

a VITAL WorkLife article

Mindfulness in Medicine: How Mindfulness Can Help Support Physician Well Being

by Liz Ferron, MSW, LICSW



This is the fourth in a series of articles from VITAL WorkLife addressing physician well being solutions at multiple levels, from individual self-care to organizational support for physician well being.

Chances are you've heard the term "mindfulness," or heard references to mindful meditation. It's important for you to know practicing mindfulness is an easy way to achieve well being, improve job satisfaction and patient care.

Origins of Mindfulness

Although the origins of mindfulness are in Buddhist teaching, the recent popularity of mindfulness in the West is generally considered to have been initiated by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, founder and former director of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center.

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Definition of Mindfulness

Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as, "paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally." The purpose of mindfulness is to assist you in keeping your mind from wandering to distracting, worrisome thoughts that keep you from being present in the moment, and may negatively impact mood and energy.

The Effects of a Wandering vs. a Focused Mind

According to a large scale study conducted by Harvard psychologists, our minds wander more than half the time and this wandering significantly correlates with unhappiness. "No matter what people are doing, they are much less happy when their minds are wandering than when their minds are focused," said Daniel Gilbert and Mathew Killingsworth, authors of the study. The study also found people's negative moods appeared to be the result, rather than the cause, of a wandering mind.¹

A wandering mind can serve the purpose of mental escape from extremely difficult or stressful situations, and in some individuals, it can serve a creative purpose. However, our minds often focus on laments related to past events and worries about the future; both tend to negatively impact mood. Gilbert and Killingsworth also found for the most part, even if people were experiencing stressful situations, they were happier being present in the moment than when their minds were wandering.

If greater happiness isn't enough of an incentive, scientists have discovered mindfulness techniques help improve physical health in a number of ways. Mindfulness can help relieve stress, treat heart disease, lower blood pressure, reduce chronic pain, improve sleep and alleviate gastrointestinal difficulties.²

1. Killingsworth, M., Gilbert, D., (2010). A wandering mind is an unhappy mind. Science, 330.

2. Positive Psychology Report "Harvesting the Power of happiness, mindfulness and inner strength" prepared by the editors of Harvard Health Publishing in consultation with Ronald D. Siegel, Psy.D., Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychology, Harvard Medical School, and clinical psychologist Steven M. Allison, Psy.D. 44 pages. (2016)



Benefits of Mindfulness for Physicians

Some research on the benefits of mindfulness specifically for the physician population found the following:

- Physician participation in a mindful communication program was associated with short-term and sustained improvements in well being and attitudes associated with patient centered care.³
- Participating in an abbreviated mindfulness training course adapted for primary care clinicians was associated with reductions in indicators of job burnout, depression, anxiety and stress.⁴
- Mindful physicians engage in more patient-centered communication and have more satisfied patients.⁵

The key to success in gaining the benefits of mindfulness is regular practice; however, the investment of time does not need to be significant. Even a brief, 10-minute daily practice can enhance well being and functioning.⁶

Simple Mindfulness Meditation

The most basic form of mindfulness meditation involves finding a comfortable position you can maintain for at least 10 minutes, often sitting in a chair, and staying focused on your breathing. When the mind begins to wander, gently return the focus to your breath.

Other forms involve observing the flow of emotions and bodily sensations without judging them as good or bad. The challenge is not to latch onto a particular emotion or sensation, or to get caught in thinking about the past or the future. Instead, you observe and fully experience yourself in the moment.

In addition to mindfulness techniques for daily meditation, there are a variety of opportunities for practicing informal mindfulness. For busy medical practitioners, these informal mindfulness practices provide a simple and effective way to manage stress and build resiliency.

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3. JAMA. 2009;302(12):1284-1293

4. Ann Fam Med September/October 2013 vol. 11no. 5 412-420. doi: 10.1370/afm.1511

5. Ann Fam Med September/October 2013 vol. 11no. 5 421-428. doi:10.1370/afm.1507

6. Moore, Adam et al. "Regular, Brief Mindfulness Meditation Practice Improves Electrophysiological Markers of Attentional Control." Frontiers in Human Neuroscience 6 (2012): 18. PMC. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.

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References:

1. Killingsworth, M., Gilbert, D., (2010). A wandering mind is an unhappy mind. *Science*, 330.
2. Positive Psychology Report "Harvesting the Power of happiness, mindfulness and inner strength" prepared by the editors of Harvard Health Publishing in consultation with Ronald D. Siegel, Psy.D., Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychology, Harvard Medical School, and clinical psychologist Steven M. Allison, Psy.D. 44 pages. (2016)
3. *JAMA*. 2009;302(12):1284-1293
4. *Ann Fam Med* September/October 2013 vol. 11no. 5 412-420. doi: 10.1370/afm.1511
5. *Ann Fam Med* September/October 2013 vol. 11no. 5 421-428. doi:10.1370/afm.1507
6. Moore, Adam et al. "Regular, Brief Mindfulness Meditation Practice Improves Electrophysiological Markers of Attentional Control." *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience* 6 (2012): 18. PMC. Web. 22 Mar. 2018.

Informal Mindfulness Strategies

- Taking a few deep breaths from the diaphragm throughout your day, focusing on the flow of your breath.
- Spending time out in nature with focused attention on all that is around you.
- Intentionally pausing before you move on to your next case and observe the sights and sounds surrounding you.
- Ask yourself what you are feeling a few times a day. You don't need to fix difficult feelings, just be aware of them.
- Take a brief walk and be aware of your feet carrying you and the sensations experienced by your feet as they move.

Whether you engage in a more structured mindfulness meditation practice, or incorporate informal mindfulness practices into your day, the potential benefits are great.

More Insights are available on our blog, addressing additional [mindfulness tactics](#) helpful for physicians and providers, including mindfulness assessments, breathing practices and more. Physician Well Being Resources members, be sure to check out the new Mindfulness Channel on our mobile app, [VITAL WorkLife Mobile](#).

To access additional tools designed to help organizational leaders support physician well being go to [VITALWorkLife.com](#).

ABOUT VITAL WORKLIFE

VITAL WorkLife, Inc. is a national behavioral health consulting firm supporting all dimensions of well being in the workplace. For over 35 years, our proven solutions have helped to reduce workplace conflict, facilitate culture change, strengthen interpersonal communication and build well being. Our healthcare solutions are designed specifically to meet the unique needs of physicians and providers. Our team of licensed master's and doctorate level senior consultants, physician peer coaches, psychiatrists and other specialists have deep experience in issues surrounding physician performance, satisfaction and retention. Our ultimate goal is to proactively help physicians and organizations address issues before they escalate to the point of affecting performance and patient safety.

