

Getting Start with Mindfulness Practice

What is Mindfulness?

- Mindfulness is a non-judgmental, sustained attention to your immediate experience. Most cultures have some form of mindfulness practice, the most common of which is mindfulness breath meditation.
- Mindfulness breath meditation involves non-judgmentally observing your breath by redirecting your mind to refocus each time it wanders off to other thoughts. Typically, your mind will wander off numerous times per minute.
- Each time you redirect your focus back to your breath, you are improving your ability to regulate your emotions and stress response and increasing your tendency for positive moods and overall positive disposition.

Why Bother Practicing Mindfulness?

- Recent research studies indicate that regular mindfulness practice can be helpful for a number of physical and mental problems, including chronic pain, skin conditions, cancer treatment, immunity, depression, anxiety, ADHD, bipolar, panic, eating disorders, substance abuse, and other stress related disorders.
- Preliminary brain research indicates that after as little as 8 weeks of mindfulness practice, there was a sustained increase in activity in centers of the brain associated with positive mood and disposition as well as immune system functioning. Thus, after a relatively short period of time, there are measurable changes in brain and body functioning.
- Current theories and brain research indicate that regular mindfulness practice can increase compassion for others and oneself, resulting in improved self-esteem and relational functioning.

Making Time for Mindfulness Practice

- A good way to start making mindfulness part of daily practice is to set aside 2-10 minutes per day for 5-7 days per week. Short frequent sessions are better than long but infrequent practices for mental health benefits. Start with 2 minutes and build up to 10.
- The best way to do this is to identify your most regular habits (meal times, working out, work schedule, television shows, bedtime, etc.) and find time before, during, or after one of these activities during which you can fit in mindfulness.
 - Ex: Add 5 minutes of mindfulness before or after breakfast/lunch/dinner.
 - Ex: Before watching TV at night, meditate for 5-10 minutes.
 - Ex: Meditate during the first/last 5 minutes of your lunch hour; or 10 minutes before work starts; or 10 minutes at end of workday.

Mindfulness Techniques and Strategies

- **Focus:** Ideally “watch” your breath by focusing on the nostrils or belly movement. You can also try counting each breath up to ten and then repeating from the beginning. Others find it help to use a mantra or focusing words attached to the in- and exhalation, such “peace in, peace out,” “be peace,” or any simple phrase that focuses you.
- **Refocusing:** There are many options for refocusing when your mind wanders off, which it will do several times a minute in most cases. The most important part is to choose a refocusing technique that reminds you to be patient and nonjudgmental with yourself (e.g., not beat yourself up or put yourself down) when you find that your mind has wandered off.

Some of options for redirecting your focus:

- “Yes, that too”: Ah, yes, that too; I expected this thought to show up today.
- Labeling: When you catch mind wandering, you can label each thought, e.g. “worry,” “planning,” “anger,” “feeling,” “thought” and then return to focus.
- Clouds Image: You can imagine the distraction as a cloud or bubble that floats away.
- **Posture:** It is generally considered best to sit in an upright yet relaxed posture on the edge of a hard chair or cushion. If this is uncomfortable, you may also lie down or sit back in a chair.
- **Eyes:** You may close your eyes or keep them slightly opened with soft gaze a few feet ahead.
- **Timer:** It is often very helpful and motivating to set a timer to set boundaries on your practice. You may use an egg timer, a timer on your mobile phone, buy a meditation timer (www.zenclocks.com), or download one on your computer (Mac: meditation timer widget; PC: Buddha bell softpedia.com) or iPhone/smart phone/tablets: meditation apps.
- **Environment:** It may be easiest at the beginning to meditate in a quiet location, but it is not necessary. Distractions can be helpful in improving your focus.

Overcoming Barriers to Regular Practice

- **No Time:** If you are motivated, you can always find 2-5 minutes a day to practice. The easiest way to find the time is to “attach” mindfulness to another daily or regular activity. Then it will quickly become a habit.
- **I Can’t Focus:** Be patient and kind to yourself! Over time, mindfulness helps you improve your focus. Each time you lose focus and then refocus, you are increasing your brain’s ability to maintain focus and regulate emotion.

Cultivating Acceptance

- At its core, mindfulness practice is about cultivating acceptance of self, others, and life. Acceptance is cultivated by your *attitude* when refocusing your attention.
- You will lose your attention frequently and often: what you do to refocus is key. You should work towards accepting with kindness and compassion whatever thought,

feeling, or distraction has captured your mind's attention while also accepting that your mind has wandered without berating yourself for having lost focus.

- The more you can learn to accept whatever the mind is doing as well as the fact that the mind has wandered, the greater your acceptance will be of self and other.

Online Instruction

On the following website, www.dianegehart.com, you will find online instruction and guided meditations to help you get started.

Additional Resources

www.meditateinthousandsoaks.org: TushitaKadampa Buddhist Center, Local Buddhist mindfulness groups

www.marc.ucla.edu: Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA; MBSR classes and Podcasts

www.mbsr.mass.edu: Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction; Research and Info

www.contemplativeprayer.org: Christian Based Contemplative Prayer Information

<http://jewish-meditation.co.tv>: Jewish meditation traditions and history.

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