

Choosing a mindful life, together

Personal experience, 2014

Marisa Hoslet

'I remember that we were sitting in the storm together and took a break once in a while.'

'I remember when you told me the meditation sessions helped you.'

'I remember the moment when you enjoyed that bottle of sparkling water and reading the newspaper.'

'I remember when you were talking enthusiastically about the beautiful moments in your life.'

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction

Living a quality life even in undesirable and uncertain situations

The moment Els told me about the intention of her book and asked me to write something about mindfulness I could not help but respond. I recognized in her my own desire to share with you, the reader of this book, and all others who may be interested, my personal experience with mindfulness. I hope this can inspire you and make you realize that mindfulness has many benefits, regardless of our life circumstances.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in the life of a family member of someone with a chronic illness

In the beginning of the summer of 2013, my father was totally unexpectedly diagnosed with a rare incurable cancer. We were told by the doctor that he had 6 months to maximum 2 years to live. On top of that, the doctor also told us that there was little to nothing that could be done about it. I was shocked, because this happened so suddenly and totally unexpected. All my certainties disappeared. I was overcome by feelings of disbelief, sadness and anger. I immediately saw the worst

scenario of the course of his illness before me. All kinds of questions went through my mind: 'What now?', 'How will the disease process go?', 'What if my father becomes seriously ill?', 'How are we going to handle this?', 'Is it good for him to start chemotherapy or is it better not to?', 'How can I still make the most of our time together now?', 'Why him?', 'Why such a short time?'.... At times, these thoughts were overwhelming and I was overcome with sadness and fear. At other times, I could notice this, focus on my breath and/or my body for a few minutes to sometimes half an hour or longer, and I could once again see the situation as it really was instead of getting carried away with my catastrophic thoughts.

The situation with my father reminded me of the fragility of life and my desire to make the most out of the last months with him. I knew that, among other things, my ongoing daily mindfulness practice would play an important role in this.

Those moments of coming back to myself and internally putting a stop to my thoughts have helped me tremendously in the course of the disease process and the death of my father.

Some examples of how it has helped me:

- in realizing that at times, it was better to allow feelings of sadness and fear, instead of running away from them
- in living day by day and not running ahead of the situation
- in seeing the gravity of the situation and making professional choices that allowed me to spend more time with my father
- in appreciating the beautiful moments we still had together
- in making conscious choices with my family in the merry-go-round of hospitals, where medication is sometimes given unnecessarily and automatically
- in realizing what the needs of my father were and how he could be helped in that
- in experiencing sadness and fear, together with my family
- in talking with my father about what still needed to be said

- in experiencing the beautiful moments of silence towards the end of the disease process
- in going through the grieving process in a society in which it is considered normal that you return to your normal life as soon as possible and mourning is pushed into the background

Mindfulness in the life of someone with a chronic illness

The moment my father received his diagnosis from the doctor, there was a silence, filled with disbelief. The realization that nothing could be done was unbearable. We felt powerless. After a while my father said that he had not been feeling well for some time. He had been suffering from occasional pain in the abdomen and a lot of fatigue since a few months. But he had never thought that it could be so serious. He realized more and more that he had not given sufficient attention to all kinds of physical complaints. He had been convinced that it would not matter. From now on it was a matter of waiting to see how his illness would progress.

For many years, my father had been following the news about mindfulness in the media a bit. However, he had many critic questions about it. That is, until one day he asked me to teach him how to apply mindfulness to help him deal with his illness and everything that was associated with it. He realized that the medical world had given up on him and that the only thing left for him was to make the most of every 'today', every 'now' moment. This is also the situation from which mindfulness training originated. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a molecular biologist, kept coming into contact with patients with chronic illnesses and their question of how they could continue to live their lives in a qualitative way, despite their illness.

After my father had asked me this question, we started practicing mindfulness together on a daily basis. I give below some examples of how this has helped him:

Practicing mindfulness has helped him:

- to let go of his fear and worry thoughts
- to fall asleep more peacefully
- to develop inner peace
- to learn how to deal with physical pain
- to live consciously from day to day and not be taken by surprise by what might happen in the future
- to be perceptive of signals from his body that warned him whenever he exceeded his physical limits
- to realize his need for rest
- to learn to deal with the stress of time pressure
- to learn to deal with the stress caused by physical changes
- to redirect his attention by listening to music when brooding thoughts came up
- to enjoy the little things in each day, such as sitting in the garden or watching the birds and the flowers
- to gradually accept his situation
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I have provided above a brief summary of what mindfulness could mean in a person's life. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction is a scientifically based training that has already proven its effects in numerous studies. I hope this text can help you find a tool that can improve your quality of life and that of your family members.

This text is written to benefit people with multiple sclerosis and the MS-Liga. The text has recently been updated. (Mijn Pöp-Up Brein, E.O., 2014)

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