

Mindfulness Basics

What is mindfulness, and how do I start?

Mindfulness has been a popular topic over the last couple of years, but what is it, and more importantly, can it really enhance your wellbeing? Based on the research, the answer is a resounding YES!

First, let's address what mindfulness isn't. According to Psychiatrist Dr. Jud Brewer, mindfulness isn't a relaxation technique, thought stopping, a special state, "Zen zone," or a way to figure things out.

Mindfulness is changing our relationship to our thoughts and feelings by being aware in the moment and paying attention without judgment. Mindful awareness allows us to step back, stay present, and lean into a thought, feeling, or experience. It provides an opportunity to act with thoughtful intention rather than from a habitual or emotionally reactive state.

When we are on autopilot, we absorb the negativity around us, including stress, irritation, impatience, assumptions, judgment of ourselves, and judgment of others. When we are mindful, we begin to notice the positives around us, experience greater depth and clarity of what holds our attention, and we have an opportunity to practice curiosity, cultivate patience, openness, kindness, and gratitude, and choose if and how we will respond.

Just like any new skill, mindfulness is a matter of practice. Over time, repetition and focused attention change the brain.

Five core skills of mindfulness

Set and reaffirm the intention

- What do you want?
- How do you want to be in relation to your world?
- What state of being do you want to cultivate for yourself?

Awareness

- Notice the state of your body, mind, energy, and emotions.
- Patterns of negativity are a default for human brains, and we react to things before we even have a chance to determine the true nature of the stimuli.
- As we become more in tune with our natural default response, we begin to notice when we are reacting automatically without awareness of the full scope of the situation.
- Awareness allows us to notice the space between the stimulus and the response. This becomes our opportunity to make an intentional decision about what is said and what we do.

Strengthen self-regulation

- Helps to settle the internal feelings of negative energy (anxiety, fear, anger, irritability, etc.).
- Focus on shortening the time that difficult emotions keep you stuck.
- Reduce emotional hijacking to bring the whole brain back online so that you can explore the situation with curiosity and open flexibility before responding.
 - Breathing.
 - Repeating a word or phrase to settle the brain (*calm, relax, this will pass, let go, be patient, etc.*).
 - Anchoring – use touch of the body to settle – tighten and release different muscles, five things you feel, etc.

- Sing, hum, chant, groan, whistle- all release anxious thoughts and can settle negative energy.

Stabilize intention

- What you pay attention to strengthens.
- Notice what you are giving your attention to and where your mind drifts when you are distracted.

Ask yourself:

- Is now the right time to be focusing on this?
- Is what I am worrying about happening now?
- Is there anything I can do about it now?

If the answer is no, then gently shift your focus to something else. Shift your focus as many times as you need to.

- What is it that you want to remember at this moment?

Self-compassion

- We tend to define ourselves by our parts rather than our whole selves and focus on what we identify as broken vs. our strengths.
- We all have negative core beliefs that were formed during the first part of our lives. These become the messages and stories that we tell ourselves that are not accurate or true (*I am unlovable, I will never amount to anything, I am invisible, etc.*). We sometimes refer to these thoughts as our baggage.
 - Consider what negative conclusion, assumption, or message about yourself or your family environment you took away with you from childhood. These messages impact the way we view and respond to the world around us.
- Positive self-talk and reassuring self-talk
 - When we change the message that we send to ourselves and acknowledge that we are doing the best that we can, we start to prime our brains to deconstruct the core negative beliefs.
 - This is where I am for now.
 - This is what I can control right now.
 - Loving kindness example – *May I be calm, may I be at ease, may I be at peace.*
 - Practicing non-judgmental awareness leads to kindness and compassion for yourself and others.

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For help translating or understanding this, please call (800) 635-9233. (TTY dial 711)