. Though many of us are not subject to such kind of stressors these days, one is stressed nevertheless due to the faster pace of life. Stress comes from different areas of our life work, family and society. Small stressors from each or all of these adds up to a bigger one over a period of time. More often we fail to take notice of or acknowledge the stress we are experiencing, accepting it unquestioningly. We ignore the stress we experience despite the physical or mental symptoms that our body throws at us. Instead of focusing on solutions for the causes of our stress, we tend to turn a blind eye and make ourselves ever busier so we can continue as 'normal' and 'achieve more' in our lives.

We keep complaining about blood pressure, heart problems, breathing problems, headaches, backaches and many other illnesses which are primarily caused by the stress. Life style habits such as smoking, drinking alcohol, eating junk foods etc, add on to this problem. Stress impacts not only body but the ways in which we think and act. Stress can cause mood disturbance and become a contributing factor to poor relationships with our family and social network.

In earlier days when life was a lot slower, it was common to acknowledge at least with a nod of head, our neighbors or even strangers when we passed them. Today we have no time or patience for such niceties. We have to get ahead in our lives and such polite or warm behavior does not add much in helping us to get ahead. The result is that we are becoming more impatient, dissatisfied and unhappy than ever before. For almost all of us, our current lifestyle is certainly not mindful living. We are physically present in the body, but our mind is elsewhere thinking of the other things that we have to do.

For instance, we might wake up in the morning, but even as we are waking up, we are not really fully conscious of the act of waking up. Our mind has already rushed to think about the pending assignments we need to complete. As one is physically just getting up from the bed, the mind is



already away at our workplace, rushing to finish our pending work. This creates a disconnect between our physical body and our mind.

Swami Vivekananda in his discussion about Raja Yoga(1998), tells the story of how the mind is comparable to a maddened monkey 'There was a monkey, restless by its own nature, as all monkeys are. As if that was not enough someone made him drink wine so that he became more restless. Then a scorpion stung him. When a man is stung by a scorpion, he jumps about for the whole day so the poor monkey found his condition was worse than ever. To complete his misery a demon entered into him. What language can describe the uncontrollable restlessness of the monkey?

The human mind is like the monkey, incessantly active by its own nature then it becomes drunk with the wine of desire thus increasing its turbulence. After desire takes possession comes the sting of scorpion of jealousy at the success of others, and last of all the demon of pride enters the mind, making it think itself of all important.

On the other hand we occasionally come across people who seem to be very comfortable being themselves however high or low their material achievements in life. They appear to be very much at peace with themselves and in control of things around them, without actually showing any outward actions controlling them. And they are always able to accomplish their tasks on time with a smile on their face. How? What is the reason? What is it that they possess which we do not? The answer is – such people have learnt the art of 'mindful living'.

Through living mindfully, they are able to explore new and effective ways of taking control of their lives and enhancing their health. That is what mindful living does to us – helping us to manage our life stress effectively and to be at peace with ourselves and our surroundings. When we practice "mindful living" we are living life moment by moment, thus becoming more aware of ourselves. It is the act of bringing attention into anything at the given moment. We step fully into the moment

For people from Asian countries mindful living as a philosophical concept is not new. It has been described in the vedic scriptures. The Bhagavad Gita, sacred text of the Hindus states in Chapter 2.47 'do your work steadfastly, irrespective of happiness or pain, loss or gain and in victory or defeat. Then you will attain to the highest'. The Yogasutras of Patanjali describes 'Samyama' an advanced level of meditation where the individual is psychologically absorbed fully in the object of mediation James Haughton (1914). Mindfulness has been taught and practiced by Gautama Buddha himself. Mindfulness 'samma-sati' in Pali is one of the element of the noble eightfold path preached by the Buddha Hall (2003).

For that matter, if we look deeper, almost all religions advice the practice of looking into oneself – introspective thinking as the major component for living a peaceful life. This is called as focusing attention on self. This introspective thinking helps us in recognizing the baggage of negative emotions that we carry around with us - emotions such as fear, anxiety, jealousy, anger, irritability, self pity, revengefulness etc. Self introspection helps us in gradually letting go of this negative baggage and helps reduce our stress. Such self introspection will leads us to the path of mindful living.

Even in modern Psychology, there have been efforts to use 'mindful living' as a a form of complimentary medicine to address a variety of health problems. In Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program he is bringing together mindfulness meditation and yoga. Mindfulness practice has helped participants to cultivate greater awareness of the unity of mind and body, as well as of the ways the unconscious thoughts, feelings, and behaviors undermine the emotional, physical, and spiritual health. Zinn(1990) has this to say about mindfulness " provides a simple but powerful route for getting ourselves unstuck, back into touch with our own wisdom and vitality. It is a way to take charge of the direction. It is a way to improve quality of our own lives, including our relationships



within the family, to work and to the world, and most fundamentally, my relationship with myself as a person.”

We could say that mindful living is helping us from the factors pulling us from the present moment and makes us to become observing self. Our conscience goes into the heightened state and we tend to direct ourselves to the positive actions. When we are aware of ourselves a we are living a life managing the emotions and living a life mindful. This calm awareness takes towards achieving the mental well being Seligman (2011). When a person could engage in absolutely ANY activity with a sense of mindfulness he is practicing the habit of positive emotions in life. While we may not be able to achieve the purest level but we could try our best for leading a conscious life.

We can harness all the power within us, through the simple act of mindful living. It is a simple yet highly practical ‘way of life’ that can help us in keeping our mind in check. But beware cautioned, this is not as easy as it appears. It requires effort and is not something that can be accomplished in a day. Only after a long continuous struggle for hours, days, weeks, months and years can we achieve some success. But as it is with all things in this universe, success in this endeavor is directly proportional to the intensity of the effort. If we seek it with single minded devotion, it cannot escape us. So intensity of effort and patience is the key to success while practicing ‘mindful living’.

Application of mindful living in daily life:

We have so far discussed what mindful living is and what it is not and the effort it needs to keep our mind under control, we can now step back and take a broader view as to how to incorporate mindful living practices in our daily life.

There are four kinds of mindfulness, identical in function but different in focus. Mindfulness can focus on the body, on feelings, on the mind Goleman (1988). In the mindfulness of the body, the focus is to attend to each of our bodily activity such as our sitting or walking postures and the movement of the limbs. The idea is to just notice the postures and motions. The reasons and the aims of this motions are to be disregarded. In the sensations, we simply focus on our internal and / or external sensations disregarding whether they are pleasant or unpleasant. Whatever be the source of these sensations, only the feeling is registered and not the reasons for it. In the mindfulness of the mental states, we focus on our moods or psychological states. For instance if we are feeling ‘happy’ we just note the happiness and not the reasons for it. Similarly, if we are feeling ‘anger; we simply note that we are feeling ‘angry’ and not the reasons for why we are feeling angry. The fourth state of a mindfulness on mind objects is very similar to the mindfulness of mental states but is at a higher level of the minds working.

We start by creating for ourselves a simple mindful living plan. For the first few days or weeks, implementing this will need ‘mindful’ attention, as we have been so habituated to the world around us that we no longer notice the familiar things that surround us. And we have got used to run on auto pilot while performing our daily routine that it very easy to lose our mindfulness. That is why it would be especially important to focus on the first and last task of mindful waking up and mindful going to sleep, as that would help us in mindful living for the rest of the day.

Wake up in the morning and breath-in and breath out slowly and with full awareness of your natural breadth. Controlling the breadth is a prerequisite to controlling the mind and the body Swami Rama et al (2011). Engage your mind to be aware of your own body, while continuing natural breathing, engage your mind for a few moments to think that you have woken up to this day to make every effort to fill it with joy, gratitude and harmony.

Since we brush several times a day, it is a good opportunity to practice mindfulness. Breath naturally and consciously while brushing your teeth. Feel how strong your teeth and gums are. How your



brushing it is making it more shiny, strong and healthy. How this is helping you to chew well and enjoy your daily food. When picking up the toothbrush, examine the brush with full awareness and see how it is helping you in this task.

Start with taking at least one healthy meal a day where you are entirely focused on the food. Take care that during this time your attention is not taken away by anything such as TV, newspaper etc. Take a small bite slowly chew it well and really enjoy the food. Be fully aware that you are ingesting this tasty food slowly and deliberately into your system and the positive energy your body is deriving from this food. Overtime you will find that you are able to do this for all the meals and that is really giving you a very positive feel. It is said that the stomach is the innermost temple (garbagriha in Sanskrit) of the body and if the stomach is healthy, the whole temple (our body) will be healthy.

In the book Autobiography of a Yogi Swami Pramahansa Yogananda (1952) describes his experience of a meal he had at Wardha with Gandhiji: “ then a meal was served. On the side of Mahatma’s plate was a large lump of very bitter neem leaves, a notable blood cleanser. With his spoon he separated a portion and placed it on my dish. I bolted it down with water. Gandhi, however, bit by bit was eating the neem paste with as much relish as if it had been a delicious sweetmeat. In this trifling incident I noted the Mahatma's ability to detach his mind from the senses at will”. We truly believe that each one of us has the capacity within us to attain to that stage of ‘mindful living’ when we can chew bitter neem leaves as if they were sweets that we are enjoying.

It is inevitable that we will find ourselves rushing to complete some activity. With better mindfulness, this rushing tendency may reduce as we will be able to plan our day. Nevertheless, when we need to hurry, we can do it mindfully. For example, if you are walking from one place to another to attend a meeting, be mindful that you are walking fast. Be aware of your hurried, short breath. And the situation permitting, be aware that you could call someone to inform of you are going to be delayed.

A smile stands for happiness universally. A ‘smiley’ relaxes, even if by a tiny bit, whenever we see it. So why not do it when we are seeing people face to face. When you are passing someone in the office corridors or the street near your home and if you see a familiar face, smile with full awareness and attention on that person. Experience the relaxed feeling that flows through the facial muscles when you do so. Never mind if in the beginning, the other person is surprised and fails to respond. Next time you pass them by, most likely they will be the first to smile at you and you have the opportunity to mindfully reciprocate it!

Driving is a fantastic opportunity for practicing mindful living. Be aware of your deliberate, deep and slow breathing and of the vehicle and that you are driving it. Concentrate on the road ahead and be aware that there are vehicles around you. Sometimes you will notice that someone is in a rush to move ahead. If possible allow them to overtake you with a pleasant feeling that today you have the time and patience to allow the other vehicle to go ahead of you. Never mind if the fellow traveler takes your gesture for granted. Remember the focus is on your ‘mindful living’ that your good gesture packs enough energy to get communicated to strangers instantaneously!

It so easy to lose ones cool and become irritable while in a signal or traffic jam. On the other hand it is a fantastic opportunity to sit back, become fully aware of yourself, others and your surroundings. Start breathing deeply, slowly and enjoy the relaxed feeling. Be aware that you are trying to reach somewhere. You are in this heavy traffic. Calmly wish for everyone to remain peaceful and continue their journey safely. If people are looking fidgety give them a calm smile that conveys that we just have to wait it out for the traffic to clear.

As beginners, whenever negative emotion – anger or fear or sadness or greed – arises, we can try to become fully aware of it. Breathe in deliberately and deeply while acknowledging the negative emotion



upper most on our mind and breathe out, imagining that our negative emotion is going out when we are letting out our breath. Be aware that your sense of calmness is improving a tiny bit with each such in and out breath, and you are starting to get better control over the negative emotion. Over time we will notice that our responses to stressful situations are getting better and people around us are likely to notice that we are responding in a mature manner.

It is now well established through many studies that email / internet is one of the greatest stressors in work life. In the globalized world it is becoming increasingly difficult for working people to shake off that fearful feeling of not checking the mails. Every time we are using the mail or internet, we can remember to breathe deliberately, deeply and slowly and for a few minutes, take our eyes off the screen and do some mindful thinking before sending out sensitive emails. And when working long hours on the computer, every hour deliberately take a small break to stretch ourselves and give some rest to our back and our eyes Carrington et al (1980).

Today's world demand multi-tasking we have to juggle our time between the tasks we have to accomplish at home, office and in society. In such a situation, we need to prioritize the tasks and focus on the one we are currently doing and not thinking about others. We then take the next task and do the same. While this is easier said than done, staying at it, over time we will know for ourselves how much we can accomplish in a give day or period of time.

Finally before going to sleep, sit down on the bed, close your eyes and take a few deliberate deep and slow breaths. While continuing, say to yourself that you have done your best this day to accomplish all that you can.. Tell yourself that you are now letting go of your worries and thoughts and will go to sleep peacefully, having accomplished your best for the day. Sometimes it is still possible that you are restless and are finding it difficult to fall asleep. On such occasions, it is a good technique to lie flat on your back and practice breathing in a measured way and keep telling your mind to calm down. Soon you will find yourself drifting off to a deep, peaceful sleep, which you will realize only the next day!

It is possible that despite best efforts, we might still end up putting ourselves on autopilot for some of the tasks we have planned for ourselves in our effort to live mindfully. Our mind runs away or starts worrying about all the unfinished tasks from the previous days and how little time we have to complete them. You continue to persist and after a couple of days it will come back at you – 'what do you think you are doing? This 'mindful living' is only slowing you down. This is for people who have renounced worldly life or losers who have lost their struggle with life.

At such weak moments, when your mind is putting forward these very convincing arguments, allow your mind to chatter. And then have a conversation with it with it that you have been doing what it has been telling for all these years of your life and the net result is more stress and unhappiness. Reason with it that, it is worth trying to attempt this practice of 'mindful living' and give it some time as it will help it to relax a little bit more and not be stressed or overworked all the time. Convince it that 'mindful living' is not really slowing you down, rather you are now carrying out your everyday tasks with full awareness, which eventually will help you carry out each activity with much better quality and lesser mistakes, thus actually saving time as you become better at it.

Catch your mind doing the above trick several times and reason with it and slowly you will find that it is listening to you. Don't feel discouraged when you slip up. Promise yourself that you will keep on trying. Sometimes in the beginning, it is quite natural to feel that doing these simple tasks mindfully is huge effort and it may appear that it is not worth it. The mind is its own master and has been your master for quite many years. It is resisting the attempt by you to take charge of yourself and discipline it by attempting 'mindful living'. Remind yourself that this is the natural reaction of your restless mind. Accept this reaction mindfully and reinforce in a very 'friendly internal conversation with your



mind' that this effort of 'mindful living' is important to help you to lead a contented and peaceful life, which can come only from continuous practice.

This approach to mindful living can have profound practical value, here and now. Mindful living does not guarantee that we will not have any problems in life. But what it can certainly do is to make us aware that it is none but we ourselves who are responsible for our own happiness or unhappiness. Patanjali as quoted in James Haughton(1914) in his Yoga Sutra says Success is speedy for the extremely energetic. It differs according to the means as they adopt – mild, medium or intense. In conclusion, our success in 'mindful living' rests upon how energetically we are practicing it.

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