

✓ lifestyle health

Being mindful when you meditate

Researcher says there is scientific evidence that mindfulness meditation can alleviate stress, depression, even pain

• RY-ANNELIM

Some experts believe mindfulness meditation alleviates anxiety, depression, stress and even physical pain, and evidence has also found that mindfulness can slow down the age-related atrophy of certain areas of the brain.

Harvard Medical School neuroscientist Sara Lazar told The NewPaper: "It's not just pseudoscience anymore. There's actual science - neuroscience - to back it up."

Dr Lazar, who was in town over the weekend for the inaugural Singapore Mindfulness Conference by the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) and local charity Brahm Centre, is a leading researcher on mindfulness and has written several academic papers about the science behind mindfulness and its effects.

The event also saw guest of honour Dr Lam Pin Min, Senior Minister of State for Health, highlighting the importance of

mental wellbeing and its impact on health, while IMH and Tan Tock Seng Hospital shared details of their mindfulness programmes.

Dr Lazar, an associate researcher in the psychiatry department at Massachusetts General Hospital and assistant professor in psychology at Harvard Medical School, said: "There are various definitions of mindfulness. But for me, mindfulness refers to paying explicit attention and awareness to the present moment in a compassionate, kind and non-judgmental way."

This could mean focusing intensely on breathing patterns, for instance, or paying exclusive attention to the various sounds in an environment.

According to Dr Lazar, practising mindfulness meditation can have numerous benefits.

"Depression is when you beat yourself up over the past, and anxiety, for the future. Mindful-



Neuroscientist Sara Lazar.

TNP PHOTO: RY-ANNE LIM

ness helps you disengage from these harmful thoughts," she said.

"Even for dealing with pain,

just be aware of its tingles or throbs, understanding that it comes in waves and isn't constant, and let go of its unpleasantness."

In a paper written in 2011, Dr Lazar also discovered that people who practised mindfulness meditation experienced structural changes in their brains.

"This demonstrates that meditation is not just about 'relaxing'. It is a type of mental training with cognitive benefits too," she said.

Cognitive benefits include a boost in intelligence, and an improvement in concentration and memory span.

She added that several small studies abroad also discovered that mindfulness meditation helps with staving off early-onset dementia.

"It reduces stress and anxiety, which may accelerate cognitive ageing," she said.

"Although more research can be done on it, our results right

now are very encouraging."

Some experts believe it is best to practise 40 minutes of mindfulness meditation a day at a quiet location, but Dr Lazar said two or three minutes can help too.

"I think it's just important to constantly practise it, because it's like exercising your mind muscles. The location doesn't really matter either," she said.

For example, she suggested people practise it while walking to work or on the bus or train.

"Hopefully this works up to practising mindfulness 24/7 and making it both a habit and a lifestyle," she said.

Still, Dr Lazar warned against using it as a cure-all.

"It can be useful to many and reduce most symptoms, but isn't guaranteed to help everyone. Even so, I believe it generally benefits everyone," she said.

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