

What is Mindfulness?

Do you remember when you first learned to drive a car? You had to focus on keeping it between the ditches while watching for other cars, traffic signals and road signs. In addition to all of this, you had to constantly glance at the speedometer to make sure that you were driving at a safe speed. You probably recited the „rules of the road’ to yourself, over and over (“Hands at two and ten,” “Watch out for animals and children running into the road,” etc.).

But as you gained knowledge and experience of driving, it became more and more of an automatic process. It may have become so automatic that from time to time you make a routine drive without remembering anything about it.

Mindfulness is just the opposite of this automatic pilot experience. It is a way of paying close attention to your immediate experiences without getting lost in thought or shifting into automatic patterns of thinking or behaving. It is a shift from Doing Mode into Being Mode.



The Benefits of Mindfulness

At this moment, think about the top three things that worry you. Make a mental list. Of those three things, how many of them have to do with worrying about events that happened in the past? How many of them have to do with anxiety over what may or may not happen in the future? Do any of your worries have to do with anything that is occurring right now?

Human beings in general are very good at getting caught in negative thought processes. For example, some day, keep track of how many times per day you have a negative thought vs. how many times per day you have a positive thought. Do your negative thoughts outweigh your positive thoughts?

Negative thoughts are like a chain reaction. One negative thought leads to another, and another, until we find ourselves caught in a downward spiral of negativity that can lead to depression, anxiety, and poor self-esteem. Mindfulness is a way of setting aside negative thought patterns and paying attention only to the moment. It’s not about avoiding, resisting or ‘fixing’ unpleasant thoughts and emotions. Instead, it is a way of stepping outside of the thought stream for a moment to realize that who you are as a person is not defined by your thoughts. It is a way of accepting that you don’t have to buy into these negative thoughts about yourself and others.

Research into mindfulness has demonstrated that practicing mindfulness for ten minutes a day, two times a day for about six weeks, can actually change your brain’s wiring (In a study in the January 30, 2011 issue of *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, a team led by Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH) researchers report the results of their study, the first to document meditation-produced changes over time in the brain’s grey matter). Just as working out with weights can build muscles, ‘working out’ with mindfulness can increase cortical thickness in certain areas of your brain. This increased thickness translates into better judgment, better impulse control, and better tolerance of unpleasant emotions and thoughts.

Features of Mindfulness

The most basic mindfulness technique involves simply paying attention to the moment. One way to do this is to focus only on your breathing, without thinking about anything. If a thought comes to mind, simply note it and let it go, without judging yourself or the thought. It’s perfectly natural that thoughts will try to surface, because we are taught to be thinking creatures. However, as you practice with mindful awareness, it will get easier to let those thoughts go, so don’t get frustrated if it is difficult at first.

Some of the features of Mindful Awareness include:

Observing

Think about your morning routine. When you were in the shower this morning, were you actually „in’ the shower, or was your mind racing down the highway to the office? When you were there in the shower, were you feeling the warmth of the water on your skin, smelling the fragrance of the soap, and hearing the sound of the water, or was your mind elsewhere?

When we are preoccupied with thoughts of the past or the future, we are in ‘thinking mode.’ Thinking mode takes us away from experiencing the world directly with our senses; or ‘sensing mode.’ Mindful Awareness teaches us to focus on the world experienced directly by our senses: touch, taste, smell, hearing, and sight. Experiencing life in sensing mode introduces us to a richer world. It’s impossible to be bored or apathetic if you treat each experience as if it is happening to you for the first time.

Describing

This skill of Mindful Awareness involves observing the smallest details of an object, event or activity. Try to approach each daily activity as if you are experiencing it for the first time. Explore as many dimensions of it as you can. For example, you can probably readily identify with the fact that the color of an orange is „orange,’ but have you ever thought about what an orange sounds like? Is there a distinct quality of an orange that would make it identifiable only by sound? What would a blind person’s experience of an orange be? When you think of oranges, do you have any emotional reaction to them? Do you have any positive memories about oranges? What about negative memories? By identifying and labeling these feelings and thoughts about oranges, we become more aware of our internal experiences relating to oranges.

When we gain experience with this technique, we can apply it to other areas of our lives as well. For example, by looking at your negative thought processes, and identifying and labeling them as such, you are better able to recognize them simply as processes, and not as part of who you are as a person.

Fully Participating

Mindful Awareness allows you to experience every aspect of an activity. We have a tendency, when in thinking mode, to see things and activities as either „all bad’ or „all good.’ This is not necessarily an accurate depiction of reality. In Mark Twain’s book, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Tom gets his friends to help him whitewash a fence by convincing them that fence painting is one of the most fun and enjoyable activities in the world. There is an element of truth in Tom’s deception. Most activities aren’t inherently ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ We’ve taught ourselves to think of them in such terms, but we can also teach ourselves a different way. Think about an unpleasant activity that you have to engage in on a regular basis, such as washing the dishes or taking out the trash. Can you think of any pleasant aspects of these activities? For example, the last time I hand-washed dishes, I found myself fascinated by the bubbles in the sink. I watched the way the light played across them, generating myriads of rainbows that danced and moved across the surface of the bubbles. I was so entertained by this, that I was done with the dishes before I knew it.

There are enjoyable aspects to every experience, if we train ourselves to look for them. Even if we find ourselves caught in an activity in which we can find no pleasure at all, at least we have the pleasure of thinking about how good we’ll feel when the activity is over!

Being Non-judgmental

Mindful Awareness teaches us the art of acceptance. Emotional reactions to our circumstances are natural, but that doesn’t mean that we have to respond to these emotions. The mindfulness skill of acceptance teaches us that we can experience these emotions without engaging in cycles of behavior that lead us to negative consequences. Acceptance teaches us that we are not our thoughts, and that we are not our emotions. At any time we can choose which thoughts and emotions we wish to respond to.

If, at any time, we should „slip up’ and engage in thoughts and behaviors that lead to negative consequences, this does not mean that we have become „bad persons.’ This simply means that we are human beings, and as humans we are entitled to make mistakes. Each mistake is an opportunity for growth and

learning. Forgiveness is a skill and an art. The place to start with learning the art of forgiveness is in learning first to forgive ourselves when we make mistakes.

Focusing on One Thing at a Time

I love Milk Duds. There have been times when I have been engaged in other activities while eating Milk Duds. On those occasions, I've eaten the last Milk Dud without realizing that it was the last one. When this has happened in the past, I've gotten a little upset that I didn't realize that I had eaten the last one. The thought that came to mind was, "If I had known that I was eating the last one, I would have enjoyed it more."

What is it about knowing that I'm on the last Milk Dud that makes eating it more enjoyable? That particular Milk Dud isn't any different from the rest of the ones in the box. What makes the experience of the last Milk Dud different and more enjoyable is the fact that I have focused all of my attention on enjoying it, *because* it is the last one.

What if we could learn to make every Milk Dud the 'last' one?

Ray Charles once said, "Live every day as if it will be your last, because one of these days, you're going to be right."

The way to live every day as if it will be your last, is to focus on the moment, savoring every bit of every experience the world has to offer. The ability to do this is what we call 'mindful awareness.'

Learning to be Mindful

Mindfulness is a skill like any other. It can sometimes be difficult to learn at first, because it is so diametrically opposed to the way we're accustomed to thinking, acting, and doing. Some of the techniques of mindfulness may feel strange at first, simply because they are different. „Different' doesn't mean „better' or „worse,' it simply means 'different.'

There's an old saying in therapy circles that, *"Insanity is doing the same thing in the same ways and expecting different results."*

If we've been doing things that lead to negative consequences, we're probably doing those things because they feel familiar to us...but the way to get different results is to do things in different ways. This leads to different consequences for our actions.

Mindfulness is a way to do things differently.

Although meditation is a part of mindfulness, Mindful Awareness is much more than a meditative technique. Mindfulness is a way of life. The techniques outlined above can be applied to any of our day-to-day experiences. They are not restricted to the realm of meditation.

Like anything else that has to be learned, mindfulness is a skill that requires practice. Michael Phelps didn't win a gold medal the first time he jumped into a swimming pool. Likewise, you probably won't be able to jump right into a „mindful awareness' mode of being without a lot of practice. That's okay. Give yourself permission to fail once in a while. The more you do so, the more mindful you'll become!