

A. Explaining Mindfulness Practice

1. Default Mode

DM involves the medial pre-frontal cortex, posterior cingulate, lateral parietal cortex, hippocampus. The medial pre-frontal cortex is the “Me” part of the brain. This is the part that processes information relating to ourselves and our experiences, and only highly-evolved species have this part of the brain. During default mode, we activate the neural pathways between the “me” part of the brain and certain parts of limbic system of the brain, which are associated with our survival instincts and emotions including stress, anxiety and fear.

2. Enter Mindfulness!

a. Mindfulness – moment-to-moment awareness of thoughts and feelings. MBSR - Started as a treatment for chronic pain and is now a common treatment for many afflictions – stress and depression. It is a practice of mental training that starts with a focused meditation on the breath and then moves to paying attention to the present moment. Instead of thinking over and over about a particular thought, you are observing it without judgment. Mindfulness is like a parade.

b. Scientists out of Toronto did a study examining why mindfulness seems to be such a good treatment for mood disorders, and they found that a mindfulness practice actually seems to break the brain’s bad habits of over-thinking and ruminating.

c. BECAUSE...A brain employing mindfulness is using a DIFFERENT part of the brain than the default mode! We are still engaging our prefrontal cortex, but instead of it deploying our limbic system and amygdala (the part of the brain that is sometimes known as the ‘fear center’), it is activating our lesser-used sensory pathways. That’s what is activated when we are living in the present moment and noticing what we feel, hear, smell, taste. When we’re depressed, we’re using the same regions of the brain that we use in the regular default mode.

Experienced meditators presented a DECREASED activity of the amygdala, which correlates to reduced stress! They are happier, bc we are shown to be happier when we are in the present moment.

Author and Buddhist monk Matthew Ricard says that our minds are like gardens, and they will grow naturally. But if uncultivated, they are influenced by the weather and whatever seeds are in the wind. Some things will grow big and others shrivel—and in the end we may not like the results.

3. WHY MINDFULNESS? ISN'T THIS A COMPASSION PRACTICE?

First we need a quality of mind that supports compassion: stability of attention, and awareness of your own thoughts and feelings. So much of what gets in the way of compassion is when we get hooked by stressful thoughts and feelings (what people mentioned); the ability to see what our minds are doing – and the ability to choose a calm, relaxed, centered state of mind – is critical for the ability to connect with others; also to being compassionate with ourselves.