

How to Be Mindful: A Beginner's Guide





Did you know you can use the power of your mind to lose weight, improve your health, live longer, and sleep better?

This is not some kind of New-Agey hocus pocus.

I'm not talking about stress reduction (as important as it is).

What I'm referring to is a simple, scientifically-validated technique that only takes moments to learn. This tool has been used by cultures all over the world for centuries, and—as is often the case—modern science is bearing out the importance of this ancient practice.

So what is this secret technique that can improve your health and revolutionize your life, practically overnight?

It's called *mindfulness*.

In case you haven't heard that term (and many of you might have since it's been all over the news recently—*Time* magazine even called 2014 "The Year of Mindfulness"), Jon Kabat-Zinn, MD, one of the premier researchers in mindfulness defines it this way:

"Paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally, as if your life depended on it."ⁱ

It sounds easy, and it can be. It's one of those things that "takes a moment to learn but a lifetime to master." The reason is because mindfulness can be tricky. Let me explain.

Why Paying Attention is So Hard



Every day we are inundated with a continuous stream of thoughts from the moment we wake up to the time we fall asleep. One moment, we're pondering over the meaning of life. The next, we're thinking about what to watch on Netflix or what to have for lunch. And it seems that we can't control this current of thoughts.

[Professor Mark W. Muesse, Ph.D.](#), calls this mindlessness. And the opposite of mindlessness, according to the professor, is mindfulness.

Recently, mindfulness has been gaining popularity. In fact, in the last 10 years mindfulness made the front page of *Time* – twice. Everywhere you look, everyone seems to be talking about mindfulness – from CEO's of huge corporations to celebrities and politiciansⁱⁱ.

Apparently, mindfulness can help you **become healthier mentally and physically**ⁱⁱⁱ. Studies show that being mindful can help with:

- lowering stress
- improving grades
- fighting depression
- sleeping better
- losing weight
- and [extending life](#)

And the results are noticeable within just a few days or weeks of practice. Shortly, we'll dive into how you can use mindfulness to improve your life. But first, let's talk about just what exactly mindfulness is.

Mindfulness Defined in Plain English



This is how Dr. Mark Muesse defines mindfulness:

“At its most basic level, mindfulness is a deliberate way of paying attention to what is occurring within oneself as it is happening. Mindfulness is more than just awareness, however; it is paying attention without judgment or evaluation.”

Our default state, according to Muesse, is mindlessness – a condition of semi-awareness that relies on habit and not paying attention. And this can be dangerous.

The good news is that mindlessness can be fixed through acquiring the skill of being mindful.

Being Attentive^{iv}

When you become mindful, you become attentively aware of your moment-by-moment experience as it unfolds. By keenly observing ourselves, we become capable of changing the way our minds function.

By being attentive to the thoughts that go on inside your head, you become less trapped by the impulses of your mind. And that, as you’ll see, is where the benefits of mindfulness lie.

Non-Judging^v

When you practice mindfulness, you stop evaluating and judging everything as you normally do. You stop making comments inside your

mind. You simply become alert. You are no longer a judge of the thoughts that come to you. You become simply an observer.

You will stop classifying thoughts as good or bad or right or wrong. You'll soon be able to become more open, receptive, and keen. Once you're able to do these, you'll experience a degree of clarity that you weren't able to before. You'll notice details and processes that escaped you before.

Heightened Awareness

When you become mindful, you realize that thoughts and emotions are temporary and will soon pass and you become less vulnerable to emotional distress. Research has shown exactly which parts of the brain are affected when we practice mindfulness.

Dr. Sian Beilock, Ph.D. writes^{vi}:

“‘Mindfulness’ is a capacity for heightened present-moment awareness that we all possess to a greater or lesser extent. Training this capacity seems to have a quieting effect on brain areas associated with our subjective appraisal of our self. By considering thoughts and feelings as transitory mental events that occur, but are separate from the self, people are able to lessen their hold on their worries and positive mental health outcomes follow.”

The Many Scientifically Proven Benefits of Mindfulness

We have Jon Kabat-Zinn to thank for introducing mindfulness into mainstream medicine. He clearly showed how the practice of mindfulness can help improve both physical and psychological symptoms.^{vii}

Aside from that, being mindful also allows you to “live life to the fullest”. Leo Baubata puts it this way:

“By being mindful, you enjoy your food more, you enjoy friends and family more, you enjoy anything you're doing more. Anything. Even things you might think are drudgery or boring, such as housework, can be amazing if you are truly present.”^{viii}

The benefits of mindfulness lie mainly on its ability to help us deal with stress. Chronic stress may contribute to obesity, heart disease, cancer, and diabetes. Stress can also increase the risk of a weakened immune

system. It can also affect us mentally and may result in anxiety disorders and also depression.^{ix}

Mindfulness and Physical Health



By being mindful, you'll find it easier and more enjoyable to engage in healthier habits. You'll eat better, sleep better, and find exercising more enjoyable.^x

Here are the physical benefits of mindfulness.

Weight Loss

Eating slower and more thoughtfully could help in dealing with weight problems. "Mindful eating", as it's been called, involves "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" according to Harvard Health Publications.

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Better Sleep

Isn't it annoying that the more you try to sleep the harder it becomes to do so? But that's just the way it is. Mindfulness can help you sleep better every night. John Cline, Ph.D. explains it perfectly:

"In order to be able to sleep, we have to be able to relax and let go of the day's stress and tension. We can't make ourselves sleep; we can only allow sleep to occur. Trying to sleep only results in greater difficulty falling asleep and when this becomes a nightly pattern, contributes to insomnia. Insomnia consists of difficulty falling and staying asleep and results in

daytime symptoms such as low mood, irritability and poor memory. The harder we try to sleep, the more distant sleep seems to become.”^{xii}

By being mindful and letting go of stress, by not trying, you’ll find it easier to get some sleep.

Helps Against Cold and Flu



Amanda L. Chan writes about the benefits of mindfulness in combating the effects of cold and flu:

“A small new study finds that

mindfulness meditation and moderate exercise seem to have protective effects against cold and flu, with people who engage in the practices having less severe, shorter and fewer symptoms of acute respiratory infection -- and fewer days missed from work due to the sickness -- than people who don't engage in either practice.”^{xiii}

The study showed that being mindful and exercising combined can decrease symptoms of cold and flu by 40 to 50 percent.

Addiction Recovery

According to addiction expert Dr. David Sack, M.D., mindfulness is the opposite of addiction in many ways.^{xiv} Addiction is about escaping difficult situations, pursuing what seems to be lacking, denial and lying to others and to one’s self, and a lot of shame and blaming.

Mindfulness, on the other hand, is about deliberately focusing on emotions that are difficult to deal with and rendering them powerless over us. It’s about seeing the abundance that life has to offer and appreciating what you already have. It’s about taking responsibility for one’s own actions. And it’s about developing compassion for yourself and for others.

Lowers Blood Pressure

A study was conducted involving 56 men and women with pre-hypertension – a condition when blood pressure is higher than normal but not high enough to require prescription medicine. The results were published in *Psychosomatic Medicine: Journal of Behavioral Medicine*.

The study found that those who were educated in mindfulness significantly decreased their blood pressure.

The researchers think that mindfulness can actually be used to delay or even prevent the need to use medication for patients who are borderline hypertensive.^{xv}

Helps with Dealing with Pain

When you're feeling pain, your instinct is to want it to go away, ASAP! The first thing we often do, when we have a headache is to take something for the pain. The last thing you'll want to do is to pay attention to the pain.

The mindful approach to dealing with pain is different. Instead of ignoring the pain or immediately wanting it to go away, mindfulness encourages us to focus on the sensation of pain without judgment. Instead of dwelling on negative thoughts and thinking of how much we want the pain to go away; being mindful teaches us to consider what we can learn about the pain.^{xvi}

This learning mindset helps with coping with pain.

Mindfulness and Mental Health



According to the UK's Mental Health Foundation:

“Mindfulness meditation has been shown to affect how the brain works and even its structure. People undertaking mindfulness training have shown increased activity in the area of the brain associated with positive emotion – the pre-frontal cortex – which is generally less active in people who are depressed.”

In other words, mindfulness is like a gym for the mind. The more you practice mindfulness, the stronger you become in dealing with your emotions. It literally changes the brain's structure!^{xvii}

Stress, Anxiety, and Depression

Stress is actually good for us. It helps us make decisions that are good for the species. However, the things that stress us modern humans weren't there when we were evolving our "fight or flight" mechanism.

Stress is useful when we were trying not to get eaten by a predator. Now, we stress about traffic, bills, deadlines, relationships, and the daily grind. But everyday stress accumulates and then snowballs.

The terms "stress" and "anxiety" are used almost synonymously. But there's a slight difference. Anxiety disorders are considered diagnosable mental illnesses while stress isn't considered a mental illness. Think of it this way, too much accumulated stress may lead to anxiety.^{xviii}

Depression is another condition often confused with anxiety. Most people suffering from depression also experience a form of anxiety. That's why it's difficult to tell them apart. Depression is a mental disorder associated with hopelessness, despair, and anger. Anxiety makes a person experience panic and heightened fear.^{xix}

The good news is that all these conditions can be helped by mindfulness.

Dr. Madhav Goyal looked at several previously published studies and found that practicing mindfulness seems to be useful in fighting anxiety and depression.^{xx}

Improves Memory, Reasoning and Concentration



Concentration affects short-term memory and verbal reasoning. One study showed that mindfulness can help students improve their short-term memory, improve their verbal reasoning test scores, and focus better.

It appears that by helping students focus, mindfulness also helps with enhancing their memory and reasoning ability.^{xxi} Which means mindfulness can help students get better grades.

Anger Management

Anger, if controlled and used sparingly, can be a healthy emotion. Its okay to show anger if you're being treated unfairly or without respect. When you show anger, it helps tell the other side that what they did is not okay.

Unhealthy anger, on the other hand, harms yourself and others. Mindfulness can help in cooling down anger. Being mindful of your anger can make the anger last shorter; occur less frequently, and at a lower intensity.^{xxii}

The steps in dealing mindfully with anger include:

- 1) recognizing that you are angry
- 2) accepting that the strong emotion of anger is present
- 3) observing the sensations that you feel while angry
- 4) recognizing that the anger you're feeling right now is a passing experience

Dealing with Grief

We experience grief after a loved one dies or after a major change in our life such as a divorce, losing a job, or moving to a new place. Grief can exact a great emotional toll and those suffering from grief are often physically and mentally stressed.^{xxiii}

Dr. Sameet Kumar, Ph.D. advises the grieving to follow these 8 tips:

- 1) meditate for at least 20 minutes, twice daily
- 2) accept that there's going to be ups and downs
- 3) manage tasks by doing small doable chunks at a time
- 4) eat mindfully
- 5) don't neglect exercise
- 6) use rituals to honor your grief
- 7) reach out to friends
- 8) set time-bound goals for your grief

Mindfulness and Enjoying Life



Awareness and being mindful can contribute to your enjoyment of life in general. “By placing the emphasis on self-awareness and mindfulness one can have the ability to reach full potential in life and to enjoy every minute of it,” according to Camilla Culler.^{xxiv}

There's evidence showing that mindfulness can help us have better relationships, do better at our jobs, and enjoy life more.

Mindfulness Makes Music Sound Better

A study published in the *Journal of Music* showed that a few minutes of mindfulness meditation improves focused engagement in music.

“The study participants marked their engagement with the music by turning a dial. They found that most of the participants -- including those who underwent the mindfulness meditation and those who didn't -- experienced flow and aesthetic response, and more than half of those who underwent the mindfulness meditation thought that it helped them to be more engaged in the music,” according to a Huffington Post article.^{xxv}

More Satisfying Relationships

A study at North Carolina University showed that mindfulness can help couples become happier in their relationship. Psychology expert Lisa Firestone writes:

“Mindfulness increases our awareness of what we are experiencing and allows us the space to decide how we want to act in our daily lives. It is easy to picture how enhancing these abilities within ourselves would lead to better outcomes in our relationships.”^{xxvi}

Helps You Become Better at Your Job

Yep. There's a study that proves you'll perform better at your job when you practice mindfulness. And not just the desk jobs, mind you – even jobs that require multi-tasking and keeping track of a lot of things at the same time.

Emily Nauman writes:

“A new study was published in the journal *Human Relations*. Erik Dane of Rice University and Bradley Brummel of the University of Tulsa surveyed 98 servers in restaurant chains in southwest America to assess their level of mindfulness at work.”^{xxvii}

The researchers measured “engagement, energy level, and dedication at work.” The managers were also asked to rate the servers' job performance. The results showed that those who scored high in mindfulness also scored high in job performance.

Mindfulness Techniques for Beginners

Zen Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh, (and Jon Kabat-Zinn's teacher) teaches five steps to mindfulness. According to him, being mindful should be effortless. Mindfulness is not work.^{xxviii}



The prolific Vietnamese author compares mindfulness to breathing. We don't exert effort to breathe. We just do it. He also compares mindfulness to enjoying the sunset. We don't have to try hard to enjoy the sunset. We just do it.

Here's a condensed version of the five steps to mindfulness.

- 1) **Mindful Breathing** – Observing yourself breathe is the simple first step to mindfulness. Just distinguish the difference between breathing in and breathing out. You don't have to over think it. Just observe yourself inhaling and then exhaling. Focus on your breath.

What this exercise reveals is that you are alive. You're breathing! Being alive is a miracle in itself. Think of your breathing as a celebration of life.

- 2) **Concentration** – Next, you observe your in-breathes entirely from the beginning to the end. A relaxed breath will last around 2 to 3 seconds. Stay with your in-breath for the entire duration. When you breathe out, follow your breath for the full 2 to 3 seconds. The length of your breath is not important though. What's important is that you follow the full breath from beginning to end.

By practicing observing your breath from beginning to end, you develop mindfulness and concentration. Soon, you'll notice that your breath becomes slower and deeper. Just be reminded that you don't have to force yourself to breathe slower and deeper. It will come naturally if you simply observe your breath from beginning to end.

- 3) **Awareness of Your Body** – To take it another step further, you will now add being aware of your body while you breathe in and

breathe out. While your mind can dwell in the past or think about the future, your body is always in the present. Being aware of your body lets you live in the present. So while you breathe in, be aware of your body. Breathe out and be aware of your body.

You'll soon notice that the quality of your in-breathes and out-breathes will gradually improve. You will experience being at peace and the effects are good for your body.

- 4) **Releasing Tension** – Becoming more aware of your body, you'll soon notice that there are areas in your body that have some tension, pain, and stress. Without the help of the mind to release tension, it can accumulate according to Thích Nhất Hạnh.

While breathing in, be aware of your body. Breathing out, release tension. It doesn't take long to release tension. In fact, the few seconds you stop at a red traffic light can be enough to release tension.

- 5) **Walking Meditation** – Just like mindful breathing, mindful walking is done without effort but with enjoyment. Every step you take helps you to wonder about life.

In Thích Nhất Hạnh's own words:

“The real miracle is not to fly or walk on fire. The real miracle is to walk on the Earth, and you can perform that miracle at any time. Just bring your mind home to your body, become alive, and perform the miracle of walking on Earth.”

Conclusion

We can all benefit from practicing mindfulness. We can become better at our jobs, better in our relationships, healthier, and happier. And all it takes is cultivating awareness. It's not hard. Actually, it's almost effortless. Try it now.

If you found this article useful, please spend a few mindful seconds to tell your friends and loved ones about it.

Also, if you're not subscribed to our newsletter, you can use the form on the right side of our blog to receive updates on our latest articles.

Useful Resources

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- ^{xxiv} [Getting The Most Enjoyment Out of Life: Mindfulness As a Tool to Enhance Well-being](#), Camilla Culler, Published 2005, Retrieved November 11, 2014.
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