



A mindful approach to coping with illness

Mindfulness is a useful technique which can help people cope with stress, anxiety and pain, writes Paula Martin



THE MINDFULNESS-BASED Stress Reduction Programme (MBSR) is an evidence-based educational approach used to help people cope and live better with pain, stress and illness. It was established 32 years ago by Dr Jon Kabat Zinn, professor of medicine emeritus at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in the US. Today, over 16,000 patients have been through the programme, and it is taught in over 26 countries. The stress reduction clinic has now grown to become The Centre for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare and Society. In September 2010, having completed the Sligo GP training scheme, I travelled to Massachusetts to participate in a two-month intensive training course in mindfulness.

I have been practising meditation and yoga for over 10 years. During my study at medical school, throughout my internship and GP training, I found yoga and meditation to be vital tools in helping me maintain balance in my life. I frequently used these practices to help me cope with the stress and exhaustion of juggling nights on-call with a demanding day job, as well as trying to maintain a sense of balance in my personal life. This experience has convinced me of the benefits of mindfulness in healthcare settings and in medical education.

The Centre for Mindfulness provided me with a structured

approach to introducing simple mindfulness techniques to people experiencing stress, pain and chronic illness. The accessibility of the practice means that anyone suffering from stress, be they patient or healthcare provider, will benefit from using it.

What is mindfulness?

So what is this wondrous technique called mindfulness? It is the simple practice of paying attention to the present moment; having a keen awareness of what is happening without trying to change or judge it. In practising mindfulness one endeavours to 'pay attention' to the moment in order to better understand oneself. It encourages people to respond to stress rather than react to it. In short, it is an invitation to bring awareness and observation into all aspects of life.

The Centre initially offered mindfulness-based stress reduction classes in Massachusetts General Hospital to patients who had already received maximum medical treatment, but remained symptomatic. Patients with chronic pain, chronic fatigue and musculoskeletal problems were referred to the Centre by their physicians and offered an eight-week training course. The training encouraged them to mobilise their inner resources and to learn new ways of responding to and living with their symptoms.



Today, the Centre for Mindfulness has grown and operates on both an outpatient and inpatient basis. Participants in the programme have diverse medical conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, chronic obstructive airways disease, ischaemic heart disease, chronic pain disorders, stroke, anxiety disorders and depression. The Centre has also established inpatient stress reduction clinics for cancer and cardiac patients. An outreach programme is also used in prisons and in alcohol and drug detoxification as part of a relapse prevention programme.

In this current climate of economic hardship, we as GPs are seeing more and more stress-related illnesses among our patients. As a profession, we are trained to look after others, but we are often poorly skilled in managing our own stress and are slow to seek help. In 1995, a UK study found that significant numbers of GPs in all age groups were affected by burnout.¹

Health in Practice surveyed Irish GPs in 2001² and found the majority of them admitted to being emotionally drained by their work. Our stress levels inevitably affect the quality of care we offer patients. When we are stressed we listen and communicate poorly, which could lead to an incorrect diagnosis or worse, a medical error. Moreover, we lose a sense of enjoyment from our work.

Today, the teaching of mindfulness to doctors and medical students is becoming more commonplace. A study of 70 primary care physicians at the University of Rochester showed reduced burnout and a decrease in emotional exhaustion and mood disturbance following an eight-week training course.³ The University of Rochester currently runs a year long mindfulness programme for its psychiatric residents while the University of Massachusetts runs a module on mindfulness-based stress reduction for medical students. By learning these practices early in their careers, doctors gain important skills in managing their own stress and in maintaining a work-life balance.

Participants in the mindfulness based stress reduction programme are taught both formal and informal mindfulness techniques over a period of eight weeks. The programme is an intensive one involving two-and-a-half hours a week of formal study and additional daily homework assignments for the duration of the course. Formal practices include a body scan, simple mindful movement exercises and sitting and walking meditation. Informal practices include bringing awareness to every day activities such as driving a car, eating a meal, answering the telephone. The emphasis is on observing what is happening in the moment and accepting it as it is.

Research from the Centre for Mindfulness shows that there is an average completion rate of 86% for their eight week courses. Despite the intensity and the commitment required, the success of the course may be due to the fact that patients feel empowered by taking steps to make some positive changes in their own lives. Patients often remark, on a weekly basis, the changes they notice in how they cope with their symptoms of pain, stress and illness. The course brings together people from diverse medical backgrounds and the emphasis is on what is right with the patients rather than what is wrong.

Chronic illness

In traditional medical models emphasis is often on

‘fixing’ or ‘curing’ people of disease. Today a large portion of a GP’s work is with patients who have chronic disease for which there is no cure, no definitive endpoint. Thus, the skills of mindfulness are particularly useful in the area of chronic illness where people have to learn to live as fully as possible with their symptoms. While many patients have little power in changing the course their illness takes, they can learn to change how they respond to their symptoms.

The past 20 years has shown an increase in the research looking at the effects of mindfulness practice on brain function. It is now proven that the brain is malleable and can be ‘remodelled’ according to how we use it.

Scientists in the Herbert Benson Institute at Harvard Medical School have shown a distinct increase in activity on the left sided prefrontal lobe on functional MRIs in people who practice meditation. The prefrontal lobe is associated with positive emotions such as happiness, love, hope, optimism and reduced anxiety states.⁴

Studies have also shown that mindfulness meditation can effectively reduce symptoms of anxiety and panic, and can help maintain these reductions in patients with generalised anxiety disorder, or panic disorder with agoraphobia.⁵

In a study on the effects of mindfulness on chronic pain, 90 chronic pain patients were treated with an eight-week mindfulness based stress reduction programme. The study showed a reduction in pain and mood disturbance and psychological symptoms including anxiety and depression. The use of analgesia was reduced following the course. Activity levels and self-esteem increased following the training.⁶

NICE guidelines⁷ advocate mindfulness based approaches as a relapse prevention to severe depression.⁶ Patients are taught to become more aware of negative thoughts and feelings at potential times of relapse. Mindfulness based approaches teach patients to view their negative thoughts as ‘mental events’ which are not necessarily a reflection of reality. By developing a more detached relationship to their thoughts patients can prevent these negative cognitions from escalating into depressive episodes.

If you would like to experience a moment of mindfulness during a busy day, then concentrate on your breathing. Observe first your inhalation and then your exhalation – without trying to change it in any way. Concentrating on our breathing is an easy way to experience the present moment and it is always available! 

Paula Martin is currently working in Dublin as a GP and runs mindfulness-based stress reduction programmes for GPs. For further information or any questions email: pmbe.mindful@gmail.com

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