

MCG Women's Behavioral Health Program

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MINDFULNESS

A Definition of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the act of paying attention on purpose nonjudgmentally. Mindfulness means being fully present with whatever it is you're doing or experiencing in the moment. Mindfulness is the opposite of being "mindless" or on "automatic pilot." It's also the opposite of multitasking because it means being focused on just one thing in the moment. Have you ever driven somewhere and realized after you got there that you can't remember the drive because you were so busy thinking about something else or listening to the radio? That's driving on automatic pilot, and that's the opposite of mindfulness.

Why Practice Mindfulness?

Most of us don't live very mindful lives. Most of the time, we're trying to do more than one thing at a time. Our society values "multitasking" because we believe it's more time efficient – and time efficiency is highly prized in our fast paced world. However, it turns out that multitasking is not more efficient than being mindful. A research study has actually found that speed and accuracy are better for those who do one task at a time compared to those who try to multitask. So that's one reason to practice mindfulness – *it's actually more efficient.*

However, there are two other reasons to practice that are even more important. First, *mindfulness allows you not to miss out on your life.* The present moment is where your life is. The past is gone and the future does not yet exist -- your life is happening only in the present moment. And yet, many of us spend a lot of time thinking about things other than what we're doing or experiencing in the moment. Most commonly, we are thinking about the past or worrying about the future, and in fact, this is the source of a lot of suffering.

For example, you might decide to take a break from your work and have a cup of coffee. But while you're drinking the coffee you're not really paying attention to the coffee – instead you're thinking about everything you're going to do when you get done with your coffee break. So you don't really get a break -- you're actually missing out on your coffee break because you're not really mindful of it when it's happening.

A third reason to practice mindfulness is that *the present moment is where you find your wise mind.* By focusing our minds in the present moment, we open ourselves to the possibility of hearing that voice in ourselves that knows truth and wisdom.

How To Practice Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a skill, and like any other skill it can be learned. Start with easy practice and progress to harder practice.

*The essence of mindfulness practice is this:
repeatedly directing your attention, nonjudgmentally, to only one thing in this one moment.*

It's a lot harder than it sounds. It means learning to be in control of your mind, rather than your mind being in control of you.

The untrained mind is like a TV that's always on but you can't find the remote. Perhaps the channels change chaotically, or perhaps your mind plays the same scary, painful, or sad show over and over again. Mindfulness means finding the remote control and learning to use it.

Thomas Merton described the untrained mind as being like a crow flying over a wheat field in winter. The crow spies lots of things that sparkle in the field and swoops down to pick them up, only to discover that it's just old pieces of scrap metal, not something delicious to eat or useful for nest-building. Mindfulness means becoming a smarter crow and not being distracted by every glittery thought.

Here is a typical formal mindfulness meditation practice:

Get in a seated position that is comfortable, with your back straight but not tense. Find a focal point for your eyes – rest your eyes on something so that you will not be distracted (but don't close your eyes). Turn your attention to your breath. Notice the physical sensations of breathing as you inhale and exhale – the rise and fall of your belly and chest, the sensations of air in your nose and throat. Breathe normally. Don't try to change or control your breath. Just notice it. Try to follow your breath through your entire inhalation and exhalation. As you do, it is often helpful for beginners to count their breaths, so say to yourself, "Inhaling...one...exhaling...one...inhaling...two..." and so on until you reach the count of "ten," and then start over again at "one." Almost immediately as you do this practice you will notice that your mind wanders away from your breath. Be nonjudgmental about this. When you find that you are distracted by other thoughts (like what you're going to do when you get done with this exercise), just notice that you got distracted, gently bring your mind back to your breath, and start counting over at "one." Similarly, if you notice judgmental thoughts (e.g., "I'm terrible at this" or "This is a waste of time") just notice your judgments and go back to observing your breath. As many times as your mind wanders away, gently bring your mind back to noticing your breath. Practice for 5 minutes. Try to practice past the first or second urge to quit. Build up to 20 minutes or more.

One way to think about this kind of practice is that your mind is like a boat that is tied to an anchor. Thoughts are like waves that will start to carry your boat away, but mindfulness is the anchor that gently pulls it back each time. Even if your mind wanders off hundreds of times, you've done the practice if you gently bring it back each time. There is no "failing" at mindfulness, as long as you notice when you've gotten distracted, and bring your mind back. That is the practice of mindfulness.

You can do this kind of practice with anything you care to bring your full and undivided attention to. You can learn a lot about yourself and others in this way.

Formal mindfulness meditation on a regular basis (like daily) will help you live your life more mindfully. Just like setting aside a time each day for exercise increases your energy throughout the day, the discipline of mindfulness meditation every day increases your ability to be fully present to your life in each moment, which is the ultimate goal.

How to Learn More About Mindfulness

I have written this introduction to mindfulness based on the writings of others who are experts at mindfulness, as well as on my own experience practicing and teaching mindfulness. I hope it has been helpful. If you would like to learn more, I recommend the following books:

The Miracle of Mindfulness -- Thich Nhat Hanh

Contemplative Prayer – Thomas Merton

Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation for Everyday Life – Jon Kabat-Zinn

Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness – Jon Kabat-Zinn

Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting – Jon Kabat-Zinn