

By Crystal F. Nichols, BS, UCCS Aging Center Graduate Student

Depression, anxiety, stress, chronic pain, illness, loneliness, sleep problems, and memory decline are problems that many people deal with as they age. As unbelievable as it sounds, over the last 15 years there has been a wealth of research supporting a common treatment that has the potential to help with all of these problems. Even more unbelievable is that this treatment is free, can be accessed from anywhere, and takes as little as five minutes a day. The only equipment needed is yourself and a little patience.

Mindfulness meditation has received a great deal of media attention over the last several years, but is still foreign to many people who have never practiced it. Mindfulness allows us to focus all our senses on the present moment, be open to what we experience in a non-judgmental way, and switch from a *doing* mode to a *being* mode. In a digital world filled with distractions and appointments, most people have little time to just simply *be*. The hurried pace of our lives leaves little time for self-care as we jump from one task to the next, constantly thinking of the items that are still on the to-do list. Not only do many people not take time to stop and smell the roses, but they rarely even take time to just stop and breathe. Concentrating on cell phones, television, computers, and an increasing sense of pressure means that we often ignore our inner experience. When this happens, our health and well-being usually suffer. The practice of mindfulness meditation can help us turn down the noise of our hectic life and allow us the opportunity to recognize our thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations.

### **Mindfulness meditation: where to get started**

There are many different ways to practice mindfulness meditation and many teachers prefer a certain style. What is important is that you find a style that feels comfortable to you. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a medical doctor and leading researcher on mindfulness meditation, says that mindfulness takes practice and that once it becomes another thing that you feel pressure to master, you may be missing the point. He recommends starting with breathing meditations when you are beginning.

#### *5-Minute Breathing Meditation Step-by-Step*

1. Find a quiet space.
2. Sit up straight or in a position that is comfortable for you to maintain for five minutes.
3. Close your eyes or fix your gaze on the floor in front of you, whichever is more comfortable.
4. Focus your attention on your breath entering and exiting your body. Think of your breathing as a wave that you are riding up and down. Allow yourself to notice how your chest and stomach rise and fall as you follow the pattern of your breath going in and out.
5. When your mind wanders, simply bring your attention back to your breath. Try not to judge yourself harshly when this happens and remember that your only job is to be you in this moment.
6. When you are ready, open your eyes or lift your gaze.
7. Congratulate yourself for taking time to just be.

Although mindfulness meditation is not a cure and cannot take the place of medical or mental health treatment, it is a tool that many find helpful in improving their lives in a variety of ways. Many long-time practitioners of mindfulness find that they no longer have a need to *stop* and smell the roses because they are always open to and aware of the roses, daisies, hydrangeas, and weeds that cross their

paths. Mindfulness cannot promise to extend your life, but it can help you to be present and fully engage with each moment of your life.

*Crystal is a second year clinical psychology doctoral student at UCCS where she works with Dr. Charles Benight of the Trauma, Health, & Hazards Center. She has practiced mindfulness meditation for 11 years and has research interests related to the benefits of mindfulness and self-compassion for older adults, caregivers, and trauma survivors. For more information about this article email [cnichol5@uccs.edu](mailto:cnichol5@uccs.edu) or call 719.255.8026. Free guided meditations from the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center can be found online at <http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22>.*