

Everyday Mindfulness

The term, “mindfulness” seems to be everywhere — it’s touted as the new yoga, the answer to stress, or the alternative to prescription drugs. But beyond the buzz, do you understand the concepts of “mindfulness”? With this fact sheet, the authors aim to provide a definition of mindfulness, share some of the benefits of practicing mindfulness, provide samples of simple exercises, and provide resources to explore.

Mindfulness Has Many Definitions

- » Living in the present moment/awareness of the present moment — paying close attention to thoughts, physical sensations, and our surroundings.
- » Observing personal experiences of mindfulness, being completely focused on a project — reading a book, doing a hobby, or playing a sport. This heightened awareness is mindfulness.
- » Taking a few deep breaths — becoming fully aware of the present moment.
- » Having nonjudgmental awareness in which each thought, feeling, and sensation is acknowledged and accepted in their present state. This steady and non-reactive attention usually differs from the way people normally operate in the world.
- » Paying attention, precisely, to the present moment without judgment.

A common concern of people relates to a misperception that “mindfulness” ties to particular religions. Remember, meditation has its origin dating back thousands of years and may be included in religious practice. At the same time, “mindfulness” sits comfortably in secular circles. Does mindfulness have to be a spiritual practice? Certainly not. The fact that many traditions — religious and secular, spiritual and philosophical — come back to these fundamental practices of compassion and awareness suggests that mindfulness remains part of the human experience.

Today, hospitals, clinics, schools, military bases, and corporations use Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction



(MBSR), developed in the late 1970s by Jon Kabat-Zinn, a physician at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Kabat-Zinn developed MBSR based on his knowledge of meditation and yoga, but he stripped the metaphysical and spiritual components away from it, making MBSR a non-religious practice.

Thousands of MBSR courses across the United States teach basic meditation practices such as body scans and breath awareness, as well as gentle yoga and movement exercises. Completely secular, these courses teach life skills for coping with stress, pain, and the human experience.

Seven Principles of Mindfulness

Seven principles serve as the basis for mindfulness. Each can help you act skillfully and not emotionally in stress situations:

- » Non-judging: Be a neutral observer to each experience.
- » Patience: Allow each experience to emerge at its own pace.
- » Beginner’s mind: Avoid bringing in what you know to the current moment and try experiencing it as if it is the first time.
- » Trust: Believe in your intuition and your ability to see things in a new way.
- » Non-striving: Avoid the need for winning or losing or striving for a purpose — it is about “being” and “non-doing.”

- » Acceptance: See things as they are in the present moment.
- » Letting go: Take the time to detach from your usual feelings and thoughts.

Benefits of Mindfulness

Mindfulness should not be considered a “cure-all.” However, science suggests that practicing mindfulness creates changes in brain function as well as changes in the body’s response to stress. The practice of mindfulness may have an important impact on physical and emotional health.

Mindfulness helps to improve work-life balance. When we look at the dominant cultural patterns of the United States, we find that we value dominating nature, being goal-bound, controlling the future, being involved in constant activity and action with no time to “sit and talk,” being autonomous, and being individualists. With that as a dominant cultural pattern, when do we have time to be mindful?

Many people look for relief from their worries. Sometimes this stress presents physically, such as a stiff neck or headache. A review published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found evidence of the effectiveness of mindfulness interventions for pain in varying degrees. Another group of researchers compared the positive effect of mindfulness on depression to that of anti-depression medications — without the side effects.

The practice of mindful meditation proved effective in reducing stress and improving overall well-being. One study from Loyola University of Maryland showed that people who meditate tended to recover more quickly from stressful events. Other benefits that come from a regular meditation practice include:

- » Increased ability to relax.
- » Improved concentration.
- » Increased energy and enthusiasm for life.
- » Increased creativity.
- » Increased self-awareness.
- » Improved self-esteem.
- » Improved work/school performance.

Mind Full?



Or Mindful?



Mindful meditation proved effective in school settings to help children manage and work through behavior challenges. From her article, “Why Teachers Say Practicing Mindfulness is Transforming their Work,” Anya Kamenetz shared classroom success stories from the CARE for Teachers program. CARE (Cultivating Awareness and Resilience for Educators) teaches mindfulness exercises for calming the body and mind through breathing and movement and uses insights from psychology to help students regulate their emotions.

Professor Michael Yellow Bird, North Dakota State University, enjoys great success with indigenous nations, indigenous communities, with tribal colleges’ students, and among leadership groups in using mindfulness. Yellow Bird’s mindfulness techniques draw from research, brain images, and stories to illustrate changes to the brain under duress from conflict, displacement, and oppression. He writes on the positive changes in quality of life when indigenous populations engage in healing through mindfulness meditation.

Mindfulness in Work and Social Settings

Every day you encounter people who are not like you. Humans tend to impose judgments as they look for conformity, and when they see difference, they may opt for negative judgment. What does that do to you? Negative judgment prohibits you from connecting to those who are different. Why do people judge difference? Many may draw from learned experiences or those spheres of influence during each stage of their lives. These spheres of influence shape your outlook on life, how you view situations, and how you see one another in work and social settings. How do you address the urge to judge in the face of difference? Look for common ground with the person or the situation. Draw mindful comparisons. It becomes counterproductive to judge negatively. Find a way to identify with the person or situation. Be present in the moment with that person or situation by using the Seven Principles of Mindfulness. With your busy lives, you may ask yourselves, “When do I have time to be mindful?” Here are some simple mindfulness strategies as a beginning.

Mindfulness Resources

The “Taking Charge of your Health & Wellbeing” on-line newsletter, produced at the University of Minnesota (<https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu>), devoted one of its articles to learning relaxation techniques (<https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/enhance-your-wellbeing/health/stress-mastery/learn-relaxation-techniques>). It’s a reminder of the many ways to enhance healthy behaviors and reduce reliance on destructive habits. Learning how to turn off the body’s fight-or-flight reflex through breathing exercises and relaxation techniques marks a good first step.

Beginning Mindfulness Exercises

Practice mindful relaxation: Mindful relaxation combats stress effectively. With practice, one soon learns how to shift into a relaxation mode. The brain responds to relaxation by increasing alpha brain wave activity, lowering blood pressure, pulse rate, respiration rate, and metabolic rate.

Try these steps to help achieve mindful relaxation:

1. Commit to an uninterrupted time each day to practice a mindful meditation. Begin with as little as 5 minutes. Many benefit from increasing meditation time to 20 minutes or more.



2. Choose a quiet place away from any technology.
3. Find a comfortable body position — in a chair or sitting comfortably on the floor.
4. Focus on your breath flowing in and out.
5. Let any negative thoughts float away like clouds.

Try breathing techniques: When people feel stress they tend to take short, shallow gasps of air. The resulting lack of oxygen restricts blood flow and causes muscles to strain. As deep breaths increase, the heart rate slows and blood pressure lowers, which breaks the stress cycle. You may choose any time or any place to think about your breathing — even stopped at traffic signals waiting for the green light or standing in line to buy groceries.

Use imagery: Imagery exercises work with or without a facilitator. A common imagery practice invites you mentally to picture yourself in a quiet, calm setting. Take note of how this setting encourages your body and mind feel calm and relaxed.

Add body exercises: Sit in a chair or lie on the floor. Put your arms above your head and stretch as high as your arms and shoulders allows. At the same time, stretch your legs and feet as your body allows. Then focus on one side of your body and repeat the stretching on the other side. Now stretch the right arm and left leg followed by stretching the left arm and right leg. Finish the exercise by starting at the top of your head and consciously relaxing your scalp and facial muscles. Move on down your body, consciously relaxing each part of your body until you reach your toes. Continue to sit or lie in this relaxed state for a few moments.

Do-In exercises: “Self-shiatsu” appears to be the easiest way to describe Do-In (dough-eeen). Consider these practices as “exercises for health.” The “Do” of Do-In means to open up channels and facilitate the movement of energy along specific routes. “In” of Do-In means to move and stretch your limbs to achieve this purpose. Basically, the Do-In exercises encourage mind and body integration. Integration of mind and body allows the “Ki” (life energy) to flow freely throughout the body. Do-In stimulates the energy flow along the acupuncture meridians. Focus on imagery, breathing, and relaxation when performing Do-In exercises. Practice this simple form of exercise alone or with a partner, using any spare time (www.kyo-jitsu.co.uk/do-in/).

Conclusion

When it comes to everyday mindfulness, remember to practice, practice, practice! Some people like to team up with a mindfulness group to get started. If you find that inconvenient or uncomfortable, start with breathing exercises and gradually add more movement as you explore ways to relax your body and mind.

Additional Mindfulness Resources:

Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment and Your Life. Book and CD set by Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life. Book by Jon Kabat-Zinn.

References for this lesson are in the leader’s guide, MF3425.

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