Practicing Mindfulness

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Mindfulness for Fibromyalgia Pain Management

Mindfulness is a fairly new approach to health and wellbeing, and many of us are starting to practice mindfulness as part of our approach to pain management.

Mindfulness is defined as: “A mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique.”

What's Involved?

Mindfulness is about training your brain to accept its thoughts and fears, then release these thoughts and forget them, as opposed to focusing on them and fighting them.

There are a number of recommended steps for practicing mindfulness, but my favourite comes from Mindfulnet, which quite simply suggests the following:

- Breathe deeply, using your breathing as an anchor for your attention
- Your attention wanders to a thought or feeling
- Notice that your attention has wandered
- Notice your reaction
- Release the thought and turn your attention back to you breathing.

When I was first diagnosed with fibromyalgia, I went to a meditation class. For one hour I was asked to sit in silence and focus on my breathing, without allowing my mind to think about anything else. It was a complete disaster and I spent most of the class mentally working on my to-do list.

Mindfulness is different. Your mind is not only allowed to wander, but it is encouraged. The skill comes from accepting your thoughts, observing the way you respond and then moving past them.

How Can It Help You?

You know when you’re driving your daily route to work and when you arrive you realize you’ve forgotten half the journey? Or you sit down with a cup of tea and a packet of biscuits, and before you know it you’ve eaten four of them without even noticing? That’s mindlessness. It’s so easy to become distracted and detached from our daily routines, so mindfulness brings you back to the present and trains your brain to become aware of your actions and your thoughts.

In the context of fibromyalgia, this can be challenging because many of us are all too aware of our thoughts and our pain. We think about the dull ache in our backs, the sharp pains in our legs and the numbness in our hands,

and at times we feel consumed by the physical sensations across our bodies. Often this leads to stress, frustration, anger, and sometimes to depression and anxiety.

Practicing mindfulness can be a way of accepting your pain, thinking about the way your body is responding to it, and then distancing yourself from it. It helps you get to know your pain and your reactions, and learn to react in a way that keeps you calm and focused. It is sometimes described as learning to make wiser choices, creating a gap between the experience and the reaction.

One study assigned fibromyalgia patients to an eight-week program of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). Results showed it helped patients to experience less pain and to better cope with pain, anxiety, and depression. Patients were still experiencing improvements in wellbeing three years later.

Practical Examples

All of this sounds great doesn't it, but it's easier said than done. Here are some practical examples of mindfulness techniques that may help you to get started.

- Pick a time of day during which you decide to become more aware of your surroundings. During this time you might choose to drive a new route to work or sit on a different chair in the house, as this helps you to see things from a different perspective.
- Notice the busyness of your mind. Don't try to change your thoughts or judge them: just observe them.
- When you are in pain, sit or lie comfortably and then think about the feelings in your body. Start at your head and work down to your toes and notice where your pain is. What does it feel like? Avoid words like 'good' or 'bad.' Instead use words to describe the sensations. The idea is to be observing your pain, rather than judging it.
- People watching is a good way of practicing mindfulness. Instead of checking emails or social media, spend a spare five minutes looking out of the window and watching the people and the environment around you. Really notice it.
- Play the game of fives. Every day to choose five things to be mindful of; these should be five things you do every day, and can be as simple as getting dressed or drinking a cup of tea. Focus on how the material feels against your skin, how the tea tastes on your tongue, and how your pain levels respond to these activities. Once you've observed them, let them go and focus on your breathing.