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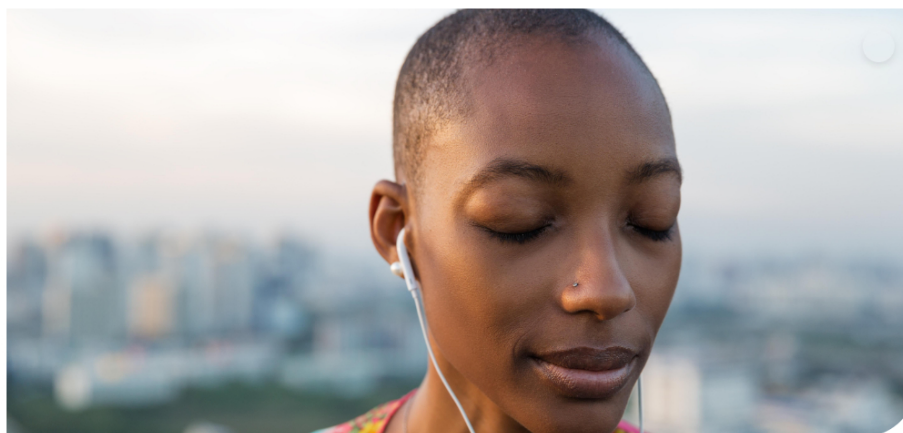
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## 3 Ways Mindfulness Improves Life with a Chronic Condition

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Mind over matter. That old adage is seemingly becoming more relevant these days, as an age-old movement known as **mindfulness** continues to gain traction. Mindfulness is a state of consciousness or awareness, and it can be honed by paying attention to our own thoughts and feelings during meditation. A little mindfulness can go a long way. That's why everyone from elementary school teachers to human resources departments and medical centers are teaching mindful meditation.

And if you're living with a chronic condition, mindfulness can help you in three very powerful ways.

### Stress Reduction

Stress is a common complaint for people with chronic conditions. Managing doctors' appointments and bills, dealing with symptoms, and worrying about the future are no easy tasks, but mindfulness can help.

"What we know is that mindfulness-based approaches such as mindfulness meditation, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and yoga, are really effective at reducing stress and enhancing mental and physical health," says Afton L. Hassett, Psy.D., a licensed clinical psychologist and associate research scientist in the department of anesthesiology at the University of Michigan.

The idea isn't to eliminate stress from our lives completely—but rather to calm our stress response for when times get tough.

"When we want our situation to be different, that's when we experience stress," says Brooke Smith, Ph.D., a psychologist specializing in mindfulness at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. When a person experiences a tough situation, **their mind tends to work overtime**, she explains. And mindfulness can calm that stress response, allowing you to deal with the problem more calmly.

Wondering how to get started with mindfulness? "A formal mindfulness-based stress reduction program is usually going to be the most effective, but it also can be time-consuming or hard to access," says Hassett. "Getting started with mindfulness can be as simple as downloading an app." In fact, we have several **audio meditations** to help you get started.

Start by practicing meditation for just 10 to 20 minutes per day—it can even be broken up into smaller sessions throughout the day. Smith suggests a **breathing meditation**, which means you simply close your eyes and notice the sensation of inhaling and exhaling.

### Pain Management

In **one study**, people who practiced mindfulness for just 20 minutes a day experienced less pain than those who received a placebo when exposed to a painful heat stimulus. That's just one of **several studies** that suggest mindfulness meditation can reduce both short-term and chronic pain.

In fact, Hassett is currently working on studying exactly who benefits most from mindfulness in dealing with pain. "We really do see significant improvement for people with chronic pain," she says.

Have you ever heard someone say they have a high tolerance for pain? The same injury or problem may be felt as a minor discomfort or it could be an intense pain, depending on the context and experience. So, it makes sense that you may be able to train your brain to cope better with any pain you're experiencing.

"The areas of the brain that process pain, emotion, and thoughts often overlap," explains Hassett. "The signals can all get mixed together such that when you are distressed, pain feels worse. If through mindfulness or other behavioral techniques you are able to decrease negative thoughts and emotion, then pain is often decreased, too." And neuroimaging actually shows that mindfulness has the ability to change the brain, says Hassett.

The first step is simply committing in your mind to not reflexively engage with the pain, says Alex Montagu, a certified meditation and mindfulness teacher in New York City, who specializes in instructing the practice to attorneys. The second step is to practice mindful meditation daily. This type of meditation involves bringing attention and awareness to your body and observing your breath and sensations, including pain.

A **body scan meditation** is a simple tool you can use to develop awareness. You simply close your eyes and notice the sensations in your body, such as the feeling of your feet on the floor, clothing against your skin, and breeze on your face. A walk with no distractions can also do the trick, so leave those earbuds at home.

### Gaining Acceptance

For many people with a chronic condition, the diagnosis triggers a number of negative emotions, such as anxiety, anger, sadness, depression, helplessness, and fear. And those negative emotions can get in the way of acceptance, which is crucial for moving forward.

“Once you realize that acceptance does not equal approval, it is liberating,” says Bridgit Dengel Gaspard, a licensed clinical social worker in New York City and author of *The Final 8th*. “You have to accept you may be in a painful state, but you don’t have to accept that you like it!”

There are some mindfulness practices Gaspard recommends to help you accept your condition. “In a journal, or using an audio recording device, let the angry part of you vent about how unhappy it is about the pain,” she says. “You can also let the grieving and sad parts reveal their emotions and fears.”

By expressing those negative emotions—in addition to the positive ones you have—you’re practicing a mindfulness technique that helps you build self-awareness, which can help you feel greater self-acceptance and self-compassion.

There are other, everyday ways to be mindful, too. Make it a point to be aware and present in the moment. “Most people are on auto-pilot, moving through their daily lives, mindlessly going through their day as if in habit form,” Montagu says. Being more mindful means being aware and attentive throughout those activities.

“There are so many different forms of mindfulness. I encourage people to figure out what works best for them,” says Hassett. “For example, if you like physical activities, then tai chi, yoga, or walking meditation might be ideal for you. If you’d rather sit peacefully and listen to audio meditations, then an app could work well. If each person can find a practice that gels for them and one they are willing to do, then that is the practice they should keep in order to reap the benefits of mindfulness.”

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