



USING MINDFULNESS
TO ENHANCE

YOUR LIFE



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Introduction

There's no doubt that you've heard of mindfulness. It's difficult to watch the news, read a magazine, or surf the web without running across the topic of mindfulness. You've probably heard about all the wonderful benefits, but perhaps you're a little fuzzy about what it actually is. Everyone seems to have their own perspective.

Many people know it's related to Buddhism. But who has time to go live in a monastery in Tibet or Sri Lanka?

Do you need a meditation pillow to practice mindfulness?

Do you need to wear a robe, chant, and meditate for hours on end?

Do you have to shave your head and swear an oath of poverty and chastity?

The good news is that you don't need to do anything beyond having a willingness to slow down and focus.

When you practice mindfulness, you'll feel better and realize numerous mental, physical, and spiritual benefits. And, it won't even cost you a dime.

Many average people are using mindfulness practices to accomplish amazing things. You can do it, too.

*"The most fundamental aggression to ourselves,
the most fundamental harm we can do to ourselves,
is to remain ignorant by not having the courage
and the respect to look at ourselves
honestly and gently."*

- Pema Chödrön

What is Mindfulness?

If you were to ask 10 different individuals for a definition of mindfulness, you'll likely get 10 different answers. However, these two definitions of mindfulness are very well-respected and commonly quoted:

- *"The intentional, accepting and non-judgmental focus of one's attention on the emotions, thoughts and sensations occurring in the present moment" – from "Mindfulness meditation for substance use disorders: a systematic review" Substance Abuse 30 (4): 266–94*
- *"Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally."*
– Jon Kabat-Zinn

In practical terms, mindfulness is simply paying attention to your environment, activities, and thoughts. Ideally, your only thoughts are only of your environment and whatever it is you're doing. But if you do have other

thoughts, the recommended course of action is to simply bring your attention back to the present.

For example, if you're mowing the grass, think of cutting the grass or those things you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel while you're doing it. Ideally, avoid thinking about your unpaid bills, relationship issues, the past, or the future - only what is happening in the present moment.

The practice of mindfulness has been around for thousands of years, but it has only become a mainstream topic in the West over the last few years. This is mostly due to the amazing medical benefits that have been discovered recently.

Understandably, you might be confused about the differences between mindfulness and meditation.

“Mindfulness is simply being aware of what is happening right now without wishing it were different; enjoying the pleasant without holding on when it changes (which it will); being with the unpleasant without fearing it will always be this way (which it won't).”

- James Baraz

The Difference Between Meditation and Mindfulness

We're all familiar with the image of Buddhist monks or other spiritual folks sitting motionless on big pillows, in seemingly uncomfortable positions, for extended periods of time. It might look interesting to some, but it's rarely described as fun.

To a large degree, meditation commonly involves removing external stimuli. Meditation is most commonly performed in very quiet, subdued surroundings. There's little light, and after sitting motionless for a few minutes, there's a minimal amount of tactile stimuli. Thoughts are completely focused on breathing or some other simple object or idea.

With meditation, the goal is to limit thinking and allow the higher functions of the brain to shine through. Removing most of the stimuli makes it easier to concentrate and focus.

Mindfulness is similar to meditation, but different.

Mindfulness is about fully living and engaging in the present, versus allowing your mind to drift off to other

things. The goal is to limit your attention to your immediate environment.

The belief is that it's only possible to live in the moment. If your thoughts aren't about your present moment, you're not really living.

"You might be tempted to avoid the messiness of daily living for the tranquility of stillness and peacefulness. This of course would be an attachment to stillness, and like any strong attachment, it leads to delusion. It arrests development and short-circuits the cultivation of wisdom."

- Jon Kabat-Zinn

Benefits of Mindfulness

Being mindful is beneficial in so many ways, and these benefits are only now being fully appreciated in the western hemisphere. **Mindfulness is being taught in prisons, schools, and the workplace.** It's even being used to treat stubborn mental illnesses with great results. It's a truly universal tool.

Check out some of the benefits of mindfulness:

1. **It's very relaxing.** Consider that essentially all of the worry and anxiety you experience is either about past or future activities. **If your mind is fully engaged on the present, it's very difficult to feel bad.** It's also nearly impossible to think about more than one thing at a time. However, it's still possible to switch back and forth rapidly between multiple thoughts.
 - ▶ If you can control your thoughts, you'll relax, and feel much better.

- ▶ ***Studies have shown that mindfulness training lowers cortisol, the primary stress hormone.***
2. **You'll have greater self-control.** Imagine being able to say to yourself, "The garage needs to be cleaned." Then, imagine you actually do it without all the hemming and hawing that usually occurs. How great would that be?
- ▶ Mindfulness is excellent at removing the negative feelings associated with undesirable tasks. You'll be able to get all those things done that you currently can't stand doing, such as your taxes.
3. **It opens your mind.** If you're truly being mindful, it's nearly impossible to be judgmental. Suppose you meet someone new of whom you normally wouldn't approve. Perhaps it's someone with a tattoo on his face. Or, conversely, maybe it's someone wearing a suit and tie. Just imagine someone that wouldn't appeal to you based on appearance.
- ▶ In a state of mindfulness, you would notice the tattoo (or suit and tie), but you wouldn't allow your thinking to go to the next step of judging the person.

- ▶ In our daily lives, most of us jump to conclusions. Many of these conclusions aren't even based on our own experiences. Have you ever actually seen someone with a facial tattoo treat others poorly? Probably only on TV.
 - ▶ Imagine how many more people you would meet, things you would see, and experiences you would try if you stopped judging others. You'd learn so much more, and your life would be richer.
4. **You'll sleep better.** Studies have shown that the stress-lowering properties of mindfulness extend to bedtime. Those that practice mindfulness have been found to have less "activation" at night. This is a fancy way of saying they feel less negative emotional upheaval at bedtime. Of course, that helps you sleep better!
 5. **Other health benefits.** *The practice of mindfulness lowers the incidence of depression in multiple demographics, lessens feelings of loneliness, boosts the ability to fight colds, enhances weight loss success, and decreases the odds of developing mental illnesses.*

- ▶ Mindfulness even lowers blood pressure and increases the tolerance for pain. Those with irritable bowel syndrome find their symptoms reduced by over 40%.
 - ▶ The health benefits are outstanding and they're likely the reason why you're familiar with mindfulness. But for many, the other benefits are even more meaningful.
6. **It increases attention, regulates emotions, and enhances self-awareness.** With fewer thoughts whizzing through your brain, it's much easier to focus on the task at hand. And, we've already touched on how negative emotions are reduced.
- ▶ Focusing on yourself and your environment will make you more aware of your thoughts and body.
7. **It has a positive impact on behavior. One study found that mindfulness increases compassion towards others and the likelihood of performing more "do-good" behaviors.** Mindfulness can help to uncover the wonderful person lurking inside of you.

8. **It lowers your medical bills.** The health benefits derived from mindfulness can greatly decrease your medical bills. Mindfulness practically pays you.

9. **It helps students, prisoners, and those in the workforce.** Unless you're retired, you likely fall into one of those categories!
 - ▶ Students and prisoners both exhibit better behavior. Students have also been shown to increase their standardized test scores.

 - ▶ ***Mindfulness in the workplace results in using fewer sick days, boosting employee morale, and increasing work output.*** You'll start enjoying your job more and feel better about being there.

It's challenging to think of another activity that provides more benefits, yet costs absolutely nothing. Mindfulness truly has the capacity to enhance nearly every aspect of your life.

The greatest obstacle to mindfulness is an overactive mind. Too much thinking gets in the way.

"As we encounter new experiences with a mindful and wise attention, we discover that one of three things will happen to our new experience: it will go away, it will stay the same, or it will get more intense. Whatever happens does not really matter."

- Jack Kornfield

4 Obstacles of Thinking

The biggest difference between humans and animals is the capacity to think deeply. How many minutes each day do you spend without a thought in your head? Even while you're sleeping, you're still thinking in your dreams.

When do our brains get a real rest? Meditation and mindfulness both provide relief to overworked and overstimulated brains.

Our ability to think is amazing, but thinking isn't all it's cracked up to be. ***Thinking is probably causing you more harm than you realize.***

Consider these issues with thinking:

1. **The vast majority of our thoughts accomplish nothing positive.** We rarely control our thoughts. While at work, we look out the window and see a balloon. That leads to thinking about the State Fair we attended with our girlfriend in high school. Then,

we're analyzing the reasons the relationship failed. All of this thinking is prompted by seeing that one balloon.

- ▶ ***Much of our thinking is simply free-association that distracts us from being productive.*** We're not very disciplined in our thinking, and we fail to use our brains in a way that's helpful. That wonderful brain capacity is going to waste.
 - ▶ We also focus on the past and future. One leads to regret. The other leads to worry. Neither is helpful. Examining the past to reflect and make changes is one thing. Ruminating and making ourselves miserable is another.
 - ▶ Taking action to head-off potential obstacles in the future is great. Worrying to the point of being paralyzed is worthless.
2. **Thinking becomes an addictive habit.** Our thoughts distract us from boredom and other unpleasant mental states. We daydream when we're stressed. We worry because it tricks us into thinking we're doing something about the issue at hand. But keep in mind that it isn't possible to worry a problem away.

3. **Thinking can confuse our perspective.** *When we let our minds wander away from the present, we lose awareness of our situation because our emotions match the situation in our heads instead of being congruent with reality.*

- ▶ If you're unable to sleep because you're thinking about a negative situation at work, it isn't the situation that's keeping you awake. It's your inability to be present that's causing the negative thoughts.

4. **Excessive thinking robs us.** Notice how a child interacts with the world. Sure, a child can think and ponder when the situation calls for it. But children are very connected to their senses.

- ▶ Children are extremely aware of what they can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. You rarely see a child "spacing out" and living inside their head. However, it's common to see adults lost in thought, while life is passing them by.

Thinking is our greatest strength but it can also be a major weakness. Intentional, directed thinking is incredibly powerful. ***Undisciplined thought is little more than a dust storm that blinds us from seeing the truth.***

Carefully choose the times you're going to let your mind work on solutions.

"Mindfulness has never met a cognition it didn't like."

- Daniel J. Siegel

9 Steps to Mindfulness

Mindfulness is quite simple, but not easy. It's important to get started and begin making progress. It's a little like walking. There seems to be little progress until one day you stand up and suddenly you're walking.

Practice these steps daily and watch your mindfulness grow:

1. **Be aware.** This means to be aware of everything in your environment, as well as everything you're doing and thinking. ***Keep your focus on the present moment.***
2. **Avoid multi-tasking.** Just do one task at a time. You'll actually get more done, and it's much easier to be mindful.
3. **Be deliberate.** Focus on what you're doing and perform the next logical step. Keep going until the task is complete. **Be focused on the task rather than getting the task over with.** If you're washing

dishes, focus on washing each dish, and keep repeating until all the dishes are washed.

- ▶ See how enjoyable this is compared to washing the dishes and whining to yourself about how boring it is or wondering how much longer it will take.

4. **Notice your feelings.** If you think about it, emotions are nothing more than feelings that we've learned to label. When your body feels a certain way, you call it "jealously," "happiness," "fear," "shame," and so on.

- ▶ Our brains don't have the ability to actually feel anything. That's why patients are frequently awake for many neurosurgery procedures.
- ▶ We rarely notice our bodies unless we're in pain or ill. This is a mistake. Our bodies are one of the primary ways we experience the world.
- ▶ ***Regularly take a moment to notice what each part of your body is feeling.***

5. **Listen to others.** What do most of us do while someone else is speaking to us? We think about what we want to say and wonder when we can say it. See if

you can limit your attention to what the other person is saying.

- ▶ You'll strengthen your relationships and make more friends.

6. **Mundane activities are perfect for practicing mindfulness.** Simple activities make it easier for our minds to wander. It's easier to allow your mind to drift away while taking a stroll than it is while downhill skiing.

- ▶ **Walking.** Most of us walk quite a bit each day, but we rarely think about walking. We also don't pay much attention to what's going on around us. Our thoughts are primarily on whatever it is we're walking to.

While walking, notice what's going on around you. Feel the pressure on your feet. Feel the temperature of the air on your skin. Smell the air.

- ▶ **Eating.** We're rarely aware that we're even eating. Try a little experiment. Take an orange and eat it one piece at a time. Bite into it slowly and really take the time to savor each piece. Take a full 30 seconds for each segment. There's a 50-50

chance you won't even be able to finish the entire orange. It's richer than you think.

Avoid eating in front of the television or while listening to music, so you can focus on your food and the people with you. When you're talking, talk. When you're eating, eat.

- ▶ ***Waiting in line.*** Maybe you find waiting in line to be especially frustrating. Notice the feelings and thoughts that arise while you're waiting. But avoid getting emotionally involved. Simply be a casual observer.
- ▶ ***Cleaning, mowing, and other chores.*** Walking and eating can be quite enjoyable. Cleaning and mowing the grass, not so much. But you'll find that the time is more enjoyable than you'd expect. Just focus on the task and avoid thinking about getting done.

See how long you can focus before your mind drifts away. Set a timer for 5 minutes and clean the kitchen. When that's easy, try 10. See how long you can go.

7. **Learn how to regain control.** If you find yourself unable to be mindful, there's a great trick to bring your thoughts back to the present.
- ▶ List 10 things that you see. It's preferable for you to list the items aloud. Describe each one with some detail.
 - ▶ List all the things you hear. Close your eyes and really listen.
 - ▶ Describe the smell in the air.
 - ▶ Describe what you're feeling physically. It might be, "My neck is hurting. I can feel the pressure of my feet on the ground. My belt feels tight. The air is a little cool on my skin. My body feels tired."
 - ▶ Take a minute to notice your breathing. Count your breaths as you feel the air moving in and out of your body.
 - ▶ ***When you complete this exercise, your mind should be back in the present.***

8. **Get enough sleep.** If you're sleep-deprived, it's much more challenging to focus. Mental clarity and energy are vital components of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is a rigorous mental exercise that requires attention, effort, and sleep!

9. **Notice the situations where you typically lack mindfulness.** Is it during meetings at work? While driving? When you're bored during church? Develop a strategy for dealing with these situations. No matter where you go, you can learn something about yourself and mindfulness.

There's no time like the present to begin your journey into mindfulness. It might seem like a big task, but every task begins with a few simple steps. Start small, but get started. ***All that's required is focus and persistence.***

Even if you only start with being mindful while brushing your teeth, it's a start. Pick up that toothbrush and spend the next 3 minutes thinking only of brushing!

As with any challenging task, there are several obstacles to meet and overcome.

Start living right here, in each present moment. When we stop dwelling on the past or worrying about the future, we're open to rich sources of information we've been missing out on— information that can keep us out of the downward spiral and poised for a richer life.”

- Mark Williams

Obstacles to Mindfulness and Recommended Remedies

Although becoming mindful can be challenging, you can be prepared if you know what to expect. Fortunately, all the common obstacles have solutions.

Watch out for these potential barriers to mindfulness:

1. **Slow progress.** While mindfulness is a simple concept, changing your mental habits can be extremely challenging for several reasons.
 - ▶ Your current mental habits are meeting your needs on some level, even if they only make you feel better temporarily. Dropping these habits can

result in discomfort, at least for a period of time. But the eventual gains are well worth it.

- ▶ Practicing mindfulness successfully will take some time. Be patient!
2. **Challenging life circumstances.** The more uncomfortable your life is, the stronger the tendency to “check-out.” ***It’s much easier to be mindful when things are going well in your life.*** When things are challenging, it’s much more difficult. We’ve all experienced this. For example, work is harder when you’re having issues at home.
- ▶ Start small with tasks that aren’t too uncomfortable. Adding discomfort on top of discomfort only increases the likelihood of a wandering mind.
 - ▶ Remind yourself that being mindful during challenging times will feel better and greatly boost the odds of turning your life around. Focus on one thing, and much of the mental clutter will likely vanish into thin air.
3. **Attachment to mental pleasure.** Some of us get great pleasure from fantasizing and remembering

pleasant experiences from the past, without realizing the cost of this type of behavior.

- ▶ Wouldn't it be much more satisfying to create new, positive experiences rather than mentally reliving your only touchdown in 9th grade or fantasizing that you're a princess or a spy? Engaging in this type of behavior accomplishes nothing.
 - ▶ The wasted time and not living in the present only adds to the chaos of life.
4. **Worry.** When your mind is over-stimulated, it can be challenging to settle down. Although you might be unhappy with your current situation, mentally hopping around to find a more tolerable reality isn't a long-lasting solution.
- ▶ **Create a plan that will solve the source of your worry.** Focus on the first step with all the mindfulness you can muster. When that's completed, move on to the next step. Then, keep going until you're finished.
5. **Lack of consistency.** Mindfulness is a bit like exercise. If you only do it once in a while, you won't

see the expected results. It's important to be diligent each day. **Only regular practice will result in attaining a high level of mindfulness.**

- ▶ Pick a few tasks you do every day, like brushing your teeth, getting dressed, and driving to work. Work on your mindfulness with just these activities.
 - ▶ Once you've made mindfulness a habit, expand your new skill to other aspects of your life.
6. **Doubt.** Achieving mindfulness seems a bit vague until you've actually experienced it. It's common to believe that you won't achieve it. You might be concerned that you're doing something incorrectly.
- ▶ Rest assured that it's a simple skill that takes time to develop. You've already learned to do far more complex and challenging tasks, such as walking and talking.

You're almost certain to come across at least a few of these obstacles in your mindfulness practice. The key is to notice them and take appropriate action. If you can avoid becoming frustrated, you've already won half the battle.

Simply recognize the challenges when they occur, and mindfully work the antidote.

*“Mindfulness meditation doesn't change life.
Life remains as fragile and unpredictable as ever.
Meditation changes the heart's capacity to accept
life as it is. It teaches the heart to be more accommodating,
not by beating it into submission, but by making it clear
that accommodation is a gratifying choice.”*

- Sylvia Boorstein

Resources

The practice of mindfulness has become so popular that a plethora of resources, many of which are free, are available if you're interested in learning more. As with any popular technology, it's important to consider the source of the information. Unfortunately, there are many unqualified people that are willing to make a buck by claiming expertise they don't possess.

Regardless of your budget, there's no need to suffer from a lack of information:

1. **Books.** A quick search on Amazon.com in the books section returns nearly 8,500 results. That's a lot to read. The books by Thich Nhat Hanh and Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn are highly respected. One of the most popular works over the last 20 years is [Mindfulness in Plain English](#).
2. **Free Courses.** *There are many free courses about mindfulness available online.* Most seem to be 8-10 weeks in duration.

3. **Paid Courses.** When anything is popular, there's money to be made. There's no shortage of paid courses. Jon Kabat-Zinn's course is perhaps the best known. His course is associated with the University of Massachusetts medical school, and there's an online version of it.
4. **Web Sites.** If you need information, the web is at your disposal. Thousands of websites are focused on mindfulness resources. Just consider the credentials of the person providing the information.
 - ▶ Remember that sometimes the best advice comes from regular people that had success.
5. **Other people (free).** There are plenty of mindfulness groups that meet regularly to exchange ideas and provide support.
6. **Other people (paid). *Many psychologists, psychiatrists, and other mental health professionals are offering mindfulness-based counseling.*** There are also life coaches and spiritual advisors willing to provide advice and training. Do your research carefully.

It's difficult to give specific recommendations. Everyone has their own unique twist to mindfulness. Just be aware of all the options available to you. A little research is sure to turn up a valuable resource within your price range.

"Two thoughts cannot coexist at the same time: if the clear light of mindfulness is present, there is no room for mental twilight."

- Nyanaponika Thera

Conclusion

The practice of mindfulness is powerful and free! You need nothing, besides yourself, to become mindful. The numerous benefits are supported with scientific research.

What other technique can be used to help sleep issues, irritable bowel syndrome, anxiety, hypertension, attention deficit disorder, borderline personality disorder, and insomnia? It can even boost your happiness, confidence, and overall sense of well-being.

Best of all, it doesn't cost a penny. In fact, it actually saves you money.

Mindfulness is remarkable!

Take advantage of the many available resources, especially the free ones. Even if you're financially strapped, you can still locate the information you're looking for.

Whatever you're planning on doing for the next 10 minutes, see if you can stay totally focused on that task

without allowing your mind to stray! Get ready, get set, go!

“Mindfulness isn’t difficult, we just need to remember to do it.”

- Sharon Salzberg