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Mindfulness is happiness

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by Denisa Oosthuizen

Professor of Clinical Psychology at the University of Oxford and Director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre in UK, **Mark Williams** co-developed the **Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)** and is the co-author of international best-seller “**The Mindful Way Through Depression**”. Here he talks about mindfulness as exposed in his latest book, “**Mindfulness: a Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World**”.

WealthWise magazine: Your latest book “Mindfulness” is based on mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT). What is mindfulness and how is it applied in cognitive therapies to address mental health problems?

Mark Williams: Mindfulness simply means being aware - seeing clearly what is happening in our minds and in the world, from moment to moment, bringing a sense of kindness to our experience rather than getting caught in judging it.

The methods used to cultivate mindfulness were first recorded over two thousand years ago. It has long been central to wisdom traditions in Asia, particularly the Buddhist tradition, but the art of cultivating inner silence has been a central part of all religious traditions across the ages.

Mindfulness meditation is a secular form of this tradition that anyone can learn. It trains us to pay deliberate attention to our experience, both external and internal. We learn to focus on what is happening from moment to moment with full intention and without judgement. Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through such training, and the skill of developing

and sustaining that awareness.

Modern mindfulness-based approaches in healthcare began in the USA. From the late 1970s, Jon Kabat-Zinn's pioneering research into Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) found remarkable effects on chronic pain and stress. With colleagues John Teasdale and Zindel Segal, we have reasoned that mindfulness training might have powerful effects in preventing future recurrence of depression, even if taught when people were well.

To test this hypothesis, we have created the 8-week Mindfulness-Based Cognitive therapy programme. Six research trials have evaluated the power of MBCT to prevent depression. The results are striking. In the most seriously ill patients - those with three or more previous episodes of depression, MBCT reduces the recurrence rate over 12 months by 40-50% compared with the usual care, and has proved to be as effective as maintenance antidepressants in preventing new episodes of depression.

WealthWise magazine: How is MBCT progressing in becoming a preferred therapy of choice and what is the perception in South Africa?

Mark Williams: In the UK, the NHS's National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) has recommended MBCT as a cost-effective treatment for preventing relapse in depression.

Other research has found that MBCT reduces anxiety in people suffering from General Anxiety and Bipolar Disorders, can help enhance the quality of life and reduce the stress in those with a diagnosis of cancer.

In South Africa, interest in the applications of mindfulness has grown rapidly since the launch of the Institute of Mindfulness, South Africa (IMiSA) - www.mindfulness.org.za.

WealthWise magazine: Mindfulness was proven as an effective in addressing depression, stress, anxiety, unhappiness among others, by promoting joy and happiness and keeping the negative feeling at bay. Can mindfulness banish these feelings completely over time?

Mark Williams: It would be dangerous to pretend that negative emotions could be banished from our lives altogether, but it is possible to 'catch' ourselves earlier, and stop things from getting out of hand. Research studies find that those who have learned mindfulness experience long-lasting physical and psychological stress reduction, discover positive changes in well-being, are less likely to get stuck in depression and exhaustion, and are better able to control addictive behaviour.

The ability to see more clearly when we are getting 'entangled' in our emotions is of great benefit, and we now know that these effects are due to important changes in the patterns in the brain following mindfulness training. Neuroscientific studies find permanent changes in those areas of the brain associated with decision-making, attention and empathy in people who regularly practice mindfulness meditation. Other studies find that it increases the area of the brain linked to regulating emotion, and that it improves people's attention, job performance, productivity and satisfaction.

WealthWise magazine: What would you advise people who have been faced with depression and stress in the past?

Mark Williams: If people find that they are still haunted by past episodes of depression and anxiety in ways that are destroying the quality of their lives even today, then they may find that a programme of mindfulness meditation may help, either by taking a class, or by working through the meditations in a book that includes a CD (as in Mindfulness: a practical guide for finding peace in a frantic world.) If they feel they need a greater focus on depression and longer meditation guidance, then The Mindful Way Through Depression (Guilford, 2007) might help.

Mindfulness is "skills training" rather than traditional type of therapy, so anyone can try it without feeling that they have to go over old ground, or talk through their problems yet again. Those already in therapy report finding treatment easier if they are more able to be mindful, and to see their thoughts and feelings with greater distance and perspective.

WealthWise magazine: Mindfulness also works for people who are not depressed. Is there a difference in the process itself (eg meditation techniques) in these different scenarios?

Mark Williams: The remarkable thing about mindfulness training is that the very same practices that help to release us from negative emotions also enhance positive emotions and well-being.

This is because mindfulness teaches us to be less 'in our heads' and more in our bodies and present to what is happening around us. We become more aware of sights, sounds, tastes that we normally take for granted, so there comes a sense of reconnecting with life, and reclaiming a way of living that expresses our deepest values, rather than postponing peace and happiness for another day.

WealthWise magazine: Where can we practice mindfulness - can you recommend places or groups where this is practiced in South Africa (and internationally)?

Mark Williams: I would advise people to get in touch with the Institute of Mindfulness, South Africa - www.mindfulness.org.za. Anyone can access our own work in Oxford through www.oxfordmindfulness.org and through this, find links to mindfulness teachers throughout the world.

Read more about **Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy** and Mark Williams' book in our May digital edition only at www.wealthwisemag.com!



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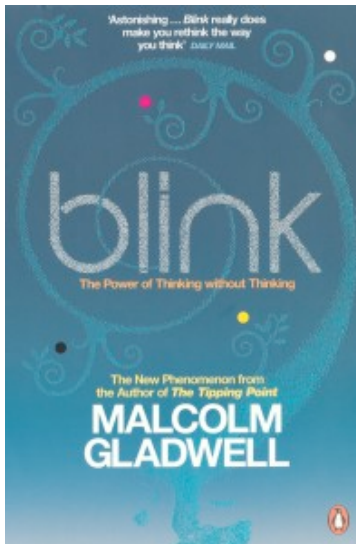
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Book of the Week



Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink - The Power of Thinking without Thinking*

Penguin Culture, R123.25 from www.kalahari.net

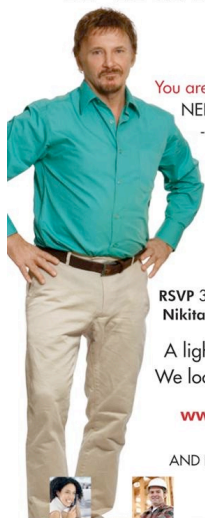
Author of the best-seller *Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell delivers yet another thought-provoking and compelling book. This time, he goes deeper into the “blink” phenomenon, referring to those moments when we know something without actually knowing why – our snap judgement or intuition. Can a snap judgement be far more effective than a carefully analyzed decision? The answer might surprise you, yet this is the essence of “Blink” and its revolutionary theory that could radically transform our lives, from business to relationships.

As in the “*Tipping Point*”, Gladwell uses real cases, interviews and psychological studies to prove that “less is more”. You'll never think about thinking in the same way again – trust our snap judgement!

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