

BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS

To the mind that is still, the universe surrenders. – Lao Tzu

Although the concept of mindfulness originated over 2,500 years ago, it is only recently that it has received so much attention in the popular press. During this time, mindfulness has been the topic of numerous self-help books, articles and lectures. Proponents of mindfulness often tout the many social, emotional, mental and physical benefits of engaging in activities that promote mindfulness, commonly defined as the moment-to-moment awareness of one's experience without judgment. But is mindfulness just a fad, or is there empirical data to support these claims? According to the American Psychological Association (APA), there is strong evidence for the following benefits of mindfulness:

- Reduction in stress – along with depression, anxiety.
- Decreased rumination and worry – along with greater feelings of happiness and subjective well-being;
- Improved concentration and mental clarity – the ability to focus on the task at hand, be creative and solve problems;
- Improved memory – especially working memory, even under stressful conditions;
- Decreased emotional reactivity – the ability to stay calm and avoid over-reacting in emotionally charged situations;
- Greater adaptability and flexibility – being resilient and navigating change with ease;
- Increased relationship satisfaction – including relationships with spouses, family members, friends, coworkers and supervisors;
- Enhanced self-insight – and increased compassion for self and others;

In addition, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) reports mindfulness meditation can help improve immune functioning and help alleviate high blood pressure, irritable bowel syndrome, ulcerative colitis, anxiety, depression, insomnia and other health conditions. It has also been used to help people quit smoking.

While the evidence supporting the benefits of mindfulness on physical and emotional well-being continues to emerge, many people are still unsure how to make mindfulness a part of everyday life. Fortunately, there are small steps you can take today to begin to incorporate mindfulness-based activities into your daily routine.

Sources:

1. "What Are the Benefits of Mindfulness? A Practice Review of Psychotherapy-Related Research," from the APA journal *Psychotherapy* (Vol. 48, No. 2).
2. Website: <https://nccih.nih.gov/health/meditation>



MINDFULNESS AT WORK

The world is won by those who let it go. – Lao Tzu

Employers understand the benefits of mindfulness. A number of well-known companies have begun implementing mindfulness programs for their employees including Apple, Google, Deutsche Bank, Procter & Gamble and General Mills. Among other benefits, employers cite increased productivity, greater focus, enhanced creativity, better problem-solving and decision-making and improved listening as just some of the ways that mindfulness can help optimize performance in the workplace. However, as an employee, you do not necessarily need a workplace mindfulness program to begin to reap many of the benefits of mindfulness in the workplace. There are a number of simple ways that you can begin to practice greater mindfulness at work:

- Begin each day with a mindfulness exercise, such as the mindful breath.
- Before entering the workplace, remind yourself of your organization's purpose.
- Throughout the day, pause to be fully present in the moment before undertaking the next critical task.
- If you are a manager or supervisor, take time to reflect and focus your awareness on your role as a leader within the organization.
- When stressful situations arise, practice "strategic" acceptance. Before reacting, observe your feelings and accept how things are at the moment. Then, make a plan to do what you can to improve the situation.
- Notice distractions and become aware of the effects they have on your body. Simply recognizing and observing distractions tends to rob them of their power.
- Take short breaks to practice mindfulness exercises at work to reduce stress and regain focus.
- Periodically, take time to reflect on your priorities to ensure that your time and energy is focused on the things that are most important.
- Take time to review the day's events at the close of the day to prevent work stresses from spilling into your home life.
- Take time to "unplug." Set aside your phone for a short walk on a lunchbreak or a three-minute breathing space in the afternoon. On the weekends, consider taking an afternoon to unplug so you can return to work on Monday feeling recharged.
- Before going to bed, end your day with a mindfulness exercise.

By incorporating even just one or two of these mindfulness at work strategies into your daily routine, you can begin to feel more in control of your day, and experience greater focus and awareness at work.



BODY SCAN

At the center of your being you have the answer. – Lao Tzu

People are often out of touch with their body. They respond to pain or discomfort by trying to distract themselves or numb the pain. They fear their body does not live up to some impossible ideal. In a mindfulness body scan exercise, you can learn to accept and notice with gentle curiosity your body in its comfort and discomfort, in its perfection and imperfection. The goal is not to relax your body or relieve pain – although relaxation, self-acceptance and an ability to face pain may result. The body scan is used simply to become aware of your body as it is, without judgement, in the moment.

1. Sit or lie down in a comfortable position, loosen any tight clothing and close your eyes.
2. Notice your breathing, and the natural rising and falling of your belly.
3. Take a moment to feel your body as a whole, from head to toe.
4. Starting with your feet, begin to notice your physical feelings, including any pain, discomfort, coolness, warmth, tension or tightness. Simply pay attention to the physical feelings and sensations. Don't judge the feelings as either good or bad, and don't try to change them. Simply become aware of them.
5. Slowly allow your awareness to drift up from your feet to your lower legs. Continue simply paying attention to any physical sensations in each part of your body, including any tightness, pain or discomfort.
6. Slowly let your awareness drift further up your body, doing the same gentle noticing for all of the parts of your body – your upper legs, hips, buttocks, pelvic region, stomach, chest, your lower back, upper back, fingers and hands, lower arms, upper arms, shoulders, neck, head, forehead, temples and face – eyes, cheeks, nose, mouth, jaw line.
7. Then, let your awareness drift gently and slowly back down your body, noticing any other places where there is pain, discomfort or tension and simply notice this, until your awareness settles back at your feet.

Tips:

- You can start by doing this exercise for just 5 minutes, and work up to 20 or 30 minutes. Don't worry about how long it takes – just allow yourself to pay attention to the sensations in your body.
- If thoughts intrude while doing this exercise, that's okay – just notice the thoughts and then gently guide your awareness back to your body.
- With practice, you can begin to imagine directing your breath into each part of your body, as if you were breathing into your toes, and out from your toes (legs, chest, shoulders, head, etc.).
- Don't use the body scan to replace conventional medical care or as a reason to postpone seeing a health care provider about a medical problem.



MINDFULNESS FOR MANAGING STRESS

Silence is a source of great strength. – Lao Tzu

Stress is an unavoidable part of life. From time to time, everyone experiences increased levels of stress. However, if left unaddressed, stress can continue to build and affect your health and ability to cope with life. This process can occur with chronic stress that builds gradually over time, or with acute stress, that suddenly overwhelms your ability to cope.

Studies show that mindfulness can be an effective way to manage stress. Exercises that help people achieve a state of mindfulness reduce ruminations over things that cause stress, keep people from dwelling on negative thoughts and decrease anxiety over the future. By providing a temporary break from stressful thoughts, mindfulness allows you to pause and gain a wider perspective before reacting automatically.

Mindfulness is most commonly achieved through meditation, and the regular practice of mindfulness meditation has benefits for your physical health, as well as your emotional health.

Basic Meditation for Stress Management

1. Get into a comfortable position that allows you to completely relax, while still staying awake.
2. Close your eyes.
3. Clear your mind. This takes practice. When a thought enters your mind, simply notice it and then let it go. Don't judge it. Then turn your attention back to the present moment.
4. Continue to notice and then let go of any thoughts that enter your mind. As you continue to practice, the quiet spaces between thoughts will become longer and more frequent.

Tips:

1. Be patient and don't strive for perfection. Meditation is called "practice" for a reason.
2. Start with short sessions (5 minutes) and work your way up to longer sessions.
3. If you are having trouble, try another mindfulness exercise, such as the Mindful Breath.

For those who feel they do not have enough time or patience to dedicate to meditation, there are many other ways to ease into the practice of mindfulness and begin to experience some of its benefits. Gardening, listening to music, driving and even housecleaning can become a practice in mindfulness if you take the right approach: Focusing on the present, and quieting the inner voice that offers a running commentary on what you're doing, what you've done, and what you will (or should) be doing.



Those who know that enough is enough will always have enough. – Lao Tzu

Research indicates that a slower, more thoughtful way of eating can help with weight problems and steer some people away from unhealthy food choices. Applied to eating, mindfulness includes noticing the colors, smells, flavors, and textures of your food; chewing slowly; getting rid of distractions like TV or reading; and learning to cope with guilt and anxiety about food. Experts suggest starting gradually with mindful eating, eating one meal a day or week in a slower, more attentive manner. Here are some tips that may help you get started:

- Before you choose what to eat, try to become aware of what your body needs. Are you really hungry, or are you thirsty?
- Set a timer for 20 minutes, and take the full time to eat a normal-sized meal.
- Try eating with your non-dominant hand. If you are right-handed, hold your fork in your left.
- Try using chopsticks to eat, if you don't normally use them.
- Eat silently for five minutes. Think about everything that it took to produce your meal, from the sun's rays to the farmer to the grocer to the cook.
- Take small bites and chew well. Close your eyes, and focus on the sensory experience of tasting, chewing, and swallowing.
- Before opening the fridge or cabinet, take a breath and ask yourself, "Am I really hungry?" If the answer is no, do something else, like reading or going on a short walk.

John Kabat-Zinn, a scientist, writer, and meditation teacher, uses this famous "Raisin Consciousness" exercise with his clients to introduce the concept of mindfulness:

Sit comfortably in a chair. Place a raisin in your hand. Examine the raisin as if you had never seen it before. Imagine it as its "plump self" growing on the vine surrounded by nature. As you look at the raisin, become conscious of what you see: the shape, texture, color, size. Is it hard or soft? Bring the raisin to your nose and smell it. Are you anticipating eating the raisin? Is it difficult not to just pop it in your mouth? How does the raisin feel? How small it is in your hand? Place the raisin in your mouth. Become aware of what your tongue is doing. Bite ever so lightly into the raisin. Feel its squishiness. Chew three times and then stop. Describe the flavor of the raisin. What is the texture? As you complete chewing, swallow the raisin. Sit quietly, breathing, aware of what you are sensing.

Paying close attention to your senses and your body's reaction to the raisin may reveal insight into your relationship with eating and food.

