

Is there too much mindfulness going around these days?

As the feeling of summer ends and vaccine passports kick in, more and more people are trying to make use of the hours of sunlight left. For some, this comes with increased anxiety around COVID safety. People are trying to figure out what they're comfortable with and to navigate their boundaries with those close to them—emotionally and physically. How many people are going to show up at the event? Are we meeting inside or outside? Will people be masked? Am I getting a cold or is this COVID? What new information is going to come out? It begs the question: Is it possible to be too mindful?

Some people might wonder if mindfulness will make them more hypervigilant. After all, mindfulness is about paying attention to our internal and external experiences in a non-judgmental way, and there can be a lot to pay attention to these days.

Practicing mindfulness in the age of COVID might actually soothe hypervigilance. Mindfulness can help us assess the present level of risk more accurately. Both mindfulness and hypervigilance involve a sense of being aware of the present moment. But hypervigilance involves scanning ourselves and our environment for cues that relate to or reinforce our anxious concerns. When we are hypervigilant, we often misinterpret ambiguous situations and exaggerate minor threats because we are in such a high state of arousal. This just leads to even more anxiety and stress. It becomes even more difficult when many threats associated with COVID remain invisible and uncertain. It's effective to be aware and alert, but we don't want to overdo it.

Mindfulness goes beyond awareness of the present moment. It involves paying attention on purpose and in a particular way. It shows us the middle path between shutting down any negative feelings, and thoughts coming too fast and too strong. It can help us to untangle our negative thoughts, feelings, physical sensations from what's actually going on around us. It allows us to control our attention by relating to our experiences in a different way. For those familiar with some of the DBT "what" and "how" mindfulness skills, we can observe negative emotions, thoughts, other people without getting caught up in them. We can describe the facts of the situation and better assess the level of risk present (e.g., that we have taken as many precautions as we have control over). We can notice judgments and have more choice in how we want to react rather than our emotions deciding for us (e.g., being aware that someone who has a cough or runny nose doesn't necessarily have COVID).

Mindfulness helps us pay attention to what's actually happening in this moment, instead of being so focused on the "what ifs" that we lose perspective. If we are practicing mindfulness, it becomes important to ask, "What am I choosing to pay attention to?", "How is this benefiting me?" and "How is this helping me to be effective?"

(496 words)

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