

Benefits of Mindfulness

Practices for Improving Emotional and Physical Well-Being



It's a busy world. You fold the laundry while keeping one eye on the kids and another on the television. You plan your day while listening to the radio and commuting to work, and then plan your weekend. But in the rush to accomplish necessary tasks, you may find yourself losing your connection with the present moment—missing out on what you're doing and how you're feeling. Did you notice whether you felt well-rested this morning or that forsythia is in bloom along your route to work?

Mindfulness is the practice of purposely focusing your attention on the present moment—and accepting it without judgment. Mindfulness is now being examined scientifically and has been found to be a key element in stress reduction and overall happiness.

What are the benefits of mindfulness?

The cultivation of mindfulness has roots in Buddhism, but most religions include some type of prayer or meditation technique that helps shift your thoughts away from your usual preoccupations toward an appreciation of the moment and a larger perspective on life.

Professor emeritus Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder and former director of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, helped to bring the practice of mindfulness meditation into mainstream medicine and demonstrated that practicing mindfulness can bring improvements in both physical and psychological symptoms as well as positive changes in health, attitudes, and behaviors.

Mindfulness improves well-being. Increasing your capacity for mindfulness supports many attitudes that contribute to a satisfied life. Being mindful makes it easier to savor the

pleasures in life as they occur, helps you become fully engaged in activities, and creates a greater capacity to deal with adverse events. By focusing on the here and now, many people who practice mindfulness find that they are less likely to get caught up in worries about the future or regrets over the past, are less preoccupied with concerns about success and self-esteem, and are better able to form deep connections with others.

Mindfulness improves physical health. If greater well-being isn't enough of an incentive, scientists have discovered that mindfulness techniques help improve physical health in a number of ways. Mindfulness can: help relieve stress, treat heart disease, lower blood pressure, reduce chronic pain, , improve sleep, and alleviate gastrointestinal difficulties.

Mindfulness improves mental health. In recent years, psychotherapists have turned to mindfulness meditation as an important element in the treatment of a number of problems, including: depression, substance abuse, eating disorders, couples' conflicts, anxiety disorders, and obsessive-compulsive disorder

How does mindfulness work?

Some experts believe that mindfulness works, in part, by helping people to accept their experiences—including painful emotions—rather than react to them with aversion and avoidance.

It's become increasingly common for mindfulness meditation to be combined with psychotherapy, especially cognitive behavioral therapy. This development makes good sense, since both meditation and cognitive behavioral therapy share the common goal of helping people gain perspective on irrational, maladaptive, and self-defeating thoughts.

Mindfulness techniques

There is more than one way to practice mindfulness, but the goal of any mindfulness technique is to achieve a state of alert, focused relaxation by deliberately paying attention to thoughts and sensations without judgment. This allows the mind to refocus on the present moment. All mindfulness techniques are a form of meditation.

Basic mindfulness meditation - Sit quietly and focus on your natural breathing or on a word or "mantra" that you repeat silently. Allow thoughts to come and go without judgment and return to your focus on breath or mantra.

Body sensations - Notice subtle body sensations such as an itch or tingling without judgment and let them pass. Notice each part of your body in succession from head to toe.

Sensory - Notice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. Name them “sight,” “sound,” “smell,” “taste,” or “touch” without judgment and let them go.

Emotions - Allow emotions to be present without judgment. Practice a steady and relaxed naming of emotions: “joy,” “anger,” “frustration.” Accept the presence of the emotions without judgment and let them go.

Urge surfing - Cope with cravings (for addictive substances or behaviors) and allow them to pass. Notice how your body feels as the craving enters. Replace the wish for the craving to go away with the certain knowledge that it will subside.

Mindfulness meditation and other practices

Mindfulness can be cultivated through mindfulness meditation, a systematic method of focusing your attention. You can learn to meditate on your own, following instructions in books or on tape. However, you may benefit from the support of an instructor or group to answer questions and help you stay motivated. Look for someone using meditation in a way compatible with your beliefs and goals.

If you have a medical condition, you may prefer a medically oriented program that incorporates meditation. Ask your physician or hospital about local groups. Insurance companies increasingly cover the cost of meditation instruction.

Getting started on your own

Some types of meditation primarily involve concentration—repeating a phrase or focusing on the sensation of breathing, allowing the parade of thoughts that inevitably arise to come and go. Concentration meditation techniques, as well as other activities such as tai chi or yoga, can induce the well-known relaxation response, which is very valuable in reducing the body’s response to stress.

Mindfulness meditation builds upon concentration practices. Here’s how it works:

Go with the flow. In mindfulness meditation, once you establish concentration, you observe the flow of inner thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations without judging them as good or bad.

Pay attention. You also notice external sensations such as sounds, sights, and touch that make up your moment-to-moment experience. The challenge is not to latch onto a particular idea, emotion, or sensation, or to get caught in thinking about the past or the future. Instead, you watch what comes and goes in your mind and discover which mental habits produce a feeling of well-being or suffering.

Stay with it. At times, this process may not seem relaxing at all, but over time it provides a key to greater happiness and self-awareness as you become comfortable with a wider and wider range of your experiences.

Practice acceptance

Above all, mindfulness practice involves accepting whatever arises in your awareness at each moment. It involves being kind and forgiving toward yourself.

Some tips to keep in mind:

Gently redirect. If your mind wanders into planning, daydreaming, or criticism, notice where it has gone and gently redirect it to sensations in the present.

Try and try again. If you miss your intended meditation session, simply start again.

By practicing accepting your experience during meditation, it becomes easier to accept whatever comes your way during the rest of your day.

Cultivate mindfulness informally

In addition to formal meditation, you can also cultivate mindfulness informally by focusing your attention on your moment-to-moment sensations during everyday activities. This is done by single-tasking—doing one thing at a time and giving it your full attention. As you floss your teeth, pet the dog, or eat an apple, slow down the process and be fully present as it unfolds and involves all of your senses.

Mindfulness exercises

If mindfulness meditation appeals to you, going to a class or listening to a meditation tape can be a good way to start. In the meantime, here are two mindfulness exercises you can try on your own.

Basic mindfulness meditation

This exercise teaches basic mindfulness meditation.

- Sit on a straight-backed chair or cross-legged on the floor.
- Focus on an aspect of your breathing, such as the sensations of air flowing into your nostrils and out of your mouth, or your belly rising and falling as you inhale and exhale.

- Once you've narrowed your concentration in this way, begin to widen your focus. Become aware of sounds, sensations, and your ideas.
- Embrace and consider each thought or sensation without judging it good or bad. If your mind starts to race, return your focus to your breathing. Then expand your awareness again.

Learning to stay in the present

A less formal approach to mindfulness can also help you to stay in the present and fully participate in your life. You can choose any task or moment to practice informal mindfulness, whether you are eating, showering, walking, touching a partner, or playing with a child or grandchild. Attending to these points will help:

- Start by bringing your attention to the sensations in your body
- Breathe in through your nose, allowing the air downward into your lower belly. Let your abdomen expand fully.
- Now breathe out through your mouth
- Notice the sensations of each inhalation and exhalation
- Proceed with the task at hand slowly and with full deliberation
- Engage your senses fully. Notice each sight, touch, and sound so that you savor every sensation.
- When you notice that your mind has wandered from the task at hand, gently bring your attention back to the sensations of the moment.

Invest in yourself

The effects of mindfulness meditation tend to be dose-related — the more you do, the more effect it usually has. Most people find that it takes at least 20 minutes for the mind to begin to settle, so this is a reasonable way to start. If you're ready for a more serious commitment, Jon Kabat-Zinn recommends 45 minutes of meditation at least six days a week. But you can get started by practicing the techniques described here for shorter periods.

Adapted with permission from [*Positive Psychology: Harnessing the Power of Happiness, Personal Strength, and Mindfulness*](#), a special health report published by Harvard Health Publishing.