

The mindful nurse

By Lois C. Howland, DrPH, MSN, RN, and Susan Bauer-Wu, PhD, RN, FAAN

MINDFULNESS is an increasingly common topic in both popular and professional literature. In clinical populations, evidence suggests mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) can reduce symptoms linked to various conditions, including cardiovascular disease, cancer, and depression. Among healthcare professionals, mindfulness training can reduce psychological and physiologic stress, emotional distress, and burnout while improving empathy, job satisfaction, and sense of well-being. This article gives an overview of mindfulness and MBIs and discusses how mindfulness practices can benefit nurses both personally and professionally.

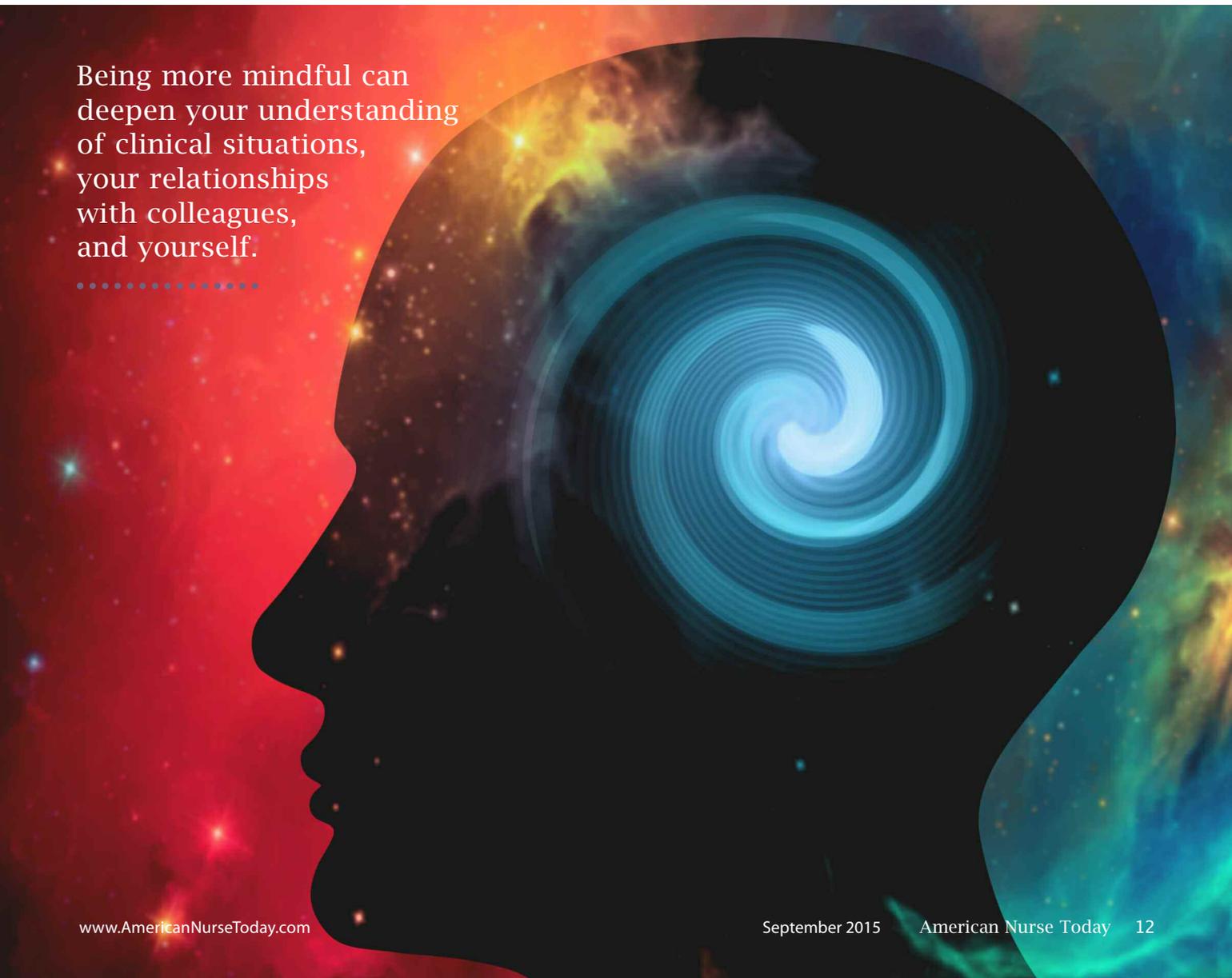
What exactly is mindfulness? It's the capacity to inten-

tionally bring awareness to present-moment experience with an attitude of openness and curiosity. It's being awake to the fullness of your life right now, by engaging the five senses and noticing the changing landscapes of your mind without holding on to or pushing away what you're experiencing.

Being mindful *doesn't* mean stopping your mind from thinking or trying to be relaxed and peaceful. Nonetheless, many people who practice mindfulness regularly report feeling more calm and clearheaded. You can develop the ability to be more mindful in everyday life through mindfulness meditation and other mindfulness practices.

Being more mindful can deepen your understanding of clinical situations, your relationships with colleagues, and yourself.

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Developing a more mindful nursing practice

While being more mindful is a lifelong process, you can begin to explore the effects of mindfulness now with a few simple practices.

Feeling your breath

Set aside 10 minutes a day (or just a few minutes, if your time is very limited) to focus on your breathing. Notice the sensations of the breath as it travels in and out of your body. Don't try to make the breath happen in any particular way; just notice your breathing as it's happening. Of course, your mind will get caught up in other mental events, such as planning or daydreaming. But mindfulness simply invites your attention back to the breath without criticizing or judging the mind's wandering. This "awareness of breath" meditation helps slow your mental activity and builds the capacity to stay focused. Taking a few slow, mindful breaths before entering a patient's room can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, causing the "relaxation response," which helps you feel more centered and more fully present with the patient.

Tuning into your body

If your mind becomes agitated with self-criticism, worry, and negative thinking, bring your attention to the physical sensations of your feet as they rest against the floor or other touchpoints of the body where it contacts other surfaces. You can practice this attention to body sensations virtually anywhere to help settle your distracted mind.

Using movement

Bringing awareness to moving your body mindfully can include gentle stretches in the morning during a break in your day or walking down the hallway to a patient's room. Notice the physical sensations of your body moving, or the connection of your soles as your feet plant and lift from the floor. Be aware of the intricate interplay of nerves, muscles, tendons, and bones that allow movement to happen. Mindful movement can slow down the busy mind and increase your sense of feeling grounded.

Practicing mindfulness in daily life

You can bring greater attention to routine activities, such as brushing your teeth, taking a shower, or walking the dog. Try to notice and bring curiosity to the routine activity as if you were doing it for the first time, exploring it with all senses (sight, smell, sound, touch, or taste). You may discover something new.

Living on automatic pilot

Throughout our lives, we develop beliefs, judgments, and habitual thinking patterns that may result in living in an automatic or habit-driven way. Many of us are on "automatic pilot," with our bodies operating in a routine pattern while our minds are somewhere else—usually anticipating future events or ruminating over something that has happened. This "mindless" way of living can limit how we experience life, the choices we make, and the quality of our relationships. It also can exacerbate feelings of stress.

Mindfulness practices can help us recognize mental habits that limit our understanding of something or restrict our options for action. Consider, for example, how negative self-talk can grip your attention and circle in your mind like a hamster in a wheel. By being able to notice when your mind is engaged in these common but unhelpful thinking patterns, you can bring attention to the feeling of the breath as it's moving in and out of your body or noticing the physical sensations of your body as it is right now. This intentional shifting of the

mind to present-moment experience can help interrupt stressful thinking and may enhance your sense of calm and centeredness.

How does mindfulness work?

The mind is busy. It constantly processes memories and plans, rehashes past events, and takes in and processes information from the senses and internal body. At the same time, it orchestrates the activities that allow us to function in daily life. The mind also must respond to the challenge of our ever-expanding and complex technological environment, which bombards us with a relentless stream of information from electronic devices and social media—increasing our mental distraction and stress.

Neuroscience research shows mindfulness training can enhance the brain regions responsible for attention and executive function (problem-solving and intentional action) while modulating the amygdala, the brain area that identifies threats and triggers such emotional responses as fear and anger. Mindfulness practices can enhance your ability to pay attention and notice what's actually happening, particularly in stressful situations. This ability to notice attentively and see situations more clearly can help you respond

thoughtfully rather than react. This has particular relevance for nurses in terms of self-care and optimal care of patients.

Learning to be more mindful

In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School developed the seminal mindfulness training program known as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), in an attempt to reduce suffering in patients with chronic pain. This highly structured, 8-week group program includes training in exercises to increase the capacity to be more mindful. Core mindfulness practices in the MBSR program include the body scan (learning to mentally tune in to body sensations), gentle yoga (moving the body with attention and kindness), and breath awareness (focusing on the sensations and experience of breathing). Research examining the effects of MBSR training found significant improvements in the health and well-being of participants with various medical conditions.

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step). This is where the work gets done. Create dedicated time on your daily or weekly calendar to write your article. Preparing an outline and establishing deadlines are helpful motivators. If more than one author will contribute to the manuscript, assign sections to each one. Based on discussion and collaboration, have one person edit the document so it reads as though written in one voice. Once you write the first draft, set it aside for a few days; then revisit it with fresh eyes and make revisions. Consider asking a mentor with publishing experience to review your manuscript and provide feedback before you submit it.

Step 5: Acceptance (evaluation step). In the nursing process, the evaluation step requires you to determine if goals and expected outcomes have been met. In the acceptance step of the writing process, you find out if your manuscript has been accepted for publication. In many cases, acceptance comes with edits, suggestions, and queries you may need to answer to put the finishing touch on your article. Realize that being asked to revise is a good outcome.

On the other hand, you may learn your article wasn't accepted for publication. As in nursing care, your first intervention may not succeed—but as nurses, we don't give up. If your article isn't accepted, you can send a query letter to another journal, along with

your manuscript already prepared for submission.

Tips for success

These additional suggestions can help you jump-start your writing career.

- Acknowledge your mentor or others who've helped you along the way. This will make them more willing to help you in the future.
- Use your own voice to help avoid plagiarism.
- To stay on track, dedicate time on your calendar for writing.
- Consider creating a writing support group with colleagues who share your desire to publish. Invite your writing mentor to support group meetings.
- Follow the steps of the writing process described above. By associating the steps of the writing process to those of the nursing process, you can improve your writing skills and achieve success in publication.

Selected reference

Saver C. *Anatomy of Writing for Publication for Nurses*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Sigma Theta Tau International; 2014.

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Hundreds of hospitals, universities, and community settings across the country and around the world offer MBSR training. Also, MBSR and other related MBIs have been developed to target specific nonclinical populations, such as business leaders, professional sports teams, schoolteachers, and students. Instructional books, websites, compact discs, and personal device applications are available to help people learn more about mindfulness practices.

Mindfulness and nursing

How can mindfulness help nurses? Greater awareness and less distraction in the clinical setting can improve your assessment skills (for instance, allowing you to identify subtle changes in a patient's condition) and your performance of complex technical procedures that may reduce the risk of clinical errors. Mindfulness can enhance your communication with patients and other healthcare team members by bringing a greater awareness to how and what others are communicating. Listening and speaking with greater attention can lead to more effective communication and better clinical outcomes, particularly in crisis situations.

Moreover, research shows mindfulness training can help nurses cope more effectively with stress and reduce

the risk of professional burnout. One randomized, controlled trial of nurses found those who participated in an 8-week mindfulness training program had significantly fewer self-reported burnout symptoms, along with increases in relaxation, mindfulness, attention and improved family relations, compared to nurses in a control group. (See *Developing a more mindful nursing practice*.)

Wiser and more compassionate care

Mindfulness is a way of living with greater attention and intention and less reactivity and judgment. You can learn and develop mindfulness through regular mindfulness practices. Consider integrating mindfulness into your self-care plan to reduce stress and minimize burnout.

Being more mindful and bringing receptivity to whatever is happening can deepen your understanding of clinical situations, relationships with colleagues, and ultimately yourself. With this understanding comes the possibility of providing wiser and more compassionate care for your patients and yourself. ★

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