

Stress Reduction: Quieting Our Minds

By Michelle DeCola, L.C.P.C

What compels someone to buy Prada sunglasses?

That was my first thought as I watched my puppy vigorously annihilate them with fervor and delight. I paused to think about my impulsive purchase. Embarrassingly enough, it wasn't due to my excitement about the designer brand, but my apathy to look for something less expensive. But, that was pre-economic disaster. My next pair of sunglasses will be thoughtfully purchased at Target.

As this new year begins, it presents a great challenge learning to cope with the stress of economic uncertainty. Anxiety levels are up along with unemployment rates, and portfolio values have plummeted.

Unfortunately, stressful thoughts alive in our heads can manifest themselves as ailments in our bodies. Coping with stress productively is a key to maintaining strong minds and bodies in the face of uncertainty. Exercise is an important tool to manage stress. A recent national poll indicated the second most popular reason for working out is stress reduction (second only to weight control / weight loss). But, in addition to regular workouts, we can do ourselves a huge favor just by learning to live in the present moment. This is called "mindfulness."

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D. is the founder and director of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. He has authored several books about the mind/body interactions including, "Wherever You Go There You Are," which teaches mindfulness meditation. He describes it as "the art of conscious living."

Mindfulness is experiencing the present moment without judgment. It means letting go of the woes of yesterday and the worries of tomorrow. When we stop wishing for something else to happen at a particular moment, we are better equipped to engage in the here-and-now.

Yoga is one of the best movement practices of mindfulness. An essential component of practicing yoga is breathing awareness. Proper breathing keeps us anchored in the present. The past and the future may be compelling, but we are only capable of existing right now.

Attitudes and mental qualities that support mindfulness include:

- **Patience:** Being patient with others and ourselves will cultivate mindfulness.
- **Trust:** Trusting ourselves helps us trust the present moment.
- **Letting Go:** If we want to get "unstuck," we need to release

holding on to things: past relationships, a view, a particular time, or an expectation.

- **Non-judging:** Often our thoughts about people and/or things are based on own fears or perceptions. What's more, they aren't always accurate. A non-judging orientation helps us see with greater clarity.

- **Generosity:** If we are generous with ourselves

(i.e., practicing self-acceptance), we can be more present for others.

Practicing mindfulness will help us stay focused in the present, and that's vital to a life of happiness, harmony and wisdom. And even though our 401ks might be lighter, acquiring such an attitude will certainly make us far richer.



Exercise is an important tool to manage stress. But, in addition to regular workouts, we can do ourselves a huge favor just by learning to relax and live in the present moment.



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