

How Achieving Mindfulness Can Lead to Serenity

Morristown psychologist Dr. Rafanello offers an introduction to mindfulness.

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Dr. Nicole Rafanello.
Photo courtesy of Dr. Rafanello

“God grant me the serenity...” This quote speaks to the importance of finding balance between accepting life on life’s terms and striving for change and growth. How often do we “burn out our motors” trying to change what we cannot and turn a blind eye to the things that we can and need to change?

Having the wisdom to know what we can and cannot change and where and how to focus our efforts is challeng-

ing. It requires awareness and attention, honesty with ourselves and others, a non-judgmental attitude, and skillful means. This is where mindfulness comes in.

There are many aspects to mindfulness. It is the ability to focus on one’s self or inward. It is the ability to think about how we think, feel and behave, with the keen eye of a scientist.

It is looking at pro’s and con’s, thinking about short and long term benefits and working to be the driver of “our bus of life” instead of being a clueless passenger. It is taking a step out of ourselves to just observe, describe, and participate in our experience. It is taking stock of what’s going on so that we are effective and purposeful in meeting our goals and not sabotaging them. But how to do this, especially when we are emotional or upset?

Linehan (1993) describes three states of mind; the rational mind, the emotional mind and the wise mind. The emotional mind is impulsive, passionate, irrational, and intense, like Scarlett O’Hara.

The rational mind is logical, methodical, devoid of emotion, and calm - almost too calm, like Spock. The wise mind is the perfect marriage of the two. The end goal of practicing mindfulness is being in wise mind.

It is not ignoring logic and consequences. It is also not ignoring our feelings and needs. It is considering both and finding the balance between the two.

In order to find wise mind, it is helpful to practice mindfulness regularly. This may be daily, once a week or whenever possible. During these times, we observe, describe, and fully participate in our experience. How we observe, describe, and

participate in our experience is another important part of mindfulness. We must “take stock” or look inward, non-judgmentally, lest we miss opportunities, see only half the picture, or become overwhelmed by emotion. It requires the unbiased eye of a scientist. Thus, noticing and challenging judgments is key.

So what do you have to actually do to be mindful and achieve the ever-elusive wise mind? There is formal mindfulness meditation and practice. These are actual meditations, daily affirmations, or moments of reflection and deep breathing to look at thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.

This type of practice starts “exercising” those parts of the mind that are reflective and “wise.” This helps to develop insight and awareness of our lives, relationships, and goals. There is also a less formal daily consideration of what and how we do things; recognizing there may be things we don’t like but need to tolerate. This is where doing what’s effective comes into play.

Mindfulness teaches us to do what works. It gets us unstuck from what we think should, but likely won’t, happen. For example, we may presume if we do right by someone, they will do right by us. But sadly, some will and some won’t.

This is what acceptance of life on life’s terms means. It is accepting the realities of life over which we have no control as fixed obstacles that need to be nimbly worked around. This is not to say that because we accept it we condone it. It simply means that we focus our efforts and resources on what will actually work and have control to change.

Being effective means knowing and accepting what is futile to change and instead focusing on what’s in our control to change. It is using means that improve our experiences rather than making them worse. This is why doing things one-mindfully, or one at a time, is a part of mindfulness.

Many things that may seem related are actually not, upon closer consideration. If we try to tackle multiple problems simultaneously and become emotional, we confuse issues and lose wise mind. In doing so, we miss opportunities to see things as they are and not as we may wish them to be or erroneously believe them to be. In boiling down and separating issues, we can be more certain that we understand these issues at their essence and not mixing them up.

Dr. Rafanello is a licensed clinical and forensic psychologist with a DBT practice on Maple Avenue in Morristown. She has been providing treatment and training to clients, students, colleagues, professional organizations, and institutions for more than 10 years. She offers free mindfulness practice on Soundcloud.com - check it out at soundcloud.com/nra-fanello, or visit DrRafanello.com.