



Full Catastrophe Living

Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness

Jon Kabat-Zinn

From the book: FULL CATASTROPHE LIVING (Revised Edition): Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness. Copyright © 1990, 2013 by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Published by Bantam Books, an imprint of Random House, a division of Random House LLC

720 pages

Book: getab.li/17673

Rating

9 ¹⁰ Applicability
9 Innovation
9 Style

Focus

Leadership & Management

Strategy

Sales & Marketing

Finance

Human Resources

IT, Production & Logistics

Career & Self-Development

Small Business

Economics & Politics

Industries

Global Business

Concepts & Trends

Take-Aways

- You can perceive your work-related stress in a more positive and useful way.
- You can reduce stress and promote greater well-being by taking a few moments to practice mindfulness meditation formally, at home or on the job.
- To do this, take a few moments to become aware of your breathing, and let whatever thoughts arise come and go in your mind.
- The key point is to “befriend” your own awareness and learn to inhabit it with calmness, stability and openness.
- You can calm down by becoming aware of your breathing and feeling it move into your belly, as you “ride the waves” of both the inbreath and the outbreath.
- You can cultivate mindfulness in this way while walking, sitting or lying down.
- You can also bring moment-to-moment awareness to everyday tasks.
- With greater awareness, you can begin to see yourself as larger than your problems and emotions, part of a larger whole. You can also alter your relationship to time.
- Being truly present is a timeless moment. Notice how much you distract yourself and allow yourself to be distracted. Instead, ask, “What is most important now?”
- Then you can redirect your attention to that. It may be the people in your life.

Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this summary, you will learn: 1) How to become more mindful, 2) How to practice several types of mindfulness meditation and 3) How to handle emotional challenges healthier ways.

Review

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn's perspective and straight-forward teachings on mindfulness are as important today as when he published the first edition of his book in 1990. The second edition was published in 2013 – thoroughly updated and revised. If you work under pressure, multitask, or feel overwhelmed and stressed, Kabat-Zinn can teach you how to slow down and use mindfulness to experience calmness and a sense of well-being. He offers tools for relaxing and interacting more authentically with others. This summary focuses on his teachings as they apply to easing work-related stress, but he offers many other applications of mindfulness. He goes into depth about reducing the difficulties of living with chronic pain and illness, as well as many different forms of stress. This revised and updated self-help classic offers a wealth of research-supported guidance you can implement immediately. *getAbstract* recommends this manual for its valuable, effective and doable quality-of-life methods and techniques.

Summary

Mindfulness is “the awareness that arises by paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”

“Knowing what you are doing while you are doing it is the essence of mindfulness practice.”

“The Practice of Mindfulness: Paying Attention”

Mindfulness is “the awareness that arises by paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.” To begin your mindfulness journey, try this three-minute meditation: Close your eyes, sit in a posture that embodies wakefulness and dignity, and become aware of your breathing. Let whatever random thoughts arise pass through your mind like clouds through the sky. Rest in your own awareness of the breath sensations and everything else. Don't worry if you are uncomfortable. The point is to pay attention to your “actual experience, moment by moment.” The more you do this, the more comfortable and at home in your own skin you will become.

You can also experiment with cultivating mindfulness this way: take up one raisin. See if you can look at it, touch it, smell it, chew it and taste it as if it were the first time you ever encountered one. Take your time. Then try it with a second raisin. Consider all you observe. This “eating meditation” can help you literally and metaphorically become more awake in everything. As your intimacy with awareness develops, you'll see how it can transform your relationship to everything that happens in your life, including stress and pain.

“The Foundations of Mindfulness Practice: Attitudes and Commitment”

“Mindfulness-based stress reduction” (MBSR) has a foundation of seven attitudinal factors:

1. **“Non-judging”** – To better handle stress, consider how often you automatically fall into judging by making quick assessments like, “This is boring,” “This isn't working” or “I can't do this.” Notice that the way you label things affects how you relate to them. You needn't stop such behavior. Just become aware of it.
2. **“Patience”** – See if you can accept the fact that some things take time. If you tear open a chrysalis to help a butterfly escape, it doesn't help. The butterfly will emerge when the time is right. Don't “rush through” moments to get to “better ones.” Every moment is part of your life.

“Unawareness can cause us to miss much of what is most beautiful and meaningful in our lives – and, as a consequence, be significantly less happy than we might be otherwise.”

“It is not that mindfulness is the ‘answer’ to all life’s problems. Rather, it is that all life’s problems can be seen more clearly through the lens of a clear mind.”

All “meditating or being mindful...involves is paying attention to your experience from moment to moment.”

“If you are pressed for time, being in the present gives you more time by giving you back the fullness of each moment that you already have.”

3. **“Beginner’s mind”** – Try to view all that happens during your day as if it’s occurring for the first time. This can free you from knee-jerk reactions tainted by past events.
4. **“Trust”** – Trusting your experience is critical to embodied awareness and wisdom.
5. **“Non-striving”** – Meditation has no goal but to be who you already are. It may sound counterintuitive, but this is the key to attaining your personal and professional goals.
6. **“Acceptance”** – Allowing things to be as they already are with full acceptance gives you a place from which to take wise action.
7. **“Letting go”** – In India, people hunting monkeys make a hole in a coconut just big enough for a monkey’s paw. They wire the coconut to the tree and put a banana inside. The monkey grabs the banana, but can’t pull it out and won’t let it go. People do the same with certain thoughts; they latch on and refuse to let go.

“Commitment, Self-Discipline and Intentionality”

To develop greater mindfulness in your life, it helps to commit to yourself to practice formal mindfulness meditation for a defined period of time, daily, at the same time. To follow the MBSR curriculum, meditate for 45 minutes a day over a period of eight weeks using the author’s Series 1 guided meditations available on the web.

“The Power of Breathing: Your Unsuspected Ally in the Healing Process”

Becoming aware of your breathing is the simplest way to cultivate mindfulness. Feel the sensations of each full inbreath and outbreath. When you notice that your mind has drifted, “gently and firmly bring it back” to the sensations of breathing in your belly as it expands and contracts. “Diaphragmatic” or “abdominal” breathing is “slower and deeper” than upper-chest breathing. Bringing awareness to your breathing can help you become calm. You can utilize this strategy throughout the day by attending to the sensations of your own breathing. It helps in sitting meditation to keep your “back, neck and head aligned” in a dignified posture, with your shoulders relaxed and your hands comfortably in your lap. Let troubling thoughts come and go like clouds in the sky. You can include them in the field of awareness, as well as the breath and body sensations. Cultivating mindfulness this way will help you develop greater insight, clarity and peace. If a thought returns, just let it pass through again.

To cultivate mindful walking, bring your awareness to what is going on in your body. As you begin to walk, pay attention to each step. To transform walking into a “formal meditation practice,” set aside a certain block of time and walk calmly back and forth in a lane. Using the walking meditation when shopping can help “bring awareness” to everyday tasks. You don’t have to wait for your vacation to enjoy a greater level of “well-being, inner peace and serenity.” Infuse walking with more awareness and do the same with ordinary tasks.

“Glimpses of Wholeness, Delusions of Separateness”

Contemplate all the different, extraordinary functions of your body. Consider how you walk, breathe, think, have emotions, circulate blood, and so on. Your body has small, complex biological systems interwoven into larger systems connecting you to the world and its regulatory systems. This includes the ozone layer, which shields you from harm, and the rain forests and oceans, which “recycle the oxygen” you breathe. The “Gaia Hypothesis,” named after the ancient Greek goddess of the Earth, sees the world as a “single self-regulating living organism.” Regardless of your challenges, you are always part of a significantly larger whole. You can try to become more conscious of this through the daily practice of the body scan. Lie down and mentally visit various regions of your body. Appreciate that you are whole and also nested in a much larger wholeness, namely the environment around you.

“Focusing on the breath does not mean you should think about your breathing! On the contrary, it means becoming aware of the breath by feeling the sensations associated with it.”

“When we are mindful of our breathing, it automatically helps us to establish greater calmness.”

“Patience is a form of wisdom. It demonstrates that we understand and accept...that...things must unfold in their own time.”

“If we can learn to see change as an integral part of life and not as a threat to our well-being, we will be in a much better position to cope effectively with stress.”

As a professor at Princeton, Albert Einstein received letters from people seeking his guidance. In response to a letter from a rabbi struggling to advise his teenage daughter who was grieving her sister’s death, Einstein suggested opening up her “circle of compassion” to connect to the whole cosmos. He said dwelling on problems, loss and pain can lead to self-absorption. To escape that pitfall, expand your view and accept yourself as part of a far greater whole.

“Mind and Body...Beliefs, Attitudes, Thoughts and Emotions Can Harm or Heal”

Dr. Martin Seligman, founder of “positive psychology,” spent years observing how peoples’ perspectives affect their health. He found that many people with negative attitudes believe that bad things happen to them because they make a mistake in one way or another. They see the worst possibilities in every event, a thought process called “catastrophizing.” This attitude frequently triggers “hormonal” or immune system shifts, which can put them at greater risk for illness.

Those with a more upbeat reaction to stress enjoy better health and less depression. Your reaction to stressors depends on how you view them. This is a key insight. When you choose to see challenging issues positively, you feel less stressed. One step is to accept the idea that change is intrinsic to life. People deal with stress many ways; some, like overeating, are unhealthy. Others, like mindfulness, are positive. As you meditate, observe and accept how your “thoughts, feelings, sensations, perceptions and impulses” change continually.

“Responding to Stress Instead of Reacting”

Your body reacts automatically to physical and emotional stressors. When something stressful happens, give yourself permission to be aware of how “threatened, fearful, angry or hurt” you may be feeling. Notice the tension that builds throughout your body. By paying attention to these sensations, you can transform them and reduce the harm they can cause you and others. In a moment of stress, you can choose to “respond mindfully” not mindlessly. As you consider the path you want to pursue, bring awareness to your breathing, settling your emotions for a moment and giving yourself time to evaluate the situation. When the stressful event ends, appreciate that it is over. Your mindfulness may have made you more resilient. With practice, you will become better at responding, not reacting, to stress. This builds resilience.

“Time and Time Stress”

Today’s world moves at lightning speed. To counter time-related stress, purposefully stop what you’re doing in key moments. Take time each day to become aware of what is unfolding in your world. Being aware in the present moment can slow your perception of time by enriching each moment as it passes. If you have ample free time, you might focus on recollections of past events or negative thoughts with “resentment, self-pity or hopelessness.” Such feelings of solitude increase your risk for illness and even premature death. To modulate these unhappy feelings, experiment with how you perceive time and embrace the present. Sit quietly and observe your thoughts as they come and go in your awareness. As best you can, stay in the present moment; notice when the mind drifts into the past or future. Reflect on the ways people relate to time. The usual sayings – pick “up the pace,” “behind schedule,” have “to run” – highlight the need to rush. You can use four mindfulness strategies to “free yourself from the tyranny of time”:

1. **Consider how “time is a product of thought”** – Einstein used to tell audiences that if they were doing something uncomfortable, time could drag. If they were experiencing pleasure, time would fly.

“Before we convince ourselves that our bodies are too this or too that, shouldn’t we get more in touch with how wonderful it is to have a body in the first place?”

“Acceptance...simply means that, sooner or later, you have come around to a willingness to see things as they are.”

“You have to accept yourself as you are before you can really change.”

2. **“Live in the present”** – Don’t use so much time analyzing past events or what’s to come. When you eat, savor your meal. When you spend time with your loved ones, really be with them.
3. **Make some time “each day just to be”** – Set aside time every day to meditate, to breathe and to appreciate moments as they pass.
4. **“Simplify your life”** – Trim complexity from your life whenever you can.

Different Kinds of Stress

If you have difficulty falling asleep or remaining asleep, you may be going through a stressful period. Don’t worry if you don’t get all the sleep you believe you need. As you age, you need less. Many adults do fine with “four, five or six hours,” though they believe they need more. If you can’t sleep, do a light task that pleases you, meditate or do a mental body scan.

Often you may have to interact with people who don’t consider your feelings. You can’t really change those people, but you can regulate your reactions to them. Your point of view – that is, your ideas, emotions and actions – may perpetuate unhealthy relationships. Openly and respectfully share how you feel about a request, decision or comment to help the other person consider the situation from another perspective. You also can learn to see that person’s viewpoint. When you listen without immediately “objecting, arguing, fighting, resisting,” or insisting you are right and someone else is wrong, your counterpart will feel heard and respected. This can help make your relationship less stressful.

To be more assertive, explain how you feel. Use “I statements” that share details about your perceptions instead of “you statements” that are more accusatory. In place of, “You make me so angry,” try saying, “I feel so angry when you say that.” Then see how the other person responds.

Your roles as a manager, employee, spouse or parent can be stressful. The position isn’t necessarily the problem; sometimes the problem is in your understanding of a role. Or, you may find it hard to transition among roles. A powerful boss may feel uncomfortable if going home means messy domestic chores. Heed how you react to your roles. Notice when your roles pull you in different directions or inhibit your growth. Bring your true self to all you do. Don’t get “stuck in a bad-guy role, a victim role, a doormat role...the hero...the sufferer,” or the like. Become aware of your actions; release “habitual patterns and confining mind-sets.”

To help limit the stress that inevitably accompanies any position in the world of work, recharge yourself when things become too daunting. Engage in “strategic renewal,” including physical activity, more time off, brief daytime catnaps, breaks away from your workplace, and so on. Try to be more mindful; breathe, meditate and draw on your internal strength.

About the Author

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., is a founder of the mindfulness movement. Numerous hospitals throughout the world use his mindfulness-based stress reduction program (MBSR). He is Professor of Medicine Emeritus and founder of MBSR and the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.