



Words About Wellness

Mindfulness for Managing Stress and Maximizing Resilience



Life is full of stressful events -- from daily hassles, to emotional upheavals, to global catastrophes. Stress can be described as a state of mental or emotional strain or tension resulting from adverse or very demanding circumstances. Stress produces physiological reactions, such as an activated sympathetic nervous system or hyperarousal. Over time, chronic stress can lead to unhealthy reactions such as elevated cortisol, overeating, insomnia, depression, anxiety, chronic inflammation, and immune system dysfunction, and increase the likelihood of illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease.

Importantly, a large component of stress is based on how we humans perceive and react to circumstances. Imagine being stuck in traffic, late for a meeting. We can either intensify our suffering by visualizing the dire consequences of being late or relax and maintain a present-centered awareness of our environment, which might include the splatter of rain drops, the rhythm of the windshield wipers, the cool crisp air, the slow moving cars, or music on the radio.

With mindfulness, we have a moment by moment choice to let go of judgmental perceptions and beliefs, and disconnect from unhelpful reactions. By being and staying present, we can choose to enjoy the subtle beauty of our surroundings, and to interpret and respond to events in ways that are creative and empowering.

Training in mindfulness is analogous to training our muscles: By regularly practicing being present, and returning to present-centered awareness when our minds wander and become mired in thoughts of past or future, we strengthen our ability to consciously direct our minds, to perceive events in a subtler and less biased manner. Over time, we may find ourselves acting more consistently with wisdom and kindness, and cultivating greater resilience to the potential stresses of everyday life.

The Mindfulness-based Stress and Pain Management Program, in the UNC School of Medicine's Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation is offering a range of programs taught by experienced instructors on topics such as mindful eating, mindful communication, mind-body skills group training, mindful self-compassion and foundations of mindfulness. **For further information about our upcoming programs, see <https://www.med.unc.edu/phyrehab/pim/>**