

Mindfulness

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness involves paying attention to each event experienced in the present moment within our body and mind, with a non-judgmental, non-reactive and accepting attitude. In learning to be mindful, we can begin to counter many of our everyday challenges such as stress, anxiety and depression because we are learning to experience events in a more impersonal and detached way.

Why Mindfulness?

Have you ever started eating a snack bar, taken a couple of bites, then noticed all you had left was an empty packet in your hand? Or been driving somewhere and arrived at your destination only to realise you remember nothing about your journey? Most people have! These are common examples of “mindlessness,” or “going on automatic pilot.” In our modern, busy lives, we constantly multi task. Its easy to lose awareness of the present moment as when we become lost in our efforts to juggle work, home, finances, and other conflicting demands.

As humans we are often “not present” in our own lives. We often fail to notice the good things about our lives, fail to hear what our bodies are telling us, or poison ourselves with toxic self criticism.

Human minds are easily distracted, habitually examining past events and trying to anticipate the future. Becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings and sensations may not sound like an obviously helpful thing to do, however learning to do this in a way that suspends judgement and self-criticism can have an incredibly positive impact on our lives.

Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to, and seeing clearly whatever is happening in our lives. It will not eliminate life’s pressures, but it can help us respond to them in a calmer manner that benefits our heart, head, and body. It helps us recognise and step away from habitual, often unconscious emotional and physiological reactions to everyday events. It provides us with a scientifically researched approach to cultivating clarity, insight, and understanding. Practicing mindfulness allows us to be fully present in our life and work, and improve our quality of life.

Mindfulness has its roots in meditation which was taught in India 2500 years ago. Central principles and mechanisms of mindfulness include equanimity and impermanence.

Equanimity

Equanimity is best described as a neutral response to something we experience. The development of equanimity, or an equanimous mind as it is sometimes called, is an important part of mindfulness skills because it gives us the ability to remain less reactive and less judgmental no matter what is experienced, thereby giving us a feeling of ease, self-control and composure as we go about our daily lives.

Impermanence

Mindfulness training teaches us that all things in our lives including our own mental and emotional experiences change and in that way, are impermanent. By experiencing the changing nature of internal experiences, we can learn to see ourselves in a more flexible and objective way. We can detach ourselves from rigid views and habits that can sometimes lead to stress and unhappiness.

Benefits of Mindfulness

- Recognise, slow down or stop automatic and habitual reactions
- Respond more effectively to complex or difficult situations
- See situations more clearly
- Become more creative
- Achieve balance and resilience at work and at home
- Deepen or strengthen relationships with others at home and at work

Everyday Mindfulness Exercises

1. One Minute Breathing

This exercise can be done anywhere at any time – at home, at work, travelling to and from, standing up or sitting down. All you have to do is focus on your breath for just one minute. Start by breathing in and out slowly, holding your breath for a count of six once you’ve inhaled. Then breathe out slowly, letting the breath flow effortlessly out back into the atmosphere.

Naturally your mind will try and wander amidst the valleys of its thoughts, but simply notice these thoughts, let them be for what they are and return to watching your breath.

Literally watch your breath with your senses as it enters your body and fills you and then notice it work its way up and out of your body as the feeling dissipates. This simple exercise lies at the core of meditation and mindfulness.



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2. Mindful Observation

This exercise is simple but incredibly powerful. It is designed to connect us with the beauty of the natural environment, which is easily missed when we're rushing around.

Pick a natural organism within your immediate environment and focus on watching it for a minute or two. This could be a flower or an insect, the clouds or the moon.

Don't do anything except notice the thing you are looking at. But really notice it. Look at it as if you are seeing it for the first time.

Visually explore every aspect of this glorious organism of the natural world. Allow yourself to be consumed by its presence and possibilities.

3. Touch Points

This exercise is designed to make us appreciate our lives by slowing the pace down, coming into purer awareness and resting in the moment for a while.

Think of something that happens every day more than once, something you take for granted, like opening a door for example. At the very moment you touch the door knob to open the door, allow yourself to be completely mindful of where you are, how you feel and what you are doing. Similarly, the moment you open your computer to start work, take a moment to appreciate the hands that let you do this, and the brain that will help you use the computer.

The cues don't have to be physical ones. It could be that every time you think something negative you take a mindful moment to release the negative thought, or it could be that every time you smell food you take a mindful moment to rest in the appreciation of having food to eat.

Choose a touch point that resonates with you today. Instead of going through the motions on auto-pilot, stop and stay in the moment for a while and rest in the awareness of this blessed daily activity.

4. Mindful Listening

This exercise is designed to open your ears to sound in a non-judgemental way. So much of what we see and hear on a daily basis is influenced by thoughts of past experiences. Mindful listening helps us leave the past where it is and come into a neutral, present awareness.

Select a new piece of music from your music collection, something you've never heard before but makes you wonder what it might sound like.

Close your eyes and use headphones if you can. Don't think about the genre or the artist. Instead, allow yourself to get lost in the journey of sound for the duration of the song. Allow yourself to explore the intricacies of the music. Let your awareness climb inside the track and play among the sound waves.

The idea is to just listen and allow yourself to become fully entwined with what is being played/sung, without preconception or judgement of the genre, artist, lyrics, instrumentation or its origin.

If you don't have any music to hand that you've never listened to before, turn on the radio and turn the dial until something catches your interest.

If you don't have a radio then take a moment to simply listen to the sounds in your environment. Don't try and determine the origin or type of sounds you hear, just listen and absorb the experience of their texture and resonance with your being. If you recognise the sound then label it with what you know it to be and move on, allowing your ears to catch new sounds.

5. Fully Experiencing a Regular Routine

The intention of this exercise is to cultivate contentedness in the moment, rather than finding yourself caught up in that familiar feeling of wanting something to end so that you can get on to doing something else. It might even make you enjoy some of those boring daily chores too!

Take a regular routine that you find yourself "just doing" without really noticing your actions. For example, when cleaning your house or car, pay attention to every detail of the activity.

Rather than a routine job or chore, create an entirely new experience by noticing every aspect of your actions. Feel and become the motion of sweeping the floor, notice the muscles you use when washing the car, observe the formation of dirt on the surfaces and see if you can create a more efficient way of removing it.

Don't labour through thinking about the finish line, be aware of every step and enjoy your progress. Take the activity beyond a routine by merging with it physically and mentally.

6. A Game of Fives

In this mindfulness exercise, all you have to do is notice five things in your day that usually go unnoticed and unappreciated. These could be things you hear, smell, feel or see.

For example, might see the walls of your front room, hear the birds in the tree outside in the morning, feel your clothes on your skin as you walk to work, or smell the flowers in the park, but are you truly aware of these things and the connections they have with the world?

- Are you aware of how these things really benefit your life and the lives of others?
- Do you really know what these look and sound like?
- Have you ever noticed their finer, more intricate details?
- Have you thought about what life might be without these things?
- Have you thought about how amazing these things are?

Let your creative mind explore the wonder, impact and possibilities these usually unnoticed things have on your life. Allow yourself to fully experience the environment.

By becoming mindful of who we are, where we are, what we are doing and the purpose, if any at all, and how everything else in our environment interacts with our being, we cultivate a truer awareness of ourselves, of others and of our environment.

This helps us learn to identify and reduce stress and anxiety and difficult, painful and perhaps frightening thoughts, feelings and sensations.

Mindfulness exercises help centre the mind and restore balance to our lives, tempering that "monkey mind" that persistently leaps from branch to branch. Rather than being led by thoughts and feelings, often influenced by past experiences and fears of future occurrences, we are able to live with full attention and purpose in the moment.

While we can practice being mindful in everyday life by just observing what is happening around and within us, formal training by way of sitting meditation is most effective in developing mindfulness skills.

References

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