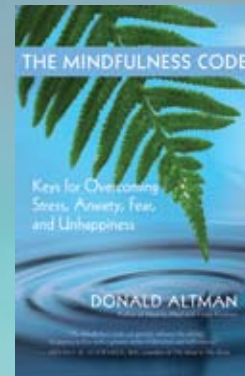


An Interview with Donald Altman

Author of *The Mindfulness Code: Keys to Overcoming Fear, Anxiety, Stress, and Unhappiness*



You say that it's good to slow down, but is that possible in today's world? Why do I need mindfulness?

Consider that one of every four persons on the planet has suffered with clinical depression, and even more struggle with some form of anxiety. We need to remember that our human nervous systems haven't changed in the past 100,000 years. But in the past 100 years, we have undergone more changes in technology than all of previous history. These changes have outstripped our innate ability to handle the speed, multi-tasking and

weapons of mass distraction that are bombarding us daily. For example, when I conduct mindfulness workshops, I begin by telling participants that they are going to be learning something that is very subversive because they are going to slow down and pay attention for the day. This really is subversive in our culture and much of the world because we have been mindlessly allowing ourselves to become obsessed with productivity, which turns us into machines. When you become consumed with achieving efficiency and productivity at all costs, you pay a terrible price in terms of ill health, stress, and anxiety. Mindfulness means you can learn to be more skillful in managing your stress so you live in the present moment and be more creative, alive, and fulfilled in the process. When you stop defining yourself by what you do and how much you do, you can touch life more deeply and become alive again. In fact, you will probably be more creative and productive without getting burned out.

How do you define mindfulness? What is it?

There are many ways to define mindfulness, and no one way is right. I have come up with an acronym that describes the transforming elements that comprise mindfulness, and I call it Intentionally Centering Attention Now, or I-CAN. Intention is how we are purposeful, how we set a direction in our lives, even if it's being intentional in the next moment. Intention is the engine of effort that gets us moving. Centering is about balancing emotions and finding ways to regulate negative emotions. When you center, you actually influence and bring into harmony different areas in your brain by helping the emotional core (the limbic area) and the thinking center (the frontal cortex) communicate and come into harmony. Centering is also about cultivating an attitude of openness and receptivity. Attention is about the quality of focus and sustained awareness we can bring to anything, so that we can see it clearly and really penetrate the truth of it. This is vital because we need attention to complete tasks and be effective in the world. Finally, there's the Now quality of mindfulness, through which we are open and flexible to experience the present moment. When we are not fixed, we can experience the present with joy and fulfillment. Also, it is only with the Now that we can participate in the world and experience the body, spirit, nature, and relationships with others. I-CAN is a starting point for what it means to be mindful. Of course, there are more traditional ways of viewing and describing mindfulness, such as being

aware of the body, sensations, emotions, and thoughts. Even finding gratitude in the moment is a way of defining mindfulness. The beauty of mindfulness is that everyone can find her or his own way to describe what it means. In one workshop, I remember a psychologist who declared that for him, mindfulness was "a way of recognizing and awakening to behavioral patterns." I thought that was wonderful, because he expanded the vocabulary of what mindfulness means.

Who can use mindfulness?

Because of its calming properties, I have found that mindfulness is especially useful for anyone suffering from stress, anxiety, fear, depression, pain, a sense of emptiness, or unhappiness. Basically, it can help anyone dealing with emotional or difficult life issues. Mindfulness is also useful for people in business or jobs where there is high stress, and I have worked with several individuals who used mindfulness to help them be more effective in their work and conquer debilitating fear and anxiety.

Another group that will benefit from learning mindfulness would be anyone looking to deepen their spiritual practice. Mindfulness is not dogmatic and it is not a set of beliefs. It is experiential and inclusive with anyone's existing religious direction. It can be a powerful way to get in touch with contemplation and insight that can add meaning and depth to one's spiritual path.

Mindfulness is also very helpful for those in the healing fields, such as mental health professionals, nurses, psychologists, social workers, naturopaths, doctors, chiropractors and others in alternative and integrative health fields because they can adapt mindfulness interventions for patients. Mindfulness is also a form of self-care for these people because it lets them recharge their batteries and focus back on their own needs after giving to others. Practicing mindfulness skills is a good way to prevent compassion fatigue.

I highly recommend mindfulness to parents and couples who want to develop healthier, more connected and loving relationships with significant family and friends. Mindfulness can help individuals attune with their partner and children, as well as get past anger so they can build stronger, caring relationships.

You talk a lot about how mindfulness practices affect the brain in a nurturing way. Can you name three practices and how they affect the brain?

That's a good question. First, there's mindful breathing, which stimulates the body's innate relaxation system to calm down reactivity in the brain's limbic system. This form of breathing actually lets you listen better because when you're reactive or arguing with someone, you stop listening. A second practice I like is loving-kindness, which actually primes the brain for experiencing greater trust and openness. Research has been done in this area by adapting the loving-kindness meditation and has been shown to

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(Mindfulness continued from page 13) help people with depression and even schizophrenia feel safer, more protected, and secure. A third practice that nurtures the brain is the body scan, which is a way of experiencing sensations in the body moment-to-moment. At the brain level you are scanning the motor-sensory cortex of the brain while you are also strengthening areas in the prefrontal cortex that enable you to experience thoughts and sensations from a more neutral and non-judging point of view. This creates healthy space from negative views and stories that we tell ourselves and actually creates a more balanced narrative around difficult life events.

What's actually happening, in scientific terms, when someone's more mindful?

Well, there are a lot of new studies in this area, and we're learning more each day. Some of the research that has been done in this area is recent thanks to the ability to watch brain activity while putting people in functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) machines. There are a lot of studies out there, but the ones conducted by Richard Davidson, Phd, have studied the Dalai Lama's monks and those who have been taught mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques. Basically, he found that there was a shift in brain activity from those areas of the brain that are active when people tend to feel depressed, anxious, discouraged, and unhappy (the amygdala and right prefrontal cortex) toward an area that is activated when people are feeling happy, optimistic, and encouraged (the left prefrontal cortex). It was once believed that people had a set "affective" tone, or a temperament that couldn't really be changed in the long term. For example, you might win the lottery and be ridiculously happy for a while, but you would return to your previous affective set point. Or, something very tragic and sad might happen and your mood would plummet for a while, but eventually you would return to your typical level of happiness. Davidson's work shows that learning mindfulness-based skills can produce greater brain activity in the left prefrontal cortex and make people happier over the long term. This is really turning old ideas upside down. Other studies seem to indicate that mindfulness gets the brain operating at a higher functional level, but it's still early in the research.

You talk a lot about stress in your book. Why should I worry about stress?

Did you know that the stress hormone

cortisol is the biological signature of having a bad stress day? If you go to bed lonely, for example, you will have higher levels of cortisol in the morning when you wake up because your body is preparing itself for a stressful day. Long term stress literally changes your body chemistry and chronic stress actually puts the brakes on your immune system by lowering the natural killer (NK) cells in your body that fight viruses and some kinds of tumors, as well as reducing the T cell count in the body. In addition, when cortisol floods the brain and body during chronic stress it reduces

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your learning ability because it kills cells in the brain's hippocampus where new memories are formed. Stress also makes memory retrieval difficult and is why people often blank out when under stress. When you consider that even three days of not getting enough sleep can produce a chronic stress state, it shows how vulnerable we all are to the damage caused by stress.

How can being more mindful help my relationship with a wife, husband, child, or even my boss?

Being mindful can help you avoid typical negative behaviors that harm relationships. With mindfulness, you learn to be present with your feelings, rather than just react to them. You can learn how to appreciate and nourish loving relationships in your life. Mindfulness can reduce the impulsivity that can create friction in the workplace. I worked with one person who lost his job because of anger and who used mindfulness to help him speak in a more mindful, reflective, and appropriate way. Once you learn how to speak in a mindful way, you will be less likely to stick your foot in your mouth. Or, at least you will know when you are about to.

Is there a connection between mindfulness and creativity?

Mindfulness can be thought of as being curious and flexible. When we are curious

we look at things in great detail, and we are free to make connections in ways that the rational mind might not otherwise make. One good way to get in touch with creativity is to calm the mind, to let go of the "problem" and let the mind get creative on its own.

You say mindfulness can help with obesity and appetite. What do you mean by that?

Stress is implicated in obesity and hunger because the stress response is telling your body that you are in a survival state, which causes the metabolism to slow down and appetite to increase. The protein and stress hormone Neuropeptide Y makes this happen. There are also numerous cravings for certain foods, such as fats and sugars, that are produced by the stress response. So long as we are stressed, there is a reason for these cravings. Fat stored around the stomach, for example, helps clear out the stress hormone cortisol from the blood. That's why if you want to manage your foods, you need to manage your stress.

What the easiest way to get more mindful in 10 seconds?

Press your hands together and feel the warmth in your palms. Notice the tension that travels from your hands and wrists up the elbows and shoulders. You are now in the present moment.

Can anyone learn mindfulness? What age works best?

Fortunately anyone can learn to be mindful. There's no age at which we can't learn mindfulness and appreciate how it enriches our lives. I think it's great from five to one hundred and five.

You are a former Buddhist monk and now a practicing psychotherapist. In your book you allude to helping patients with mindfulness. Is mindfulness now a clinical intervention in psychotherapy and if so, why?

Mindfulness is probably one of the newest areas for psychotherapists in terms of research and therapy. Not that mindfulness is new! It's part of the practice of Buddhist psychology that goes back 2,500 years and is considered a key element for bringing emotional peace. In traditional Buddhism, mindfulness is considered a path to enlightenment. The reason it is being embraced in the field of psychology today is two-fold. The first reason is that mindfulness is a powerful tool for emotional regulation and for nurturing positive

emotions. We live in a chaotic and unpredictable world that can churn our emotions in all directions and leaving us feeling off balance. So mindfulness helps deal with what is pervasive 21st century stress—stress that is the root cause of much anxiety and depression. The second reason is that mindfulness leads to acceptance, openness, and flexibility of thought. This means that when we're stuck, mindfulness can help get us moving again because it helps us know that acceptance is a positive outcome to any difficult situation—whether that may be a loss, an illness, or a financial struggle. So, if we can center our emotions and find acceptance we are in a much better place than if we are resisting whatever is happening to us. So mindfulness isn't about escaping what is painful, but being present with life in an entirely new, healthy, and spacious way.

There are a lot of mindfulness books out there. What's different about The Mindfulness Code?

If I had to point to three things, I'd say that first of all, this book explains a lot of the brain science behind mindfulness. In this sense, it is a very hopeful because it shows that no matter how stuck you are, you can rewire your brain and life for happiness. Secondly, this book really integrates mindfulness into your life rather than making it something that takes up more of your time. Thirdly, this book is unique by bringing the aspect of relationships into mindfulness—so that you can experience and build relationships with more joy and awareness.

Donald Altman is the author of *The Mindfulness Code* and *Meal by Meal*. He is an adjunct professor at Lewis and Clark College Graduate School, teaches at Portland State University, and conducts mindful living and eating workshops nationally. A member of the Dzogchen Foundation and the Burma Buddhist Monastery Association, he lives in Portland, Oregon. Visit him online at www.mindfulnesscode.com.



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