

MINDFULNESS AND CHRONIC PAIN

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction
in Everyday Life

Erin Woo, Assistant Director of Mindfulness
& Education, Brown University



MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF
**HEALTH &
SENIOR SERVICES**



Missouri Department of
MENTAL HEALTH



UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGE OF CHRONIC PAIN

Chronic pain affects one in five adults in the U.S. and can take many forms—from lower back pain to migraines, fibromyalgia, or arthritis. For nearly one in twelve, the impact is severe enough to disrupt daily functioning. This burden is not just physical; it can reshape every corner of a person's life, leading to fatigue, anxiety, substance use, and a reduced quality of life.

When pain lingers, it often brings an emotional echo: fear, frustration, hopelessness. These psychological responses can intensify the experience of pain itself. In clinical research, this pattern is known as catastrophizing—a cycle of rumination and helplessness that can worsen pain perception and even influence loved ones around us.

A NEW RELATIONSHIP TO PAIN

Mindfulness doesn't promise to eliminate pain—but it can dramatically shift how we relate to it. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the creator of MBSR, frames this well: "Pain is inevitable. Suffering is optional." Mindfulness creates space between the sensation and the spiral. Instead of being swept away by pain's echo, we learn to observe it with curiosity, patience, and even kindness.

Research supports this approach. Studies show that mindfulness-based programs can significantly reduce pain intensity, depression, and functional disability. In fact, one analysis found mindfulness and cognitive behavioral therapy more effective than standard care alone—yet many primary care treatments fall short of evidence-based standards. Mindfulness offers a proven, accessible supplement to traditional care.



HOW MINDFULNESS WORKS

Mindfulness builds three key capacities that help interrupt the pain cycle:

Attention Regulation – Through meditation, we learn to focus on the present moment and gently bring our attention back when the mind wanders. This builds mental flexibility and offers moments of relief when pain tries to dominate our awareness.

Interoceptive Awareness – This is the ability to notice body sensations in detail. Pain is not a singular experience; it may feel dull, stabbing, tense, or hot. By observing these specifics rather than lumping them together as "bad," we can reduce the overwhelming quality of pain.

Emotion Regulation – When difficult emotions arise, mindfulness helps us pause before reacting. Rather than spiraling into worst-case thinking, we gain the tools to notice thoughts as they are and choose how to respond with compassion and clarity.



THE RAIN PRACTICE: A MINDFUL RESPONSE TO PAIN

One accessible way to use mindfulness in everyday life is the RAIN practice. This four-step approach helps people meet pain and strong emotions with gentleness and intention.

R - Recognize what's happening: *"This is pain."*

A - Allow it to be there without resistance.

I - Investigate with curiosity: *"What does it feel like?"*

N - Nurture yourself: *"May I be kind to myself in this moment."*

RAIN gives people a map for moving from reactivity to presence. Practiced regularly, it can increase your sense of agency and ease—even when the pain remains.

LOOKING AHEAD

Mindfulness won't cure chronic pain—but it can make life more livable, connected, and grounded. For those wanting to deepen their journey, Brown University offers evidence-based programs like the 8-week MBSR course, Power of Awareness, or Mindfulness-Based Blood Pressure Reduction. These programs include guided instruction, group sessions, and dedicated practice time.

Contact mindfulness@brown.edu to register for an MBSR Course today.

REFLECTION PROMPTS

Use these prompts to reflect or journal as you move forward:

- How does chronic pain show up in your body, emotions, or thoughts?

- Where do you notice the emotional echo of pain?

- What brings you even small moments of ease or joy?

- What would it mean to be in relationship with your pain, rather than trapped by it?

