The Benefits of Mindfulness Meditation for the Elderly

'Mindfulness' is a popular catchword these days. We are inundated with books, shows, movies, articles and even unsolicited emails celebrating the benefits of mindfulness and inviting people to try it.

Despite the hype, research clearly indicates that 'mindfulness' meditation practice has a positive impact on well-being.

The popularity of Mindfulness is in large part due to the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who developed the 'Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Program at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. Although the focus of his program was initially for people with chronic pain, his method was eventually broadened to be used as complementary therapy for nausea, insomnia, addictive behavior and other related issues.

In addition to 'Mindfulness' there are various other types of meditation including:

- Transcendental Meditation
- Zen Meditation
- Vihangam Yoga
- Biofeedback Therapy (Relaxation)

What is Mindfulness Meditation?

Meditation has been practiced by most religions for thousands of years. However you need not be religious to practice meditation.

Mindfulness is the practice of sitting down daily in a quiet place and holding awareness of the present moment.

Gautama Buddha, a sage who lived in the 6th century, discovered that the source of suffering came from our attempt to escape from our direct life experiences.

The practice of Mindfulness can lead us to change things that can be changed and accept things that cannot be changed. Practitioners of mindfulness feel that they have a better understanding of themselves, other people, and of life itself.

When we are mindful we are content instead of wishing for things to be different.

Mindfulness for the Elderly

In nursing homes and other long-term care facilities, loneliness, depression, and anxiety are
considerable risk factors for residents.

Mindfulness may help elders to find peace within themselves with daily practice.

Research indicates that mindfulness for the elderly is an encouraging intervention that is well worth introducing. It is suitable for high functioning clients.

Benefits of Mindfulness for the Elderly

- Relaxation
- Strengthening of the immune system
- May improve sleep
- Activates the 'happy' part of the brain
- Sharpens and focuses the mind

What Mindfulness is Not

- Mindfulness is not 'Thinking about nothing'
- Mindfulness is not 'Personal development'
- Mindfulness is not 'Stop thinking'
- Mindfulness is not 'Self-improvement'

Mindfulness practice is an exercise to simply allow you to get in touch with your own self in a deep and satisfying way.
Awareness & Acceptance: The Principles of Mindfulness

All meditation traditions have as a starting point a focus on breathing and the body. Most of the time we take our bodies for granted. Exploring the physical sensations of the body without analysing or manipulating them can have profound implications on one's health.

There are two important aspects to consider when practicing Mindfulness: awareness and acceptance. Awareness and acceptance of the body promotes tension release and improves concentration.

How to Practice Mindfulness

Here is a basic framework for beginning a mindfulness practice.

1. Invite a small group of three to four people to practice mindfulness together. It is important to practice daily to form a habit and get the most benefits from it.
2. Designate a group leader - if you are not comfortable leading the group yourself, delegate to a calm and gentle volunteer willing to help.
3. Ensure you have quiet place where people can sit uninterrupted, and with few sensory distractions.
4. Everyone should be seated comfortably with hands resting lightly on the knees and eyes closed.
5. The group leader will talk the group through an intentional and systematic guided body scan after a few deep breaths.

A Guided Mindfulness Meditation transcript has been provided however you may also use other online guided meditations. There are dozens of free guided meditations available online ranging from 5, 10 & 20 minutes to 1 hour long.

Alternatively, you may hire a Meditation instructor to provide a few lessons on breathing, body scan, or any other type of meditation.

**What to Expect**

Simple? Not really. It is amazing how the mind wanders incessantly during practice. There will be a lot of analysing, reminiscing, judging, and also the surfacing of emotions such as: sadness, enjoyment, surprise and grief. This will pass with time.

One cannot stop the mind from wandering. Every time the mind strays, bring it back unemotionally to the focus. After a few weeks of daily practicing clients may notice that they are more serene and that things that upset them before no longer bother them.

The more you practice, the easier it becomes. The objective is to get in touch with the body and to train the mind to pay attention to the present moment.

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**We'd love to hear your feedback!**

What has been your experience with mindfulness meditation for the elderly?
Transcript for Guided ‘Mindfulness’ Meditation

This exercises goes from 10 to 15 minutes depending on your speech tempo.

- Close your eyes... and welcome yourselves to this moment...
- Begin by taking a few deep breaths...
- In through your nose and out through your mouth.... (say this four to six times)
- (Pause for 3 seconds...)
- Become aware of the position of your body on the chair... any tension or tightness...any tingling sensations...
- Think about how your mind is doing at this moment... calm... restless... or a neutral feeling...
- (Pause for 5 seconds...)  
- Keep breathing gently... noticing the air going in... and out...
- (Pause for 5 seconds)
- Feel the sensations of the body... perhaps there is an itching... a warm or cool sensation...
- (Pause for 3 seconds...)
- Let’s go now to our feet... the soles of the feet... the toes... the tops of the feet... the ankles... feel them... be curious about them... if you can’t feel them that’s fine...
- Let your awareness go up your legs... your knees... notice any feeling in the shins ... calves... feel your knees...
- (Pause for 5 seconds...)  
- Now shift your attention to the groin... hips... feel them... no need to analyse... just feel... experience....
- (Pause for 5 seconds)
- Let’s now be aware of the torso ... pelvic region... to your lower back...abdomen... upper torso...upper back... chest... ribs... the rib cage... heart... lungs... just observe and feel this area...
- (Pause for 5 seconds)
- Now feel your shoulders, arms... hands.... and fingers...
- Shift your attention to the neck... front... back... feel it... experience it....
- Pay attention to your face now.... relax your jaw.... feel your cheeks... left and right.... relax your forehead....
- (Pause for 5 seconds...)  
- Let’s now go to the scalp... top of scalp.... sides.... back of scalp....
- Breathing in and out.... in and out... notice the whole body.... from the feet to the scalp... all connected...
- (Pause for 3 seconds...)  
- Feel happy you took this time to improve your health and wellbeing
- Open your eyes slowly when you are ready....

Thank the group and invite them for daily practice!