

Mindfulness – the art of living in the moment

WRITER:
Tweet Gainsborough-Waring

If you are unsure about mindfulness and its benefits, here is a simple exercise you can try. Begin by selecting a raisin and examining it closely. Notice its color, shape, smell, and how it reflects light. Next, place the raisin in your mouth and pay attention to its texture on your lips.

Before chewing, use your tongue to explore the raisin and fully experience the sensation of having it in your mouth. Take your time to be fully present and mindful throughout the entire process, focusing on the taste, texture, sweetness, or sourness of the raisin. This exercise can help you cultivate mindfulness and awareness in your daily life.

Mindfulness is a meditation in which you focus on holding attention to, and increasing awareness of what you are sensing, feeling and thinking in the moment, without interpretation or judgment, with an attitude of self-kindness. It has become one of the most widely studied areas of psychology in the last few decades. But the question arises: how do you attain this and is it relevant to everyday living?

Dr Kantha Pillay, a local resident, psychologist and mindfulness consultant, gave me some insights into mindfulness, its benefits and how to make it work for you in a modern world. She presented a well-received and fully booked workshop during the recent FynArts Festival.

In essence mindfulness is harnessing the prefrontal cortex (that part of the brain associated with reasoning and wisdom) to override the reptilian brain (the brain's alarm system which harbours negative experiences and is responsible for the fight or flight reaction). Kantha describes mindfulness as the 'superpower' of modern-day living based on ancient wisdom.

A state of mindfulness is characterised by present-moment awareness, acceptance, and a non-reactive attitude towards one's experiences. It is essential for coping with issues like anxiety and stress, where often reactions are driven by the reptilian brain. So while we may not be born with mindfulness in its adult conceptual form, we do start with some of its foundational elements, which can be nurtured and developed over time.

Babies and young children naturally live in the present moment, untrammelled by thoughts of what has been and what could happen in the future. They are naturally curious and open-minded. They are also mindful of their physical state and respond immediately to hunger, tiredness, comfort and discomfort. In addition, they have emotional resilience allowing them to dispel negative emotions once the moment has passed.

There are three components to mindfulness: intention, attention and attitude. Intention is the commitment to pay attention to the present moment without judgment. Attention involves focusing your

mind on the here and now both internally (thoughts, feelings and body sensations) and externally (sounds and sights). Attitude revolves around what you bring to your practice – ideally an approach which is kind, compassionate and non-judgmental.

The exercise requires letting go so that you can approach it openly and curiously with compassion for both yourself and others. It has been found to have a host of evidence-based benefits for physical and mental health, including helping to alleviate physical pain. As a technique it has been shown to successfully reduce anxiety and depression and is known to reduce blood pressure and heart rate. It has also been proven to boost immunity. Regular mindfulness practice changes the structure and function of the brain, building ongoing resilience for stress.

Mindfulness training is widely applied internationally in various contexts like in schools and the healthcare system. Big corporations like Google and Nike offer it as part of their work wellness programmes. Kantha regularly hosts workshops on mindfulness and its relevance in today's world. She said that in the modern world, especially post-Covid, many people had lost their way and found themselves unable to process the loneliness and suffering they had experienced through loss, not only of loved ones but of community too.

Mindfulness has ancient roots in Buddhist contemplative practices, but its secular application today emphasises universal principles of



ABOVE: Dr Kantha Pillay starts the day with a sun salutation on Grotto Beach.



LEFT: Dr Kantha Pillay will be presenting an introductory lecture on mindfulness at the upcoming Kalfieees in August.

PHOTOS: Supplied

compassion and kindness, present-moment awareness, non-judgment, and motivation for self-growth and improving overall wellbeing benefiting the individual and the greater community.

Kantha holds an MA in Research Psychology, an MA in Clinical Psychology and a PHD from Wits University for her research on the benefits of mindfulness. She has almost 30 years of experience as a psychologist. In Hermanus, she offers mindfulness

training workshops for the general public, professional development mindfulness for healthcare professionals, and workplace wellness training for corporate organisations, based on the Google mindfulness programme.

She may be contacted on kantha-psych@gmail.com or via WhatsApp on 071 897 5407 for workshop bookings and will be presenting an introductory lecture on mindfulness at the Kalfieees in August. ■