Meditation: Why the Hype?

Mindfulness meditation increasingly attracts leaders with the promise of alleviating stress, maintaining focus and spurring creativity. How can mindfulness meditation be applied to health, education and leadership?

The Issue

An understanding of the mind and the brain allows us to achieve an understanding of ourselves. Mindfulness meditation helps to clear the mind and make it more flexible, and develops compassion. Mindfulness involves being attentive about others, mindful of their emotions and being careful about one ' s own reactions. Brain science provides evidence of how meditation reduces stress, enhances immunity and increases focus and social behaviour. By teaching children meditation, they become familiar with their brains and learn self-control and equanimity. Even short sessions of meditation, as little as five minutes a day, if done regularly, will bring benefits to a person ' s physical and emotional health. Small surprise that the likes of Google, Apple and General Mills, and financial powerhouses such as Aetna and Goldman Sachs, are promoting meditation among their employees.

The Consequences

Scientific research suggests that the mind can be trained through meditation with significant benefits for individuals, their communities and society at large. In the West, nearly half of people ' s waking life is spent doing things while not paying attention. " We can train our minds to do better, " said Richard J. Davidson, William James and Vilas Research Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the Center for Investigating Healthy Minds, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Oscillations in the brain change when a person meditates. Even novices – the subjects of experiments, who meditated for eight weeks – showed more antibodies when vaccinated for flu than non-meditators. Similarly, meditation is shown to lower inflammation, the source of pain in many afflictions. Scientists believe this effect stems from the activation of peptide and opiates which lower pain. One participant cited studies of children who were trained to meditate. The results indicated that their attention was more focused and they were able to delay gratification. He added that they were less likely to become drug abusers or criminals when they reached adulthood.

Different types of meditation produce different results. Presence meditation stabilizes the mind and places the person in the present. Affective meditation fosters loving kindness, addressing anger and difficult emotions, and perspective meditation promotes self-knowledge and an understanding of others. Tania Singer, Director, Department of Social Neuroscience, Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences in Germany, said that during loving kindness, or compassion, meditation, " a network in the brain is activated associated with warmth, affiliation and positive affect " .

Meditation and mindfulness can be taught to children and they will become calmer, more social and less stressed and depressed, said Goldie Hawn, Actress, Producer, Author and Founder, The Hawn Foundation, which promotes social and emotional literacy with meditation and other curriculum tools in schools. The Hawn Foundation promotes the teaching of meditation – it ' s called " brain break " – and children learn mindful listening, all part of learning to quiet the mind. They play games where they measure their heart rate after jumping and dancing, and then they sit and breathe and observe their ability to tune in and reduce their heart rate. The curriculum involves three brain breaks a day and includes writing gratitude journals and carrying out acts of kindness. " We create a symphony of happiness, " Hawn said. She has been practising meditation since 1972.

Meditation means cultivation, and meditation is a practice done regularly for best effect. Meditation can be done effectively for 10 seconds every hour, or five minutes a day, said Matthieu Ricard, Buddhist monk and President

and Co-Founder, Karuna-Shechen.

Options for Action

Meditation is free and does not need to take a lot of time. Practice can begin immediately, panellists said. By beginning with three or four minutes a day, a person will begin to see the benefits of meditation, the experts said.

Getting meditation to be adopted on a widespread scale requires that “ we frame this in the way physical exercise was framed in the 1950s, ” said Davidson. “ We need a massive international media campaign to teach people the simple fact that well-being can be learned, ” he added.

Significant Quotes

“ Let ’ s create a new culture in the classroom, put the human back in humanity, ” said Goldie Hawn, Actress, Producer, Author and Founder of The Hawn Foundation which promotes social and emotional literacy with meditation and other curriculum tools in schools.

“ Only humans create the future. We have to create equanimity, ” said Goldie Hawn, Actress, Producer, Author and Founder of The Hawn Foundation.

“ Meditation cultivates emotional balance but more than anything else, compassion, something we have buried in our mind, ” said Buddhist monk and scientist Matthieu Ricard, President and Co-Founder, Karuna-Shechen.

On a long meditation retreat, “ I never feel lonely, I try to grow compassion, how can I feel lonely? ” said Buddhist monk and scientist Matthieu Ricard, President and Co-Founder, Karuna-Shechen.

Disclosures

This summary was written by Lucy Conger. The views expressed are those of certain participants in the discussion and do not necessarily reflect the views of all participants or of the World Economic Forum.