

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a way of being. It's also a skill developed by deciding to slow down and taking the time to pay attention and be curious about things that we're experiencing and things that we see around us. Each of us can be mindful—we just don't do it often. Most people new to mindfulness first work on three of its main parts: attention, curiosity, and acceptance.

Attention

- Awareness of things in and around us
- Attention to internal thoughts, feelings, body sensations, our environment, and/or specific experiences
- Focusing on the HERE and NOW



Curiosity

- Exploring without judgment
- Looking at thoughts, feelings, or sensations from the perspective of an explorer
- Curiosity helps us examine situations more objectively
- When we explore with judgment, it's easy for one critical thought to cascade and cause distress. Practicing mindfulness may not stop judgments, but it can help us notice those thoughts

Acceptance

- Embracing the present moment as it is, both the good and the bad, rather than resisting it or doing something quickly to change it
- Since we cannot control everything, acceptance might mean simply acknowledging that we feel anxious and letting those feelings be, knowing that they will pass



Let's Talk About Stress...

Your nervous system is not very good at distinguishing between emotional and physical threats. If you are very stressed over an argument with a friend, a work deadline, or a mountain of bills, your body can react just as strongly as if you are facing a true life-or-death situation. And the more your emergency stress system is activated, the easier it becomes to trigger and the harder it becomes to shut off. Stress is a reaction to a situation—it isn't about the actual situation. We usually feel stressed when we think that the demands of the situation are greater than our resources to deal with that situation.

Negative Effects of Stress

- Depression and anxiety
- Pain of any kind
- Sleep problems
- Autoimmune diseases
- Digestive problems
- Skin conditions, such as eczema
- Heart disease
- Weight problems
- Reproductive issues
- Thinking and memory problems



Among other strategies and practices, mindfulness can help you deal with stress.

Benefits of Mindfulness

When you induce a state of relaxation, which can be achieved through mindfulness, another kind of meditation, or other activities, you can reap the benefits, including:

- Increased immune function
- Improve sleep quality

- Lowered blood pressure
- Lowered heart rate
- Increases positive emotions
- Reduces physical symptoms of stress
- Increases density of gray matter in the brain linked to learning, memory, emotion regulation and empathy
- Increased awareness, attention, and focus
- Higher brain functioning
- Increased clarity in thinking and perception
- Lowered anxiety levels
- Experience of being calm and internally still
- Experience of feeling connected

Mindfulness is Not...

- An empty mind. The goal of mindfulness is to notice thoughts and the way those thoughts make us feel. Mindfulness is about learning to explore the inner dialogue that is quick to judge something. Mindfulness does not eliminate thoughts altogether.
- Only thinking good or happy thoughts. Instead, mindfulness helps us become aware of all kinds of thoughts and sensations—pleasant or unpleasant—and helps us let them be.
- Forced relaxation. While mindfulness may reduce stress, relaxation is not the goal.



Ways to Engage in Mindfulness

Pay close attention to your breathing, especially when you're feeling intense emotions. Notice—really notice—what you're sensing in a given moment, the sights, sounds, and smells that ordinarily slip by without reaching your conscious awareness. Tune into your body's physical sensations, from the water hitting your skin in the shower to the way your body rests in your office chair. Focus on the movement of your body as you take step after step, your feet touching and leaving the ground—an everyday activity we usually take for granted.

Exercise 1 (Retrieved from therapistaid.com)

Five Senses

Use this exercise to quickly ground yourself in the present when you only have a moment. The goal is to notice something that you are currently experiencing through each of your senses.

What are 5 things you can see? Look around you and notice 5 things you hadn't noticed before. Maybe a pattern on a wall, light reflecting from a surface, or a knick-knack in the corner of a room.

What are 4 things you can feel? Maybe you can feel the pressure of your feet on the floor, your shirt resting on your shoulders, or the temperature on your skin. Pick up an object and notice its texture.

What are 3 things you can hear? Notice all the background sounds you had been filtering out, such as an air-conditioning, birds chirping, or cars on a distant street.

What are 2 things you can smell? Maybe you can smell flowers, coffee, or freshly cut grass. It doesn't have to be a nice smell either: maybe there's an overflowing trash can or sewer.

What is 1 thing you can taste? Pop a piece of gum in your mouth, sip a drink, eat a snack if you have one, or simply notice how your mouth tastes. "Taste" the air to see how it feels on your tongue.

The numbers for each sense are only a guideline. Feel free to do more or less of each. Also, try this exercise while doing an activity like washing dishes, listening to music, or going for a walk.

Exercise 2 (Retrieved from mindful.org)

How to Really Listen

1. Check inside: "How am I feeling just now? Is there anything getting in the way of being present for the other person?" If something is in the way, decide if it needs to be addressed first or can wait till later.

2. Feeling your own sense of presence, extend it to the other person with the intention to listen fully and openly, with interest, empathy, and mindfulness.

3. Silently note your own reactions as they arise—thoughts, feelings, judgments, memories. Then return your full attention to the speaker.

4. Reflect back what you are hearing, using the speaker's own words when possible, paraphrasing or summarizing the main point. Help the other person feel heard.

5. Use friendly, open-ended questions to clarify your understanding and probe for more. Affirm before you differ. Acknowledge the other person's point of view—acknowledging is not agreeing!—before introducing your own ideas, feelings, or requests.

Exercise 3 (Retrieved from [mindful.org](https://www.mindful.org))

A Five-Step Sleep Meditation

- Dim the lights 1 hour before bedtime. Start winding down the brain and body by dimming the lights. Engage in relaxing activities outside the bedroom that pass the time quietly.
- Avoid looking at anything with a screen. Stow away your tablet, phone, computer, and TV for the night—the light can keep you awake and alert.
- Ten minutes before bedtime, begin a focused mindfulness exercise. Sit in a comfortable chair in the same dimly lit room. Imagine the outline of your body and slowly trace it in your head. Keep in mind the amount of pressure you're feeling against the chair or the ground and be mindful of where there's more pressure and where there's less. Start with your head. Is it touching the back of the chair? How heavy does it feel against the chair,



wall, or just the air? Then slowly move down to your ear, then shoulder, arm, and leg. Work down to your feet and then back up the other side of your body. Take about five minutes for this exercise.

- If your mind begins to wander, notice that it wandered and get back on track. Try to avoid judging yourself—your mind will indeed wander; the skill lies in getting it back on track.
- Get in bed and focus on your breath. If you are unable to fall asleep, get up, sit in the comfortable chair again and repeat the exercise. Don't get back into bed until you're sleepy—and don't sleep in the chair!

Apps:

- Calm
- Headspace
- Moodpath
- Pacifica
- 7 Cups
- Happify
- Breathe2Relax
- Healthy Minds

Online Resources: (General Mental Health)

-
- CMHA – Ontario : www.ontario.cmha.ca
- Mood Disorders Association of Ontario: www.checkupfromtheneckup.ca
- <http://www.windsoressex.cmha.ca/suicideprevention>
- Bounce Back: www.bouncebackontario.ca
-