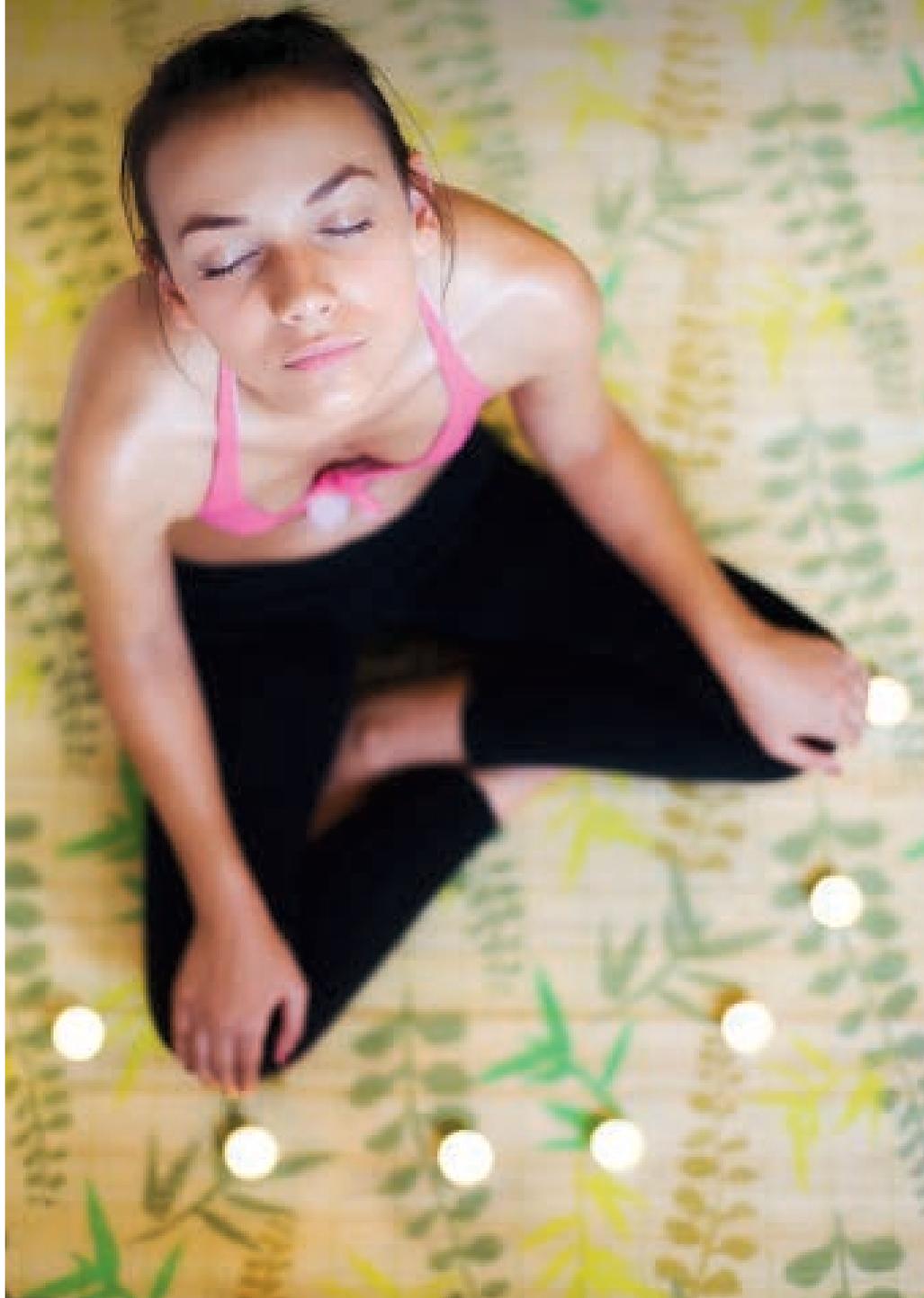


# MINDING your health



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Learning mindfulness can be a pathway to reduced stress and improved wellbeing.

THE word ‘mindfulness’ may refer to a form of meditation, a way of living with attention, and a foundation for psychotherapy.

Mindfulness is a mental discipline that involves training attention; but in its fullest sense, training in mindfulness also implies cultivating an open, non-reactive and accepting state of mind.

It teaches people how to use the mind in a different way and to focus on the things that are

most useful and helpful in their lives, thus providing help for living more consciously and fully.

Mindfulness can be a useful tool for health practitioners’ personal use and as a management strategy for patients with a range of conditions.

Mindfulness enhances executive functions – those associated with the prefrontal cortex.

Executive functions include regulating attention, short-term

(working) memory, processing information, decision-making, emotional regulation, appetite regulation, impulse control and prioritising.

Mindfulness training stabilises this area of the brain and helps it to function well, whereas an overactive stress centre (the amygdala) hijacks this area of the brain making effective functioning difficult, if not impossible.

Mindfulness is the most scientifically investigated form of meditation, attracting growing clinical and scientific interest.

Evidence suggests learning to pay attention may be the most important skill we ever learn.

## COST OF UNMINDFULNESS

Many factors in modern life, such as the pace of life and the need for complex multitasking, make being mindful a difficult skill to maintain.

Studies highlight some of the costs of unmindfulness, such as more mistakes, less efficiency and reduced enjoyment of life.

Furthermore, when we are not paying attention, our mind may get up to ‘mischief’ in the form of worry and rumination, which are at the very heart of anxiety and depression, known as ‘default mental activity’.

## FIGHT OR FLIGHT

When people are not paying attention, they often unconsciously make mountains out of molehills and imagine stressors that don’t exist.

This takes a toll on both mental and physical health.

The ‘fight or flight’ response is appropriate and life-protecting, provided it is only turned on when it needs to be, it is turned off when no longer needed and it is not prolonged.

When appropriately activated, humans experience fight or flight as a surge of energy.

When activated inappropriately, based on imaginary threats, it is experienced as anxiety.

Long-term over-activation of the stress response – allostatic load – is like physiological wear and tear on the body and is seen in chronic depression and anxiety.

This is the way to accelerate the ageing process.

The good news is that these effects can all be reversed over time with the cultivation of mindfulness, which helps understanding about how meditation has such widespread health benefits.

Focusing attention on the “here and now” helps discern between the stressors that are actually present and the ones that are in our imagination.

When we fight with thoughts

and feelings we would rather not have, we increase their impact.

So learning to notice these thoughts and be non-reactive and non-judgmental of them is an important aspect of learning to be free from them.

## AVOIDING DISTRACTION

In order to be more mindful, individuals need not struggle with the distracting stream of circular, habitual, repetitive and imaginary mental activity, as we cannot ‘stop the mind from thinking’.

We can, however, learn not to be so reactive to it or interested in it.

This takes the emotive force out of it.

Analogously, many trains of thought come into our minds but we can learn not to be moved by them.

It’s not a matter of trying to stop these thoughts or fighting with them, but learning that we don’t need to get on board any old train of thought that comes into our minds.

Reference:  
McKenzie S, Hassed C. *Mindfulness for Life*. Exisle Publishing, 2012

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## Mindfulness benefits

### MENTAL HEALTH

- Prevention of depression relapse, anxiety, panic disorder, stress, addiction, sleep problems and psychosis

### NEUROSCIENCE

- Structural and functional changes in the brain, neurogenesis particularly in the memory and executive functioning centres, dementia prevention, reduced activity in the amygdala

### CLINICAL

- Pain management, symptom control, coping with major illnesses, reduced allostatic load and metabolic benefits, hormonal changes, improved genetic function and repair and possibly slower ageing, enhanced doctor-patient relationship and empathy

### IMPROVED PERFORMANCE

- Sport, academic, leadership, communication

### SPIRITUAL