

HUMAN POTENTIAL AND HAPPINESS SERIES

MINDFUL BEINGS

BY BRIGID HARDY

Mindfulness, now a common term in Western popular culture, promises to restore balance and awaken us from the frenzy and drudgery of our daily lives. Through a regular mindfulness practice, we are encouraged to pause and more fully embrace our lives, while wholly experiencing each individual moment within it.

Perhaps that sounds exhausting to you, or maybe enticing. But if we are to fully embrace mindfulness, and live better and happier lives, then it's important to understand what is it and how it can be of benefit.

The genesis of mindfulness, or Sati in its Pali form, dates back 25 centuries to ancient Buddhist, Hindu and Chinese philosophies. The late global spiritual leader, poet, peace activist and Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh describe mindfulness as being at the heart of the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha gave mindfulness prominence through its inclusion in his pathway outlined for Buddhist living. He described it as **"....being completely conscious of everything one does, not being absent-minded"**.

"The little things? The little moments? They aren't little". Jon Kabat-Zinn

Thomas William Rhys Davids, a British scholar of the Pali language, was the first to translate Sati to the English word mindfulness in 1888. Late Buddhist meditation master Chogyam Trungpa said in 1974, “**Buddhism will come to the West as psychology**”. Indeed, it is now widely recognised that mindfulness has permeated many areas of modern psychology and clinical practice as well as fields such as contemporary learning and education, politics and the military.

Western definitions of mindfulness include:

- “attentional control”
- “the bringing of one’s awareness to current experiences through observing and attending to the changing field of thoughts, feelings, and sensations from moment to moment”
- “paying attention with purpose, non-judgmentally, and while in the present moment”; and
- “maintaining an orientation in the present openness to novelty, alertness to distinctions, sensitivity to different contexts, and an awareness of multiple perspectives”.

Why do we need to be more mindful?

The most recent source of mental health statistics in Australia was conducted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2009 in its National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing. The survey shows that one in five (20%) Australians aged 16-85 experience a mental illness in any year. The most common mental illnesses are depressive, anxiety and substance use disorders. These three types of mental illnesses often occur in combination.



“Live the actual moment. Only this actual moment is life”. Thich Nhat Hanh

In addition, with a rise in both the use and types of social and 24-hour media, comes an overconsumption of information that clutters the mind and our ability to focus our attention. The veracity of this spoon-fed information is also not necessarily validated or relevant to our needs. Swiss author Rolf Dobelli has called this information overload toxic to our health and wellbeing. In his book *The Art of Thinking Clearly* he writes, **“Information is no longer a scarce commodity. But attention is. You are not that irresponsible with your money, reputation or health. Why give away your mind?”**.

American psychologist, professor, author and consultant Jean Twenge refers to the people born in the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s as iGen as they are the first generation to spend their entire adolescence with smartphone technology. She correlates higher levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness with an increased focus on smartphone activities and less connection and activity with friends.

Mindfulness was first introduced as a therapeutic tool in the West in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre by Jon Kabat-Zinn as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, or MBSR. It has since spread beyond stress reduction to assist in the treatment of depression, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorders. In fact, mindfulness has been shown to be more effective than psychoeducation and as effective as pharmaceutical treatment in major depression. Overall, the scientific literature clearly demonstrates that regular mindfulness promotes psychological wellbeing, resilience and emotional regulation while reducing stress, depressive and suicidal symptoms, and anxiety [1].

Blaise Pascal, the 17th century French philosopher and mathematician once noted, **“All of man’s difficulties are caused by his inability to sit quietly in a room by himself.”** Maybe he was right.

If you would like to learn more about mindfulness and wellbeing, the team at Interaction have extensive expertise. Contact us on us on 02 6282 9111 or email icg@interactionconsulting.com.au or visit www.interactionconsulting.com.au



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[1] Dr Craig Hassed, *The Health Benefits of Meditation and Being Mindful*, Monash University.