

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness means awareness. Mindfulness is becoming fully aware of each moment and one's experience of that moment. It can be described as open attentiveness, and involves a willingness to receive whatever we experience, whether this is viewed as positive or negative.

Mindfulness is drawn from meditation, which is practised in a number of spiritual traditions. While mindfulness is a part of Eastern religious traditions, you can practice mindfulness regardless of your religious background.

Practising mindfulness has been found to promote psychological well-being.

Mindfulness is now widely used in the treatment of chronic physical pain and in stress management programmes and is increasingly being used in the treatment of emotional disorders.

Mindfulness is a quality or state of mind that is natural but needs to be cultivated through practice. As with any skill, it needs to be practised regularly in order for you to fully appreciate its benefits.

Practising mindfulness is done using a variety of core skills that we can call 'what' and 'how' skills.

'What' skills:	'How' skills:
Observing	Non-judgmental stance
Describing	Being 'One-Mindful'
Participating	Being effective

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS

Observing

‘Just notice the experience’

Observing requires you to pay full attention to an event or an emotion.

Observing is sensing and noticing without labelling or judging an experience.

Rather than leaving a situation or ending an experience if it becomes unpleasant, observing is staying with that feeling. It is allowing yourself to experience whatever is happening and being fully aware of the world around you.

Exercise:

- Step inside yourself and observe.
- Imagine that your mind is the sky, and that your thoughts, sensations and/or feelings are clouds.
- Watch your thoughts coming and going.
- Gently notice each cloud as it drifts by.
- Be the observer – try to avoid judging or analysing these thoughts, just notice them come, remain for as long as they remain, and pass.

Describing

Describing is using words to represent what you have observed and acknowledging when a feeling or thought arises.

It is putting an experience into words and describing to yourself what is happening.

It is helpful to distinguish between objective reality and subjective evaluations or judgements when describing.

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Describing (Cont.)

For example:

You are in a situation that feels uncomfortable to you and you do not know what to do. Rather than thinking, 'I can't do this' and believing this to be true, if you were accurately describing you would acknowledge, "A thought "I can't do this" has come into my mind'.

This act of describing can make the thought less powerful, as we stop treating thoughts as unquestioned truths, but rather as things to observe.

Exercise:

- Sit quietly on your own or in session and hold a pebble or other object (it may help to close your eyes).
- Notice sensations such as the smoothness or coolness of the pebble, and the sense of weight.
- Describe what you are sensing.
- Notice any judgements you may make (e.g. whether it is pleasant or unpleasant).

Participating

Participating is entering into your experiences and letting yourself get involved in the moment rather than avoiding, suppressing or trying to escape from unpleasant feelings.

You may have felt able to do this in positive states of mind, but it is human nature to want to escape, numb or avoid unpleasant states.

The importance of participating can be seen when people experience bereavement. All of us experience loss at times in our life, particularly loss of a loved one. There is evidence to show that those who allow themselves to grieve (and thus participate in the experience/feelings of grief) recover more quickly than those who avoid or suppress grief.

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Participating (Cont.)

Exercise:

- When you find yourself in a situation that is irritating or frustrating, you may have urges to fight the situation or wish it to be different.
- Resisting how things are usually compounds the problem; instead practice trying to accept and willingly participate in the experience.

Mindfulness 'How' Skills

These skills have to do with how one observes, describes and participates.

Non-judgemental stance:

Having a non-judgemental stance involves attending, describing or participating without judgement, seeing but not evaluating and focussing on the reality of how things are rather than views, opinions or evaluations.

Even when you find yourself judging, do not judge your judging.

Example:

Judgment	<i>Versus</i>	Non-judgment
I am stupid		I do not understand this information
I am fat		I am not feeling happy with the way I look
I am pathetic		I am feeling upset about what x said

Have you noticed yourself making judgements like this?

What would be non-judgemental alternative thoughts or viewpoints?

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Being 'One-Mindful'

Essentially this is focussing on only one thing at a time. When you are eating, eat. When you are planning, plan. Do each task with all your attention and if actions or thoughts distract you, let go of them and go back to doing what you are doing.

We are often not in one mind; you may be sitting in this session while at the same time thinking about what you are going to be doing later or driving whilst thinking about a situation at work.

It is completely natural for us to do this – we have the ability to operate automatically in some tasks and at times this is desirable and appropriate. Developing the ability to be 'one-mindful' takes time and practice. We are not striving for this state permanently but try to do one task a day when you are being 'one-mindful'.

Exercise:

Next time you have a drink, make your drink mindfully. Take a few moments to give 100% of your attention to the experience of drinking, rather than drinking whilst doing other things such as talking, working or watching TV.

Mindfulness 'How' Skills

Being effective

Being effective involves focussing on what works and what needs to be done in a situation, rather than what you think should be done, or what is the right/wrong response.

Act as skilfully as you can, meeting the needs of the situation you are actually in, not how you wish it to be.

Try to let go of anger and vengeance that hurts you and doesn't work.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness of your emotions; awareness of your goals

Basic Mindfulness Practice

This practice is very simple, but not easy to do.

- Find a quiet place. Minimise the likelihood of being disturbed.
- Sit upright, with your back straight and chest open. Lower your chin slightly so that you are not tensing your neck. Try to be still.
- Close your eyes. (If you are uncomfortable closing your eyes, or are sleepy, keep your eyes open, but keep gaze lowered and focus downward in front of you.)
- Direct your attention to your breathing. Focus on the passage of air in and out of your nostrils or watch the movement of your chest as your lungs expand with air, then exhale.
- When thoughts, emotions, physical sensations or external sounds occur, simply notice them, allowing them to come and go without judging or getting involved in them.
- When you notice that your attention has drifted off and become engaged in thoughts or emotions, simply bring it back to your breathing and continue. If you are very distracted, try saying 'In' and 'Out' as you breathe.

You will need to do this every day for a minimum of 5-10 minutes. It will get easier over time.