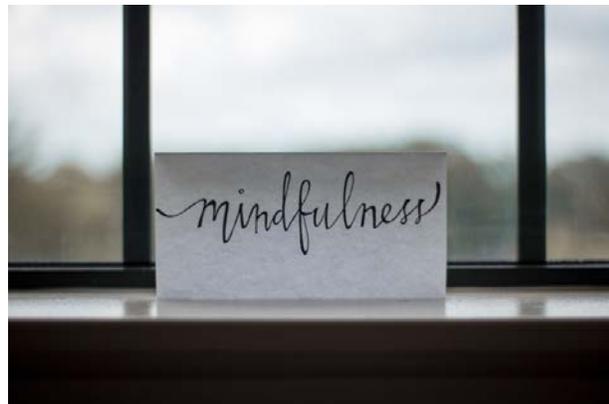


Using Mindfulness to Stay Mentally Healthy

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the act of being present and aware of the current moment. Although this may seem like a very simple task or concept, it can be very difficult for many of us to practice it in our daily lives. We are all too often operating on “auto-pilot,” which creates a barrier to paying attention to what is happening in our lives, especially the positive.

We often distract ourselves with thoughts about the past or the future, thinking about what we should have done or what we should do next time. We can easily get stuck in patterns of negative thinking, especially when it comes to our self-esteem or our self-worth. These distractions get in the way of our ability to connect to our bodies, our thoughts, our feelings, and our environment. These distractions can also get in the way of acknowledging or appreciating the good in our lives.



Mindfulness encourages clarity and insight. It improves our quality of life and reduces stress. Once we are aware of our distractions, our negative thinking, or self-criticism, we are then able to interrupt our destructive thought patterns. This opens us up to enjoying

ourselves, our environments, and our thoughts in an honest and healthy way.



Mindfulness is not a religion, although it has roots in Buddhist meditation. Anyone, with any type of belief system, may experience benefits from practicing mindfulness.

How can mindfulness help me?

Practicing mindfulness has been proven to improve our physical and mental health. For instance, studies show that mindfulness:

- Lowers levels of stress
- Improves concentration
- Encourages healthy lifestyles
- Increases self-awareness
- Increases happiness

Meditation is also good for our hearts and our immune system. Chronic stress has been shown to decrease our immune system functioning, leaving our bodies vulnerable and weak to fighting infections. Meditation induces relaxation; this increases the development of nitric oxide, causing blood vessels to open up and blood pressure to drop.

How do I practice mindfulness?

There are many different ways to practice mindfulness. Some examples are through meditation, guided imagery, breathing exercises, and physical movement. This toolkit provides a few

examples of mindfulness exercises that you might find helpful. You may want to practice these exercises when you're not feeling stressed, so you know how to use them when you really need them.



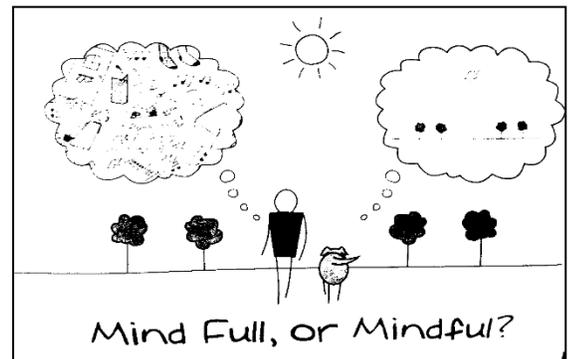
Mindfulness in Everyday Life

How can I be mindful in my everyday life?

You can be mindful during any activity! The key is to experience the present moment by observing details. Use your 5 senses to help you do this. Here are 3 examples of everyday mindfulness:

Walking:

- No matter why or where you are walking, be mindful. While walking, our minds often wander. Bring your focus back to the present moment.
- Pay attention to each step. Notice your breathing – is it deep or shallow? How does your body feel? Are there any places of tightness or pain? Which muscles feel loose? The purpose isn't to make judgments or changes in your movements, but to just notice.
- Take in the sights, smells, and sounds around you. Observe the feelings you're having as a result of this mindfulness.



Eating:

- Avoid multitasking while you eat. Consider how often you snack on your favorite foods, and before you know it, your snack has disappeared! Did you even enjoy your experience?
- Instead, try to slow down, pause, and pay attention to the food you are eating. Maybe your meal includes an apple. Notice the different shades of reds and greens on its skin. How does it smell? Is the skin smooth? Are there any bruises? Observe the

crisp crunch when you bite into the apple, and then be present with the various flavors and textures on your tongue, whether tart, sweet, crisp, gritty, or somewhere in-between.

- Try this with any food item! Is your post-meal satisfaction different at all?

Showering:

- Notice the feel of the water as it runs down your skin. Is it warm? Is it enjoyable? Observe the scents of soap and shampoo, and the feel of your hands on your head and skin. How does the water feel on your feet? Can you taste anything? Notice the sound of the water. Is it different if your eyes are open or closed? Watch the droplets run down your arm.

Helpful hint: It is normal for our minds to wander. If this happens, do not judge or feel frustrated. Gently bring your awareness back.

How can mindfulness improve my mental health?

Practicing mindfulness can help you train yourself to focus on the present, rather than worry about the future or regret the past. It is completely normal to notice thoughts coming to your mind. Over time, you can learn to refocus your attention. The next time you're feeling sad, worried, or angry, try being mindful of that moment. Use your senses to observe the here-and-now. Simply observing your thoughts and feelings can help you feel less overwhelmed during tough situations. Practicing mindfulness can improve your coping skills over time.

5 Senses Mindfulness

What is 5 Senses Mindfulness?

Sometimes we feel like we're caught in a current of water and are unable to reach solid ground. This exercise is an easy way to find your grounding and feel more centered on a difficult day. During this exercise, you bring awareness to your 5 senses in a calming and soothing way.

How do I practice the 5 senses?

You can do this exercise anywhere: at home, on vacation, a busy street, a quiet place in nature or at a park. You just need 5 minutes available to yourself to practice this exercise.

First, take a few minutes to sit quietly and tune into your body. Take a few relaxing, deep breaths, noticing the air as it passes through your nose and mouth. You can choose to participate in all 5 senses, or just focus on one. Below are some examples of how to focus your energy on one sense at a time.

Sight:

Shift your concentration to noticing the world around you. Notice colors, changes in light, textures, and movement. Look at the nature around you, look at a picture on the wall, or notice the edge of a table or the pattern



in the carpet. Pay attention to your surroundings and look for things you haven't noticed before.

Sound:

Close your eyes and notice all the things you can hear. Listen to music, pay attention to the sounds of nature, the wind in the trees, or water dripping. Be mindful of any sounds that come your way, letting them go in one ear and out the other.

Smell:

Now, shift your concentration to noticing the smells of your environment. Is somebody cooking nearby? Are you able to notice the smell of perfume, flowers, or laundry? Mindfully breathe in the scents around you. Smell an orange, chocolate, or your favorite scented oils.

Taste:

Find something such as a small chocolate or fruit and really taste the food, noticing the flavor and intensity. Sip a drink slowly, savoring the taste. Try new foods, especially if they are sweet, sour, or bitter. Instead of judging the food as good or bad, simply notice how your taste buds respond.

Touch:

Notice your hands and where they are placed. Notice the pressure between your feet and the floor. Run your fingertips gently up the inside of your arm. Feel the air across your skin. Walk barefoot on grass, sand, or water, noticing how your feet feel. Pet your cat or dog, have a massage, or hug someone. Hot, cold, sharp, hard, soft—there are many textures to experience.

When you are finished, breathe full and deep. Acknowledge your remarkable body that allows you to see, hear, smell, taste, and touch.



Progressive Muscle Relaxation

What is Progressive Muscle Relaxation?

Progressive Muscle Relaxation is a mindfulness exercise that is intended to help you slow down, to develop greater awareness of tension in your body and to help you let that tension go. This exercise is useful for relaxing stiff, tired, or overworked muscles and for general relaxation. Many people don't know that their muscles have become increasingly tense, and some people who are under a lot of stress may not even recognize what being relaxed feels like.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation teaches your body to distinguish between tense and relaxed sensations by purposefully tensing and releasing muscles in a systematic way, starting at the feet and working your way up to your head.



How do I practice Progressive Muscle Relaxation?

Set aside 15 minutes in a quiet place where you can sit or lay down comfortably.

Step 1: Tension

The first step is to apply muscle tension to a specific part of the body. Focus on one muscle group. For example, your right foot. Next, take a

slow, deep breath and squeeze the muscles as hard as you can for about 5 seconds.

Step 2: Releasing the Tension

Quickly release the tension, letting the tightness flow out. Exhale as you do this step.

Important: Very deliberately focus on the difference between the tension and relaxation. Remain relaxed in this state for about 15 seconds and then move on to the next muscle group.

What are the different muscle groups?

- Foot (curl your toes downward)
- Lower leg and foot (tighten your calf muscle by pulling toes towards you)
- Entire leg (squeeze the muscles while doing above)

Repeat on other side of body

- Hand (squeeze your fist into a tight ball)
- Entire right arm (tighten your forearm up towards your shoulder)

Repeat on other side of body

- Butt
- Stomach
- Chest (tighten by taking a deep breath)
- Neck and shoulders (raise your shoulders up to your ears)
- Mouth (open wide enough to stretch the hinges of your jaw)
- Eyes (close tightly shut)
- Forehead (raise eyebrows as far as you can)

Note: It is important to really **feel** the tension. Your muscles will shake when you do this properly. Be careful not to hurt yourself! Tension should be done gently but deliberately.

Is there also guided Progressive Muscle Relaxation?

Yes, it can be helpful to listen to someone guiding you through these steps. There are many audio recordings available online, on the App Store or Google Play, or on podcasts for free. You may try searching for “Progressive Relaxation” on YouTube to find a recording you like.

What is calm breathing?

Calm breathing, sometimes called “**diaphragmatic breathing**” is a technique that helps you slow down your breathing when you’re feeling stressed or anxious.

How can calm breathing help me?

Breathing is something we usually do not pay much attention to. With slow breathing, we take the time to focus on slowing our breathing and relaxing our bodies from head to toe. Calm breathing has been suggested to help with symptoms of anxiety, sleep problems, chronic



pain, and stress. When we feel anxious, we tend to take short, shallow breaths or even hold our breath for short periods of time. Calm breathing helps you to focus on your breath in order to calm yourself and relax.

How can I practice calm breathing?

- Sit comfortably in a chair with your feet on the floor. You can lie down if you wish.
- Fold your hands on your belly.
- Breathe in slowly and calmly. Fill up the lower belly with a normal breath. Try not to breathe in too heavily. The hands should move up when you breathe in, as if you are filling up a balloon. Avoid lifting the shoulders as you inhale or filling up your chest. Rather, breathe from your diaphragm

(the large muscle located at the base of your lungs) or stomach. Your shoulders and chest area should stay relaxed and still.

- Breathe out slowly to the count of “5.” Try to slow down the rate of the exhale. After the exhale, hold for 2-3 seconds before inhaling again.
- Work to continue to slow down the pace of the breath.
- Practice this for about 10 minutes.
- This works best if you practice this two times each day for 10 minutes each time. Try to find a regular time to practice this each day.

How can calm breathing help me when I am stressed out?

A benefit of calm breathing is that you can practice it at any time, in any location. Breathing is a built-in coping mechanism. Calm breathing can be used when you are alone or when you are around others, and it can help with a variety of stressors you might be feeling. The next time you find yourself in a stressful situation, try taking a few calm breaths and focus on relaxing your body and mind. Below are a few examples of times you may find calm breathing useful.

At home:

- When you are tossing and turning as you try to fall asleep
- As you feel yourself becoming frustrated or upset while having a stressful conversation with a family member, friend, or roommate

In public:

- Before an exam, interview, meeting, or any other anxiety-inducing event
- When your day has been busy or hectic, and you are feeling overwhelmed

Where can I get more information?

- You may try searching for “Calm Breathing” or “Diaphragmatic Breathing” on YouTube to find videos that will walk you through the process of calm breathing.
- www.Mindful.org: an informative website that provides information about simple techniques, including deep breathing, that will help you to relax and reduce stress in your everyday life.

What is guided imagery?

Guided imagery is a safe, effective way to find freedom from tension and stress. It focuses on the connection between mind and body, using the imagination to achieve a state of calm or relaxation.

Whereas it is not a substitute for medical treatment, it may effectively be used in conjunction with treatments for many different illnesses.

How can guided imagery help me?

Guided imagery has been used for hundreds of years. Research shows guided imagery can ease pain and nausea, lower blood pressure and heart rate, and improve sleep. Guided imagery is often used for depression and anxiety, to address the effects of cancer treatment, and for chronic pain management.

Steps of guided imagery:

1. Find a place where you will not be interrupted
2. Close your eyes
3. Take a few deep breaths and notice your body relaxing
4. Picture a scene where you are very relaxed. This scene is often different for different people. Some may choose a setting such as a beach, forest, or the mountains - whatever is relaxing to you.
5. Become fully involved in your imagination. Try to use all of your senses. What can you hear? Smell? Touch? See? Staying in this exercise for 10-15 minutes is ideal, but it can be adapted depending on how much time is available.

6. Slowly deepen your breaths and bring your awareness back to your body
7. When you are ready, open your eyes and notice any relaxation or recharging in your body or mind.

For further information on guided imagery, visit:

<http://www.mccancer.org/support/managing-emotions/complementary-therapies/guided-imagery>



Building Mindfulness through Movement

When most of us think of meditation, we think about sitting on the floor in quiet stillness, with the goal of emptying our mind of all thoughts. This practice is not for everyone and can be very difficult to achieve

Meditation and mindfulness can also be reached through slow and fluid movements. Yoga, Tai Chi, and dance are very popular types of moving meditations. Not all moving meditations require specific steps or poses. A moving meditation can be completely your own creation.

No matter how you choose to move your body, it is important to remember to move at a comfortable pace. Start with about 30 minutes at a time. Focus on the movements and how your body feels while it is moving. Some people like to create variations in their breath—starting with a natural breath and slowly working to deepen it by expanding the belly and rib cage.

Next is a series of moving meditations that can be done standing or sitting. If music helps you to relax, put on your favorite song to match your mood, ~~maybe~~ something inspiring for a more energetic practice or something soothing for a more calming practice. Make sure to tune in to your body. Only do what feels good and make sure to modify the movements to meet your body's needs.

5 Examples of Mindful Movements

Each exercise should be done at least 5 times. Remember to focus on how your body is feeling and where you are feeling the movements. Allow the movements to be slow and fluid; consider matching your movements to your breath.

1. Start with your feet hip-width apart. Take a deep breath through your nose, raising your arms over your head. Exhale as you bring your arms back down, and start again. Notice the weight of your arms and the movement in your shoulders. As you inhale deeply, notice how your belly is expanding. As you exhale, feel your body release the breath.
2. Start with your feet hip-width apart and your hands on your hips. With your eyes closed, begin gently twisting at the waist. Do this a few times, and then extend your arms out straight, allowing them to naturally swing as you continue twisting at the waist. Be aware of how your twisting waist is moving your arms.
3. Start with your feet hip-width apart and your hands on your waist. Gently bend at the waist, allowing your arms to naturally fall down toward the ground and your head to hang heavy. Consider putting a slight bend in your knees for comfort. With your eyes closed, begin gently swaying your arms left to right. Feel your spine begin to lengthen. When you feel ready, grab opposite elbows and continue to sway.
4. Challenging our balance is a great way to build awareness in how our body moves. Start with your feet hip-width apart and your arms by your side. Slowly lift your right knee to meet your left elbow. Bring your leg back down and raise your left knee to meet your right elbow. Do a few rounds of these. If it is too much, modify the movement so it feels good. If you fall off balance, start again.

5. You may choose to do this exercise either standing or seated in a chair. Be sure that you are either standing or sitting up straight with your hands at your waist or on top of your thighs. Begin by bringing your chin to your chest, allowing your head to hang heavy. Slowly begin moving your head up and down. After a few rounds, begin moving your head left to right, noticing your chin grazing your chest. You may then decide to do a full neck rotation, moving your neck clockwise and then counter-clockwise.

For more information:

- University of Michigan Depression Center
- 1-800-475-MICH or 734-936-4400
- <http://www.depressiontoolkit.org>

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