

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction: An Important Tool in Mitigating Compassion Fatigue in Helpers

By Françoise Mathieu, September 2009

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is a holistic mind/body approach developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979. MBSR is "[...] based on the central concept of mindfulness, defined as being fully present to one's experience without judgment or resistance". (Cohen-Katz et al, 2005) The MBSR program recommends using meditation, yoga, relaxation training as well as strategies to incorporate these practices into every day life.

Research on the effectiveness of MBSR is highly conclusive: over 25 year of studies clearly demonstrate that MBSR is helpful in reducing emotional distress and managing severe physical pain. In fact, MBSR has been used successfully with patients suffering from chronic pain, depression, sleep disorders, cancer-related pain and high blood pressure. (Cohen-Katz et al, 2005) Based at Toronto's CAMH, Zindel Segal has developed a mindfulness-based cognitive therapy program for treating depression that has shown to be highly effective.

MBSR and Compassion Fatigue

Researchers recently turned their attention to the interaction between MBSR and compassion fatigue (CF), to see whether MBSR would help reduce CF symptoms among helpers. One study of clinical nurses found that MBSR helped significantly reduce symptoms of CF, as well as helping the subjects be calmer and more grounded during their rounds and interactions with patients and colleagues. (Cohen-Katz et al, 2005) Another study investigated the effects of teaching mindfulness-based stress reduction to graduate students in counseling psychology. The study found that participants in the MBSR program "reported significant declines in stress, negative affect, rumination, state and trait anxiety, and significant increases in positive affect and self-compassion." (Shapiro, 2007)

The Full MBSR Program

"The MBSR is taught as an 8-week program that meets approximately 2.5 hours a week and includes a 6-hour daylong retreat between the 6th and 7th weeks. Participants are asked to practice the mindfulness techniques 6 days a week as "homework" and given audiotapes to facilitate this. Group sessions include a combination of formal didactic instruction on topics such as communication skills, stress reactivity, and self-compassion and experiential exercises to help participants integrate these concepts. The program is described in detail in Kabat-Zinn's textbook "Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness." (Cohen-Katz et al, 2005)

As you are reading this, you may be thinking: "I don't have time to take part in a 2.5 hour, 8 week program!" Nor do you have to - let's extract the main features of MBSR and see how you might integrate them in your own life routines.

Incorporating MBSR into Your Life

The key strategies of MBSR mirror the best compassion fatigue reduction techniques described in my book *The Compassion Fatigue Workbook: developing self-awareness, self-regulation (how to cope when events are overwhelming and/or stressful) and how to balance the competing demands in our lives.* (Shapiro, 2007)

In the Shapiro study with counseling students, five mindfulness practices were taught, adapted from Kabat-Zinn's program:

1) Sitting meditation: This is the cornerstone of MBSR - To develop, over time, a sitting meditation that is done daily, if possible. It involves the "concentration of attention to the sensations of breathing, while remaining open to other sensory events, and to physical sensations, thoughts and emotions."

2) Body scan: A very effective exercise from the field of relaxation training and stress reduction. The full version of the body scan encourages you to focus on each part of your body one after the other, to identify where you are holding tension. This process is normally done lying down, in a quiet room. If time does not allow you to do the full scan, you can also carry out a modified version of the body scan:

Sitting in a quiet, peaceful room, close your eyes and focus on your breathing. Notice what is happening in your body: Working your way down from the top of your head, notice how your jaw, neck and shoulders are feeling at this moment. Remember to keep breathing and, if your mind wanders, gently bring it back. If that is all the time you have, take three, slow deep breaths through your nose and gently open your eyes. If you have more time, work your way down your body, noticing how your shoulders, arms, stomach, calves and toes feel right now.

Where to find the full body scan exercise:

Web: Through Google, I was able to find several audio and scripted body scan exercises in a matter of seconds. Here is a free body scan exercise script and audio.

CD: *Creating Inner Calm* by Mark Berber (only available at Indigo/Chapters, not Amazon)

Books: *The Anxiety and Phobia Workbook* by Edmund J. Bourne (2000)

3) Hatha Yoga consists of "stretches and postures designed to enhance mindful awareness of the body and to balance and strengthen the musculoskeletal system." (Shapiro, 2007)

4) Guided loving-kindness meditation: A meditation practice which focuses on developing loving acceptance towards oneself and others. You can find examples of loving-kindness meditation on the web.

5) Informal practices: Exploring ways to bring mindfulness into our everyday life (while waiting in line at the grocery store, stuck in traffic, dealing with a challenging patient, etc.)

Want to know more? Where to start?

You can learn more about MBSR on your own or by taking a course or attending a workshop.

On your own

Audio Cds:

Kabat-Zinn has produced a collection of mindfulness meditation CDs that can be purchased on his website and on amazon/indigo. Your local library may also have them. Kabat-Zinn's site also has a useful FAQ which describes the different CDs and guides you on which one to buy. He also has an informative blog and resources.

Books:

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990) *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness*.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1995) *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life*.

Segal, Z. et al (2002) *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression*.

Video:

If you can get your hands on it, a good introduction to MBSR is offered in Bill Moyers' 1993 PBS Special "*Healing and the Mind*" featuring Kabat-Zinn in the Stress Reduction Clinic.

Courses/Workshops:

Many mid to large sized cities offer MBSR programs several times a year. Contact your local meditation/yoga centers to see if one is being offered in your community.

Final thoughts

If you are new to meditation practice, the most important thing to remember is that you cannot fail at meditation. There will be times where you can meditate with ease, and other times where your mind will be racing and you will have great difficulty focusing on being mindful. (You may also fall asleep). All of those are part of the process of mindfulness practice. Try not to judge your meditations. Simply try to refocus on your breath and on the meditation itself. It takes time and practice but it could literally save your life.

Sources:

Cohen-Katz, J., Wileys, S.D., Capuano, T., Bakers, D.M., Kimmel, S., & Shapiro, S. (2005). The effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction on nurse stress and burnout, Part II: A quantitative and qualitative study. *Holistic Nursing Practice*, 19, 26-35.

Shapiro, S., Brown, K.W, & Biegel, G.M., (2007) Teaching self-care to caregivers: effects of mindfulness-based stress reduction on the mental health of therapists in training. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 105-115.

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