

‘Mindfulness’ mania discussed in Parliament

This week, an all-party parliamentary group has been launched to look at how meditation can improve public policy. Is this just new age nonsense or can it really transform modern living?



Science behind the silence: Is meditating like this as important as physical exercise? © PA



A new word has started sneaking into people's vocabularies, peppering the conversations of politicians, celebrities, city bankers and hospital workers alike. It is selling millions of books and apps, and has appeared in headlines and on the front covers of magazines.

So, what is it? 'Mindfulness' is a Buddhist concept of intense self-awareness and living in the moment. Scientists believe that taking time to sit silently and focus the mind on physical sensations and breathing, could equip us with vital skills needed for modern living, and NHS figures show that record numbers of people are turning to it.

Now politicians are extolling its virtues, too. On Wednesday, an all-party parliamentary group on mindfulness was launched, with the aim of discussing ways that it could enhance public policy. Experts believe it could boost business, help pupils learn more effectively and

rehabilitate prisoners.

In America, mindfulness experts are even working with the US Marines Corps, which turns out some of the country's toughest soldiers.

The best way to explain this growing phenomenon, say experts, is to try it for yourself: 'Close your eyes and bring your attention into your body, to the sensation of your feet on the ground; the movements of your breath, the expansion of your rib cage. Stay with these tiny physical sensations. Patiently. Without getting cross with yourself for getting distracted. Try it for two minutes.'

Scientists have been treating mindfulness as a serious topic for the past 40 years. The American scientist, Jon Kabat-Zinn, began to research its impact on chronic pain in the 1970s and, thanks in part to his work, it is now used in hospitals all over the world – including in the NHS. It has also been recommended as a treatment for depression, and it is

thought to improve public speaking, reduce overeating and promote clarity of thought.

MIND OVER MATTER

Some dismiss mindfulness as new age mumbo-jumbo. Lifestyle fads, like veganism, come and go. Besides, some psychologists believe that rather than learning to tolerate stressful environments, we should change the environment instead of resorting to breathing techniques. And although it can be done for free, many mindfulness courses charge people. Some cynics say this is just a craze to get people to part with their money.

But mindfulness is no passing fad, argue others. It has deep historical roots going back at least as far as Buddha, and is grounded in a deep appreciation for the complexity of human experience. As the information age reduces our ability to switch off, learning to meditate could be vital for our mental health. Some say that soon, meditating will be as important as physical exercise.



Q & A

Q How does doing nothing help me?

A It may seem like a waste of time when there are so many other activities and chores to cram into the day. But this could be part of the problem. Multi-tasking can make our work less effective and decrease our attention spans. The fact

that concentrating on something as simple as doing nothing is actually quite difficult shows how hyper-connected and noisy our lives have become. Try switching off for a few minutes!

Q Why do the US Marines need to meditate?

A After more than a decade of fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, the marines are facing high suicide rates and record demand for post-traumatic stress treatments.

Courses offering meditation techniques and yoga-type stretching have been introduced to combat this, with positive results.



SOME PEOPLE SAY...

'Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor.'

Thich Nhat Hanh

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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WORD WATCH

City bankers – The CFA Institute for Investment Professionals, Goldman Sachs, Unilever and the Bank of England have all begun encouraging staff to embrace mindfulness, amid concerns over growing stress levels in the industry, greed and materialism.

Buddhist – Buddhism is a spiritual traditions with no gods or deities. It focuses on personal spiritual

development and the attainment of a deep insight into the true nature of life. There are 376 million followers worldwide. But mindfulness, although it has roots in Buddhism, is considered by scientists to be a secular activity.

Boost business – Companies are becoming more proactive at addressing ill health, which costs UK employers an estimated £26bn a year in sickness

absence. Arianna Huffington, editor-in-chief of the Huffington Post, believes that mindful workers can also give a business a competitive edge.

Veganism – Pop star Beyoncé and her rapper husband Jay-Z started a trend for veganism last December, by embarking on a 22-day plan. Veganism is a strict vegetarian diet which excludes all meat and dairy products.

YOU DECIDE

1. Is mindfulness as important as exercise?
2. We live in an age of instant information and clever technology. Is it having a positive effect on us, or a negative one?

ACTIVITIES

1. Sit in a circle and follow the instructions for mindfulness as described in this article. After ten minutes, discuss whether you think it could be effective.
2. Write down a list of things that make you stressed. Take some time to think about what you could do to combat these pressures.

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