

On top of the cliff - Mindfulness

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Summer had just begun. On a wednesday morning in a somewhat dimly lit room, the psychologist sitting across from me is drawing on a whiteboard. They draw a line, sloping upwards in steps, followed by a steep drop. The highest point is marked on the chart. “This is where you are, right now. If you go any further,” they circle the lowest point on the graph, “you will surely end up here.”. This chart showed how stress builds up, leading to a burn-out. Due to professional, personal and psychological factors there was a buildup of stress, which led me to this metaphorical edge I was now standing on. My mind and body were ready to take the leap if I were to allow stress into my life. The next day, I had a panic attack in my car — while driving. I never had a panic attack before, which to me was a wake-up call: I needed to start working on myself.

This was the start of my journey of improving my quality of life by finding ways of dealing with stress and optimizing my personal and professional life to reduce any “friction”. I’d like to discuss some techniques and practices I’ve encountered over this past year and a half.

Before I get to that however, I want to clarify my general view of the world. I see myself as a non-spiritual person who tries to think critically and make rational decisions; or at least, as much as I can. When I hear about “being one with the universe” or the bastardized term “energy”, I would often write these off as not rooted in reality or nonsensical altogether. Having had the aforementioned wake-up call, I noticed a change in my view on these practices. Nowadays, I will first think about the physiological and psychological factors at play, and subsequently look up some scientific research — if any exists — to verify my hypotheses ¹. Any colourful language or concepts used (e.g. the vague notion of “energy”) I will discard, or try to find some wisdom that can be applied and thought about in a real sense. Consequently, this leads me to view things a bit more utilitarian than others might.

¹I find healthline to be a good resource for finding some peer-reviewed research on “healthy practices”. They often seem to be unbiased in their writing, and are able to list both pros and cons, instead of just taking a single viewpoint.

That being said, today I would like to discuss *mindfulness*. A seemingly logical first step for those who want to relax or “find peace” in stressful situations. I bought a subscription for calm.com and started a 30 day programme to learn about mindfulness and meditation.

What is mindfulness?

“Mindfulness is the practice of purposely bringing one’s attention in the present moment without evaluation, a skill one develops through meditation or other training.” – Quoted from Wikipedia

Meditation initially sounded a bit “floaty” to me. In popular media it is often presented as such. As if it were reserved only for those who are spiritual or religious, and solely used as an expression of that spirituality. Nevertheless, I gave it a chance, curious to see what I would gain from it.

Most guided mindfulness exercises are about 10 minutes long and start with the instructor asking you to find a comfortable place to sit up straight, close your eyes, relax your muscles and focus on your breathing – in and out. For the remainder of the exercise, the instructor will ask you to observe certain “things” (both in- and outside of the mind’s eye). These might be how your body feels, what emotions are present, or what thoughts cross your mind. The instructor also notes that any sounds, smells or feelings must just be observed, as if they were completely new to you and there is no pre-existing notion of how to feel about them; there should be no judgment, interpretation or emotional response. Simply observe and let go.

Body scans are also a common exercise, aimed to reduce physical tension. Here, you systematically “scan” the body in your mind’s eye (start at the feet, move to the legs, hips, . . .), taking note of how everything feels. This identifies areas of high tension, and allows for you to relax those areas in a calm, peaceful manner.

There seems to be a lot of research done on the topic ², and it has been practiced for stress reduction, cognitive therapy ^{3 4} and pain management ⁵. As far as stress is concerned, it seems to provide a moment of relief, and also “trains” you to evaluate your emotions and thoughts on certain matters in a calm and unbiased way. There are also not many drawbacks from mindful meditation, instead boasting positive results all round. There are some reports by those who are hypersensitive that the silence and observing any stimulus is too overwhelming, and instead induces anxiety rather than reducing it.

While its roots are certainly in the Buddhist religious practices, mindfulness is a secularized version of these ancient practices, making it easier for me to connect

²<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/consumer-health/in-depth/mindfulness-exercises/art-20046356>

³<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4677133/>

⁴<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15256293/>

⁵<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19911432/>

with. Though the exercises on calm.com still make use of vague, unactionable concepts, generally it stayed within reality.

What did I gain from mindfulness?

At the end of an exercise, I would feel more relaxed and perhaps happier at times. Sadly, this did not stay that way. Once the motivation to meditate regularly started to fade, the relaxation effect of meditating subsided. This removed the advantage of daily meditation almost altogether. Mindful meditation still is a tool in my arsenal ready to be used if I'm in need for some peaceful time to take a step back from my stress or emotions, but that is barely the most important takeaway of mindfulness.

After having more than a year time to reflect on this practice, I did notice my ability to observe feelings and not immediately act upon them improved. Being able to “face your demons” head on and keep calm is something that proved to be more difficult before I knew about mindfulness than after. This is also something that is related to Stoic philosophy, with the main difference being that the stoic will reflect and act upon these feelings in a rational way, while mindfulness trains the mind to be able to abstain from immediately acting upon certain emotions.

As for the usefulness of buying a subscription on calm.com, I would advise against it, simply because there are many free guided meditation exercises available online on YouTube or elsewhere. The only advantage I can think of to pay €49.99 (at the time of writing) yearly is to have the same person/voice guide you every day, if that seems important to you.

In conclusion, I would recommend anyone to try at least some mindfulness exercises. These may be very beneficial, and allow you to handle emotions in a better way. Since these exercises are quite short and there are no prerequisites to start, the barrier to entry is very low. Its benefit might be immediately clear to you, or you might find you feel indifferent. If, like me, you find it hard to handle tough situations head-on, these exercises may help you stay calm when needed.