



SUBSCRIBE TODAY
at
bit.ly/subscribeLD
and get our
e-mag delivered to
your inbox weekly!

Like this article?
Follow us
@Leaderonomics
on Facebook,
Twitter, LinkedIn
and Instagram.



Work is a convenient excuse for not taking care of yourself. Not exercising, poor diet, and stress are a bad combination. Go make time for yourself. Don't wait till you get a heart attack. Check out this story on Leaderonomics.com: bit.ly/MFheartattack

While we might start off in life with curious minds and creative imaginations, the rigidity of conventional education often stifles our natural tendency to explore and experiment as we grow older. Here's why we, especially the adults, should play more. Read it here on Leaderonomics.com: bit.ly/RTplaymore

■ *Sandy Clarke has been studying mindfulness and meditation for over 15 years and has gained valuable insights into the practice during stays at forest monasteries. She co-delivers mindfulness workshops with Eugene, and believes it helps to boost focus, creativity, and well-being in the workplace.*

■ *Dr Eugene YJ Tee is currently senior lecturer at the Department of Psychology, HELP University. He has research interests in emotions within organisational leadership contexts. Eugene occasionally writes as a form of catharsis, and at times finds it relaxing to also engage in some video gaming and reading.*

By **SANDY CLARKE**
and **DR EUGENE YJ TEE**
editor@leaderonomics.com

ONE of the many benefits of mindfulness as suggested by psychological research is that it can help to reduce levels of anxiety – which is good news if you're one of the millions worldwide who suffer from it.

According to *mentalhealth.org.uk*, behavioural problems such as depression, anxiety and drug use are "reported to be the primary drivers of disability worldwide, causing over 40 million years of disability in 20- to 29-year-olds."

Anxiety UK and the Anxiety and Depression Association of America estimate that there are approximately three million adults (in both the United Kingdom and the United States) who suffer from anxiety, many of whom have a co-occurring physical illness which makes recovery even more difficult.

In terms of worldwide figures, a 2012 *Global Burden of Disease (GBD)* study suggested that around one in 13 people are affected by anxiety.

They experience a range of effects including excessive worrying, muscle tension and aches, headaches, sweating, difficulty concentrating, nausea, and tiredness – to name just a few of the symptoms.

Here in Malaysia, it is estimated that four in every 10 people (over 12 million) will suffer some form of mental ill-health in their lifetime, according to International Medical University consultant psychiatrist and addiction medicine specialist, Dr Philip George.

This number is expected to rise due to life and workplace demands that have seen young professionals (aged 22–40) reporting more stress-related illnesses in recent years.

TREATMENT FOR MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

As mental health issues such as anxiety are on the rise throughout the world, practices such as mindfulness are viewed as effective complementary treatments alongside conventional methods.

But how can mindfulness be applied to help reduce the symptoms of anxiety?

Before we get into that, an important caveat needs to be highlighted.

Mindfulness should be used as a complementary treatment with professional therapy, rather than a standalone method to treat issues such as depression and anxiety, particularly for those who suffer from major or chronic conditions.

Such a caveat is necessary, given the stories that abound concerning people with anxiety who have looked to mindfulness programmes or teachers for help and received advice to "note the feelings present and just let it be".

In some cases, this has led to a worsening of the condition due to the client not having the right tools or appropriate guidance to deal effectively with the feelings that arise.

Ajahn Brahmali – a senior Buddhist monk at Bodhiyana Monastery in Australia – suggests that, if anyone finds mindfulness techniques to be overwhelming, they should immediately suspend the practice.

He adds: "To be able to let go you need the right tools; it's not just something you can do on command. "If you try to do it on command,

SILENCING YOUR THOUGHTS

HOW MINDFULNESS CAN HELP YOU OVERCOME ANXIETY



you will end up using willpower, and suppression and repression will often be the result. This is detrimental to one's mental well-being.

"This may be one of the reasons people get negative results from mindfulness practice. (In other words, it's not really mindfulness practice any more – as in being a passive observer – but a subtle form of control.)"

Psychological research has indicated that mindfulness can be useful in helping to reduce the symptoms of anxiety and depression.

"If mindfulness is unpleasant for a particular person, I would recommend them to stop.

"They need to plug away at the foundations so as to create the conditions in which mindfulness becomes both relatively pleasant and useful."

That said, psychological research has indicated that mindfulness can be useful in helping to reduce the symptoms of anxiety and depression.

In their 2010 paper, *What Facets of Mindfulness Contribute to Psychological Well-being and Depressive, Anxious, and Stress-related Symptomatology?*, researchers Morgan Cash and Koa Whittingham found that the ability to refrain from judging ourselves "predicted lower levels of anxiety, depression and stress".

Additionally, what they called being "act-aware" – the ability to maintain awareness of our daily activities – predicted lower levels of depression.

With this in mind, the researchers suggest an approach to mindfulness that emphasises "developing the ability to accept, rather than judge, the thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations that arise in the course of daily activities".

WANDERING MIND
Mindfulness training – particularly in mindfulness meditation – can be extremely useful in helping to minimise rumination, or the excessive thinking that can trigger episodes of anxiety.

In their 2010 study of the effects of mind-wandering, Harvard psychologists Matthew A. Killingsworth and Daniel T. Gilbert discovered that, on average, our minds wander for almost half of our waking hours, and for no less than 30% of the time when we're engaged in most activities.

In a 2012 study, researchers at the University of Oregon found that the default-mode network (DMN) – the part of the brain that helps us to create the story of who we are – was less active in meditators, who reported fewer instances of mind-wandering.

The key to seeing results in meditation is consistency. It is more beneficial to practise every day for five minutes than to practise for 20 minutes twice a week.

Although mind-wandering can be beneficial when we're aware of what's going on (and the wandering is engaged in positive thoughts), the majority of our mind-wandering relates to stressful or unhelpful thinking, which negatively affects our mood and subsequently the stories we create about ourselves and the world around us.

Professor Mark Williams, former

director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, believes that mindfulness meditation helps us to clearly see when we are becoming entangled in unhelpful streams of thought.

In an interview with National Health Service England, Williams added: "This lets us stand back from our thoughts and start to see their patterns. Gradually, we can train ourselves to notice when our thoughts are taking over and realise that thoughts are simply 'mental events' that do not have to control us."

"Most of us have issues that we find hard to let go and mindfulness can help us deal with them more productively.

"We can ask: 'Is trying to solve this by brooding about it helpful, or am I just getting caught up in my thoughts?'"

"Awareness of this kind also helps us notice signs of stress or anxiety earlier and helps us deal with them better."

Mindfulness meditation can be beneficial in enabling us to decrease our tendency of getting caught up in our thoughts, feelings and emotions.

The following instructions outline a basic mindfulness meditation practice, which can be done for five minutes initially, and then built up to 10 minutes and so on as the practice becomes more comfortable.

The key to seeing results in meditation is consistency: it is more beneficial to practise every day for five minutes than to practise for 20 minutes twice a week.

8 PRACTICAL STEPS TO MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

1 Sit on a chair with your back straight (but not rigid) and place your hands in a comfortable position, for example, folded on your lap or facing palm-down on your thighs.

Your legs should be comfortable yet stable. Try to avoid crossing them at the ankles, as this might cause some discomfort and distract your meditation.

2 When you're ready, close your eyes and carry out a quick scan of your body: Is your back straight? Are you sitting comfortably? Do you need to shift your weight a little from one side to improve balance? Spend the first 30 seconds or so making sure you're as comfortable as you can be; don't be afraid to adjust your position if it's required.

3 Once you're comfortable, take some time to just be in the moment. There's no rush to jump to the breath or centre the mind.

Just as you dip your toe into the water to test it, ease into the meditation by feeling the weight of your body on the chair, how your feet feel on the floor, and note any ambient sounds that you can hear.

For the next few minutes, there's nothing to do, nowhere to go – all you need to do is be with whatever comes into your awareness.

4 Once you've settled into the meditation, it's at this point you can start to bring your attention to the breath.

If you prefer, you can focus on a particular point where the breath comes in and out, such as the tip of the nose.

Otherwise, you can simply observe the feeling of the breath as it comes in and out, without controlling it.

Noticing its natural rhythm, allow the mind to be anchored in that observation, again keeping in mind that there's nowhere you need to be at this time, no need to worry about the past or the future.

You're just spending a few moments being exactly where you are, and how you are, right now.

5 You might notice during these moments that the mind likes to drift off, carried away by the tide of thoughts that pop up. Whenever you notice this, just return your mind back to the attention of the breath. There's no need to get frustrated or even to judge your reaction if you do – it's natural for the mind to wander and for feelings to arise.

Each time you bring it back to the centre, it's like doing one repetition of a bicep curl or a squat: with each 'rep', you're strengthening your mindfulness over time.

6 Should you find it difficult to stop the mind from wandering, take three deliberate deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling slowly.

This should help to calm the wave of thoughts and allow you to carry on with your meditation.

7 As you come to the end of your meditation, it's good to check in with the body again with a quick scan, noticing how your chest, back and legs feel, noting if there's any tension.

If there is, take a few deep breaths and try to gently relax the area of tension. Don't try to 'get rid' of any sensation, but rather use your deep breathing as a visualisation, as though it's helping to softly dissolve the tension wherever it exists.

8 When you're ready to end the meditation, open your eyes and remain where you are for just a few moments longer.

Sometimes, the temptation is there to 'get on' to the next thing on your to-do list. By taking a few moments just to sit where you are, the impulse of the 'monkey mind' becomes less potent with practice.

It feels good when you decide when you're going to move, rather than being compelled by an impulse.

DISSECTING YOUR EMOTIONS

WHEN it comes to our emotions, we usually sort them into one of two categories.

When we feel good, we view our emotional state as positive; and when we're feeling frustrated or angry, we see these kinds of emotions as negative.

But our emotions are much more nuanced in how they serve us.

Describing some of our emotions as negative implies they are either dysfunctional, bad, undesirable, or a combination of the three.

Prolonged experiences of negative emotions can have adverse consequences to our health and overall well-being.

Attempting to suppress unpleasant emotions and negative experiences doesn't help very much.

Suppressing anger, for instance, is found to be associated with elevated blood pressure. On the other hand, venting our frustrations does us no good, either.

Studies show that venting elevates rather than diminishes anger and aggressive behaviour.

Another "negative" state, anxiety, can sometimes create crippling phobias that inhibit our day-to-day functioning.

KEY TO OUR SURVIVAL

When we think of so-called negative emotions, it can be helpful to realise they're not always such a bad thing.

Unpleasant emotions aren't necessarily negative influences, and neither are they dysfunctional. They are viewed as negative because they arouse undesirable feelings in us.

However, for most of the time, we neglect to spot the difference between an emotion that is dysfunctional, and when it's actually beneficial to our well-being.

As we think of negative emotions, the likes of anger, fear, sadness, guilt, loneliness and shame might come to mind.

Now try to think of a pleasant emotion besides happiness. You might have thought of joy, or perhaps love.

You probably found it easier to list unpleasant emotions than you did trying to list pleasant ones.

This is because our inherent, in-built negative bias towards unpleasant emotions has been – and still is – essential to our survival as a species.

As a result, when unpleasant emotional states are experienced, they prompt stronger, more reactive behaviours than

pleasant emotions.

We could compare unpleasant emotions to an alarm system. For an alarm to be helpful to our survival, it's more advantageous for the alarm to overestimate rather than underestimate threats.

A fire alarm that fails to sound when there is a fire is going to be more hazardous to us than a fire alarm that sounds when there isn't a fire.

In the same way, our unpleasant emotions follow a similar 'better-safe-than-sorry' mechanism, prompting us to respond impulsively in the interest of our survival.

These unpleasant emotions, and our negatively-biased emotional minds, are concerned primarily with our survival.

Our base instincts don't differentiate if our reactions bring us happiness or ensures our psychological well-being in the long run.

With this in mind, it would help to be more mindful of our unpleasant emotions the next time they arise.

STOP. REFLECT. ACT.

Being mindful allows us to pause and consider how our emotions are altering our thoughts and priming us to act.

Anger, for example, might trigger an intention to respond aggressively to someone who has caused us offence.

Being mindful of the anger impulse helps us to recognise that anger's effects are largely instinctive and automatic – but crucially, that our responses towards anger can be controlled.

Mindfulness practices have been shown to be effective in helping to stop us from replaying negative scenarios in our heads over and over again.

Mindfulness-based approaches have also been found to be effective in treating anxiety and mood problems.

Being mindful of fear as an imperfect, jumpy alarm system encourages us to fine-tune our responses towards situations that trigger worry and anxiety.

Whenever we experience negative mental states, such as anger or fear, it's impossible to rid ourselves of them by feeling more angry or fearful.

By being mindful, however, we take that first step towards understanding our unpleasant emotions.

Mindfulness helps us to first be aware of and then understand how unpleasant feelings arise, which then allows us to



respond in a way that's beneficial to our well-being.

The same mindful approach can be applied towards emotions besides anger and fear.

Shame and guilt, for example, are referred to as "self-conscious" emotions. These emotions are experienced when we form unfavourable evaluations of ourselves and our abilities or actions.

We feel shame when we have fallen short of our own capabilities and standards, and we feel guilt when we feel we've betrayed our values.

These unpleasant emotions encourage us to take corrective actions, reminding us that we can do better in the future.

LOVE AND ACCEPT YOURSELF

Dwelling on shame and guilt is detrimental to our physical and psychological well-being.

It has been shown to be associated with higher levels of stress and a weakened immune system.

However, being mindful of the functions of shame and guilt, and choosing to respond with self-compassion (i.e. giving ourselves a break) helps us channel these unpleasant emotions towards accepting ourselves, which opens the door to improving our behaviours.

Part of being self-compassionate means to accept that we all share unpleasant emotions and feelings – it's part of what makes us human.

Rather than beating ourselves up or trying to suppress negative emotional states when they arise, we should instead practise taking a step back and stopping ourselves from reacting immediately, as

we might tend to do.

The next time you feel a negative emotion begin to rise, try saying to yourself, "This is just a feeling and feelings change – it will pass soon enough."

It's interesting to see what happens in the mind after you try this the first few times and turn it into a regular practice. Try to avoid labelling unpleasant emotions as 'negative', or thinking that you "shouldn't feel this way".

Instead, check whether your emotions are helpful to you in that moment and, if not, consciously tell yourself that it will soon pass.

Then, respond to your unpleasant emotional state compassionately – that is, in a way that's accepting of both yourself and the situation which might have caused you to feel those unpleasant emotions in the first place.

Remember the animated film *Inside Out*? The story threw up a number of thought-provoking questions about the way we process emotions, and how that changes during our journey from being a child to adulthood. To learn some lessons from the story, check out on Leaderonomics.com: bit.ly/AVinsideout

Emotions. They're antithetical to rationality, representing the disruptive to the ordered. Do emotions, however, deserve to be cast under such an unfavourable light? Check out why it's important for you to be rational about the emotional when making sound decisions: bit.ly/ETemotions