

# Why Practice Mindfulness?



Mindfulness—an awareness of the moment—can help you in many areas of life. When you're aware of your experiences on a moment-by-moment basis, you can direct your focus away from negative thoughts like worry and self-doubt and be present in a calmer way.

Many people use the broad term *mindfulness* to refer to specific practices that experts call "mindfulness meditation" or "mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)." Any type of mindfulness that you practice may improve your wellbeing. Research has found that mindfulness has helped people manage physical and mental health concerns that range from diabetes to stress to anxiety and depression.

## The Science Behind Mindfulness

Over the past several decades, studies have found that mindfulness has a variety of physical and mental health benefits, including helping you sleep better, improving wellbeing, even helping ease chronic pain.

Recent studies have suggested that regularly practicing mindfulness meditation creates physical changes to the brain. Doctors have long known, for example, that as we get older, we experience shrinkage in a specific region of the *prefrontal cortex*, a part of the brain associated with working memory and certain types of decision-making. That's why it's harder to remember certain things as we get older—we have less "gray matter" there.

But after eight weeks of regular mindfulness meditation, 50-year-olds had the same amount of gray matter as 25-year-olds, according to a study by researchers at Harvard Medical School and elsewhere, published in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research*.

Research has also found that participants in mindfulness programs showed changes in the amygdala—a part of the brain that affects fear, stress, and anxiety—which correlated with lower stress levels.

## How Mindfulness Can Help You

Even five minutes a day of practicing mindfulness may help you reap some of its benefits. Some studies have shown that people often begin to see benefits after about eight weeks of regular practice.

The more you practice mindfulness, the more you may gain from it. Experts generally recommend that you start by practicing mindfulness for five minutes per day, gradually working up to 15 to 20 minutes a day. This will give your mind time to "settle" into being fully present in the moment.

Practicing mindfulness consistently may help you:

**Have more satisfying relationships.** Several studies have found the ability to be mindful can predict satisfaction in relationships, perhaps because greater self-awareness helps people communicate thoughts or feelings to others.

**Quit smoking or overcome other addictions.** The craving for cigarettes significantly decreased for people with an average age of 21 who took part in a study of mindfulness meditation published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

**Manage a health condition.** Doctors may recommend mindfulness meditation, along with other treatments, for health concerns including diabetes, chronic pain, eating disorders, and some types of heart disease.

**Manage feelings of stress and anxiety.** Therapists sometimes use mindfulness in combination with other treatments to help people cope with unwanted thoughts that interfere with work, relationships, or the ability to enjoy life.

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