

This article was written by Miranda Stephens for the Diabetes Tasmania magazine in October 2016:

Can Mindfulness Meditation help with diabetes?

Mindfulness is all the rage. There are articles regularly in the weekend papers. Schools, universities, workplaces and hospitals are offering mindfulness programs. Audio mindfulness meditations are freely offered on the national



broadcaster's Health and Wellbeing webpage, along with a list of some of the programs and interviews the ABC has run on mindfulness over the past few years, such as a review on Catalyst in June this year (The Science of Meditation: Can it really change you, 2016).

But what actually is it? Perhaps the most common definition used internationally is that of the American molecular biologist who shaped yoga and insight meditation into the 8 week health course (Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction) that has swept the world – Jon Kabat-Zinn. He defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Or, in other words, being curious of your own thinking, emotions, body sensations and actions, as well as what's going on around you, moment to moment, whatever you are doing. This develops the capacity for calming, or regulation, as well as insight. We can all be mindful, some of us are naturally more so than others. But all of us will at times have our attention swept away by what has happened before, what may or may not happen in the future, or stuck in problem solving or daydreaming, planning or plain ruminating. Things that pull us away from what's going on in the moment, meaning we act on automatic pilot – perhaps being oblivious of body sensations until they scream at us, becoming oversensitive to others, or being caught up in what's easiest or more pleasurable, rather than what might be more helpful or what our body needs. If you have diabetes, maybe being mindful means being very aware of how the body feels after eating certain foods, after engaging in exercise or activity, or “riding the waves” of

cravings or difficult thoughts about helpful behaviours. Perhaps not spending so much time desperately wishing things were different.

The research indicates that mindfulness might in fact be quite beneficial for people with either type 1 or 2 diabetes and in a number of different ways. When people with type 2 diabetes were trained to attend mindfully to helpful behaviours, such as monitoring blood sugar levels, food intake and physical activity, significant improvements in glucose regulation occurred (Gregg, et al 2007; Youngwanichsetha, et al 2014). It is likely that regions of the brain that assist us to control impulses (seen in emotional eating, or over-eating), that manage cravings (for sedentary activities), that can reduce stress and increase our sense of control, are all strengthened by practicing mindfulness, which in turn translates into behaviour, or behaviour change (Loucks, et al 2016).

Unfortunately, there is a higher risk of experiencing anxiety and depression when you have diabetes (van Son et al, 2015). Research also indicates that emotional distress experienced from a diagnosis of diabetes may lead to a potential lower quality of life and poor glycaemic control (van Son et al, 2015). So it's important to consider how emotional distress can be prevented and managed. Mindfulness based interventions have their strongest evidence in this area, with randomized control trials indicating that the 8 week course has the equivalent effect to an SSRI antidepressant which is generally a GP's first line of treatment for a mood disorder (Segal, Bieling & Young et al, 2010). A recent study of people with either type 1 or type 2 diabetes, showed that mindfulness skills can act as a buffer against the stress of living with a chronic illness such as diabetes (van Son, et al, 2015).

Learning or strengthening skills and habits that can benefit health and mental health, do however take time to develop, and they take practice and persistence. But it may be worth it, may potentially be life changing.

“Start living right here, in each present moment. When we stop dwelling on the past or worrying about the future, we're open to rich sources of information we've been missing out on—information that can keep us out of the downward spiral and poised for a richer life.” — Mark Williams.

For more information about mindfulness courses in Tasmania, check out:

www.mindfulnessaus.com.au

Mindfulness Tasmania facebook page

www.mindfulintent.com.au

References

Gregg, J., Callaghan, G., Hayes, S., & Glenn-Lawson, J. (2007). *Improving diabetes self-management through acceptance, mindfulness, and values: a randomized controlled trial* (Electronic Version). *Journal of Consulting Clinical Psychology*, 75(2):336-343.

Guided audio meditations. (n.d.). ABC Radio National online. Retrieved October 24, 2016, from

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/lifematters/features/meditation-toolkit/audio-practice/4326674>

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are*. New York: Hyperion.

Loucks, E., Gilman, S., Britton, W., Gutma, R., Eaton, C., & Buka, S. (2016). *Associations of mindfulness with glucose regulation and diabetes* (Electronic Version). *American Journal of Health Behaviour*, 40 (2): 258-267.

Segal, Z., Bieling, P., Young, T., MacQueen, G., Cooke, R., Martin, L., Block, R., & Levitan, R. (2010). Antidepressant monotherapy vs sequential pharmacotherapy and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, or placebo, for relapse prophylaxis in recurrent depression (Electronic Version). *Archives of General Psychiatry* (67), 1256-1264.

The Science of Meditation: Can it really change you? (2016, June 7). ABC iview.

Retrieved October 24, 2016, from <http://www.abc.net.au/catalyst/stories/4477405.htm>

van Son, J., Nyklicek, I., Nefs, G., Speight, J., & Pop, V. (2015). *The association between mindfulness and emotional distress in adults with diabetes: Could mindfulness serve as a buffer?* (Electronic Version). *Journal of Behavioural Medicine* (38), 251-260.

Williams, M., Teasdale, J., Segal, Z. & Kabat-Zinn, J. (2007). *The Mindful Way through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness*. New York: Guilford Press.

Youngwanichsetha, S., Phumdoung, S., & Ingkathawornwong, T. (2014). *The effects of mindfulness eating and yoga exercise on blood sugar levels of pregnant women with gestational diabetes mellitus* (Electronic Version). *Applied Nursing Research*, 27(4):227-230.

This article was written by Miranda Stephens.

Miranda is a Clinical Psychologist and Lecturer in Clinical Psychology with the University of Tasmania residing in the beautiful North West of Tasmania with her husband and three gorgeous daughters. Miranda is a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Teacher and co-owner of Mindfulness Programs Australasia.