

Mindful awareness can reduce stress and anxiety; ease depression and pain



Over the past decade, a growing body of research studies has shown that the practice of “mindful awareness,” a concept focusing on attention and awareness — essentially being “in the moment” — can be a strong antidote for stress, anxiety and depression, and can help alleviate chronic pain.

Since its founding in 2007, UCLA’s Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC) has fostered mindful awareness through education and research in an effort to promote individual well-being and a healthier, more compassionate society.

MARC, a partner of the Norman Cousins Center for Psychoneuroimmunology within the Jane and Terry Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA, defines mindful awareness as paying attention to present moment experiences with openness, curiosity and a willingness to be with what is. In other words, inviting an individual to stop, breathe, observe and connect with one’s inner experience.

While the concept has origins based in the Buddhist practice of meditation and can be found in a variety of religions and cultures, mindfulness is taught at MARC independent of any religious influence. Meditation, yoga, art or time with nature can all be ways to draw on mindfulness.

Living in the present

Faced with increasing pressure related to the complexities of modern society, people are often under tremendous stress, which contributes to a variety of mental and physical health problems. Mindful awareness can help as a preventative measure to reduce stress and anxiety, and also help people get through difficult periods, such as facing illness or chronic pain.

“Most of the time, people’s minds tend to be lost in the past or the future,” says Diana Winston, MARC’s director of education and co-author of *Fully Present: The Science, Art, and Practice of Mindfulness*. “When we’re lost in the future, we’re worrying about it, planning, obsessing; when we’re lost in the past we’re replaying things and feeling bad. Mindfulness tells us to come back to the present moment. It reduces the stress of mental activity connected to the past and the future.”

Meditation calms nerves and strengthens brain structure

Current science has shown that mindfulness can positively affect the brain by reducing stress, as well as chronic physical pain. It has also been shown to boost the immune system; improve attention and concentration, particularly in those with ADHD; enhance positive emotions and cultivate well-being and happiness. It can also increase an individual's self-awareness and enhance positive emotions.

Specifically, it has been shown to be helpful for those with diseases related to inflammation, and those caused by stress, including high blood pressure. It can also help patients who are anxious or going through difficult times or treatment, such as chemotherapy. Research has found it to be beneficial to some breast cancer survivors.

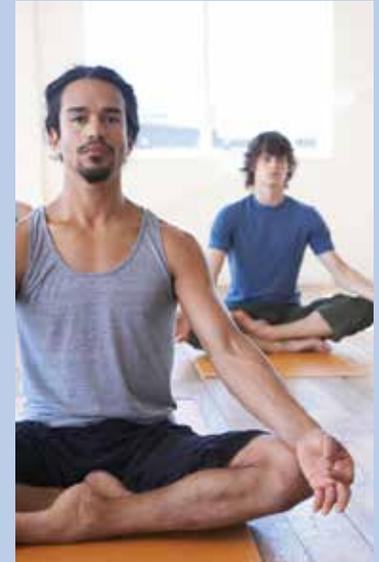
Studies have also shown that mindfulness supports brain structure and function. Long-term meditators were shown to have increased thickening in the prefrontal cortex, responsible for executive functioning such as decision-making, emotional flexibility and empathy. But even after only eight weeks, some research has shown minute structural changes. In addition, cortisol levels in those who practice mindful awareness are reduced, calming nervous system functions and promoting relaxation. From a mental health perspective, this can provide tools for emotional regulation, helping people respond to difficult situations in healthier ways.

A 2008 UCLA study of 48 HIV-positive adults found that reducing stress through mindful meditation can bolster the immune system in those with HIV. Researchers ran an eight-week mindfulness-based stress-reduction meditation program. Participants in the meditation group showed no loss of CD4 T cells, while the control group showed significant declines, a hallmark of HIV progression.

Classes to develop a skill-set for life

MARC offers many different classes, workshops and online seminars to train people in the practice of mindfulness. Mindful Awareness Practices is MARC's signature education program. This six-week series, where students meet two hours per week, builds a foundation for understanding the basic principles of mindfulness, developing a personal meditation practice, and applying the principles to a daily lifestyle. Each class, with a maximum of 30-40 students, is a combination of lecture, practice, group feedback and discussion. Students will learn skills such as how to work with pain, process difficult thoughts or emotions, and cultivate greater kindness and compassion. These classes are for anyone 16 years of age and over. Online courses are also available. The center offers a variety of discounts, including discounts for college students, seniors and UCLA faculty and staff. Some scholarships and work exchange opportunities are also available.

MARC also holds free 30-minute weekly drop-in meditation sessions at several locations, including Ronald Reagan UCLA Medical Center, UCLA Medical Center, Santa Monica and the Hammer Museum.



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Mindful Meditations by UCLA

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