

Practicing Mindfulness

Does your life seem to keep moving faster and faster? Do you sometimes find yourself doing so many things you can't appreciate any of them fully? You may benefit from practicing mindfulness, an awareness of the moment.

Mindfulness is “the practice of purposely focusing your attention on the present moment— and accepting it without judgment,” a report by Harvard Health Publications said. Mindfulness is the practice of eliminating distractions and focusing on your thoughts, feelings, and actions as they occur. Some experts say that mindfulness is “the opposite of multitasking”—doing two or more things at once—because it involves doing one thing at a time.



Here you will learn about the benefits of mindfulness and how to deepen it through the practice of mindfulness meditation.

The Benefits of Mindfulness

Mindfulness has been found to promote health and happiness for many people. Research suggests that mindfulness can improve your mood, reduce negative thinking, and ease stress. It can also help enhance productivity, concentration, and creativity.

Practicing mindfulness can also improve your physical health, according to the Harvard Health Publications report “Positive Psychology: Harnessing the Power of Happiness, Personal Strength, and Mindfulness.” The report finds that mindfulness can:

- Help you sleep better
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduce chronic pain
- Ease stomach problems

A study presented to the American Heart Association found that patients who practiced mindfulness regularly cut in half their risk of heart attacks and strokes compared with people who received only education about a healthy diet and lifestyle.

Ways to Practice Mindfulness in Everyday Life

Limit multitasking. As much as you can, do one thing at a time and give it your full attention. Avoid switching back and forth between tasks. Keep in mind the words of the psychologist Mary Pipher, who says in her book *Seeking Peace*: “A very simple definition of mindfulness is doing one thing at a time.”

Practice mindfulness when you're with others. Listen closely to people, whether they are new acquaintances, close friends, or relatives, and try not to interrupt. Focus on what others are saying— not on what you want to say next.

Unplug your devices. Periodically, turn off your television, phone, tablet, or laptop so they won't distract you from your thoughts, feelings, and actions. Or keep your gadgets in a room where you can't see or hear them.

Use all five of your senses. Let yourself see, hear, touch, taste, and smell your world. Before you peel an orange, smell it, notice its color, and feel its texture. Eat the orange slowly. Observe your reactions. Does the orange have a different taste or bring more pleasure when you take time to savor it? When you sit to sip some tea, bring your complete focus to it. Take in the tea's scent, savor its taste, and feel its warmth. Or sit outdoors with your eyes closed. Notice the sounds of birds, the scent of the flowers, and the feel of the breeze on your skin. Try to stay in the present moment instead of dwelling on what has happened in the past or may happen in the future. Using all of your senses will make you more aware of your surroundings and may make you appreciate them more.

Try progressive muscle relaxation. This technique may help if physical tension makes it hard for you to practice mindfulness. Sit or lie down in a quiet place. Then tense and relax different muscle groups one at a time. Start by holding out your right arm and making a fist. Tense your arm and fist for a slow count of 10. Then relax your arm and fist for a slow count of 10. Repeat with your left arm. Then do the same with your legs, stomach, and other muscle groups.

Be patient with yourself. Avoid judging or criticizing yourself if being mindful is hard at first. It can be a challenge to stay in the present moment if you're used to multitasking. Stick with the process, if only for a few minutes a day. With regular practice it will get easier.

Mindfulness Meditation

Being mindful in everyday moments when you bring your full presence to an object is a kind of meditation. But if you are interested in deepening your ability to stay in the present moment, you may want to learn the techniques of mindfulness meditation. This is a practice that has specific techniques. During mindfulness meditation, your objective starts with being mindful about your breathing, which can help calm the mind and improve focus.

Many schools and hospitals teach mindfulness meditation to help people cope with stress and anxiety or to manage health conditions, chronic illnesses, and pain. While you can start practicing mindfulness meditation on your own, you may benefit from taking a class and learning from an experienced meditation teacher.

Spend time each day alone in mindful meditation. Sit quietly in a place where people, tasks, and noises won't distract you. Focus on your breathing, inhaling and exhaling evenly. Thoughts will inevitably arise, but simply observe them without judgment. Let your thoughts go, and return your focus to the breath. Experts say that practicing mindfulness meditation regularly is more important than how much time you spend on it when you do. When you're getting started, it's usually more helpful to commit to five minutes of meditation a day than to try for a longer block of time at unpredictable intervals. Your daily practice of meditation will help you make a habit of it that will become longer and easier to maintain over time.

Consider "walking meditation." It's often a challenge for busy adults to sit still long enough to meditate or become more mindful of the world. If you're one of those adults, look into "walking meditation," which teaches you how to meditate while moving. Search online for "walking meditation" to learn more about how to use your walks to gain a greater awareness of the world.

Look into books, DVDs, apps, and other resources on mindfulness meditation. Explore a variety of approaches to mindfulness meditation if you don't find one that works for you right away. You can find good books, DVDs, and apps on mindfulness at bookstores, libraries, and online. You might start with *Practicing Mindfulness: An Introduction to Meditation* by Mark Muesse, an award-winning teacher who has studied at some of the world's leading meditation centers. Or try the popular Headspace app, designed to help busy adults get started with mindfulness and guided meditation. If you've found a technique that has helped you, resources like these can help you build on that technique to further develop your practice of mindfulness.

Mindfulness meditation can also be used to treat depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance abuse, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and some types of heart disease. A study presented to the American Heart Association found patients who practiced mindfulness regularly cut in half their risk of heart attacks and strokes compared with people who received only education about a healthy diet and lifestyle. Therapists often use mindfulness meditation along with another form of therapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy, to help people cope with distractions or negative thoughts that are affecting their work, relationships, or ability to enjoy life.

Mindfulness can be a precious gift you give yourself because it expands your ability to savor each moment.

The Dalai Lama, when asked what surprises him most about humanity, said: "Man. Because he sacrifices his health in order to make money. Then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health. And then he is so anxious about the future that he does not enjoy the present; the result being that he does not live in the present or the future; he lives as if he is never going to die, and then dies having never really lived."

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