

Understanding and Practicing Mindfulness

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Mindfulness is the intentional practice of bringing your attention to the physical sensations, thoughts or emotions of the present, in a non-judgmental way. (In other words, without labeling those experiences as good or bad.)

Research has shown that mindfulness can reduce anxiety and stress, improve working memory, as well your ability to cope with physical pain. Moreover, it has also been shown to improve metacognitive awareness, which is your ability to think about your thoughts and watch them like an outside observer.

In doing so, we are able to observe any thoughts, emotions or physical sensations from a distance, and create a buffer between these experiences and any reactions we might have, effectively cutting off unhealthy habitual patterns of thinking and behaviour before they spiral out of control.

This is why mindfulness is not just one of the most useful standalone practices for supporting basic mental hygiene, but also an essential prerequisite skill for using the tools of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy – psychology’s gold standard, evidence-based treatment for most mental health issues.

Most often mindfulness is practiced as a silent, seated meditation, with a focus on the sensations of the breath and/or the body for a prolonged period of time. But mindfulness can be practiced for any amount of time, or in conjunction with almost any activity, as long as you are focusing on just one thing in the present moment (no multi-tasking!).

Try mindfulness by tuning in to savour the present moment during your first sip of coffee in the morning, taking time to notice the water run over your body in the shower, eating your favorite food or enjoying an intimate moment with a loved one.

Don’t worry when judgments come up (and they will), just notice and let them go. What’s key is to not fall into the common trap of judging yourself for judging. We strive to do this from a place of acceptance – embracing whatever thoughts and feelings show up without trying to push them away, or cling to them, but merely observing them without any agenda for control.

We’re also aiming for something called “beginners mind” – almost like you are an alien being transplanted into your body, exploring it for the first time with openness and curiosity.

Read the follow-up articles to deepen your understanding of how to practice mindfulness, acceptance, specific exercises and more. This is all you need to know to start incorporating mindfulness in your day-to-day life.

In fact, before you move on with your day, pause and notice the sensation of your next few breaths, or perhaps just savor some pleasurable sensation that is available to you, even if it’s just for a few seconds.

Acceptance is key!

How learning “acceptance” can have a positive effect on your mood.

While in day-to-day life people often use the word “acceptance” as a synonym for resignation, giving up or approval; we mean exactly the opposite.

Acceptance is a willingness to embrace reality as it is, even if you don't like it.

For example, imagine that you smell smoke, hear the fire alarm go off, and feel an overwhelming heat coming from the next room. Acceptance is NOT burning down with the house – that would be resignation or giving up. In this extreme case, acceptance would mean acknowledging that the house is on fire and getting yourself and your loved ones to safety!

By not fighting or resisting reality, we reduce our overall suffering in situations we can't change. And, at the same time, we take the first steps towards improving the things we can change, and start to build a life worth living.

In other words, acceptance is an active process, despite how we often mistake it for its exact opposite: experiential avoidance.

“Experiential avoidance” are all the little things we do to avoid or numb ourselves from our pain when we've given up any hope of actually improving our situation in a real, tangible way.

It's akin to putting in earplugs when the fire alarm is going off. It might make life more tolerable in the short term, but the signal will become louder and louder until you finally address the actual problem. In the meantime, the problem grows worse and may cause real damage or harm in your life.

When we practice acceptance of internal experiences it means we are mindfully recognizing what's going on without trying to push away those unwanted thoughts or feelings. We are not clinging to the pleasant experiences. We're making space for whatever experiences arise, without trying to control or change them.

Externally, however, we can observe acceptance in action when we actively take steps towards change (i.e. getting the fire extinguisher).

If you're asking yourself lots of “why” questions about a situation you don't like, or if your mind is running through “if only” or “what if” scenarios where the situation could have been different, then you might be struggling with acceptance. If this is the case, try to identify what you can control in the situation. Be mindful of this kind of unhelpful self-talk, let it go, and try to refocus your attention to taking real world steps to improve your situation.

Don't be discouraged if you have to try this again and again. It isn't usually something that happens without intentional practice, nor is it something that you can achieve once and be done with.

Acceptance is something that needs to be actively re-initiated any time you're struggling. However, with practice, you will be able to do this more effortlessly and automatically.

Don't think about the White Bear...

If you've ever found yourself saying: “I tried mindfulness and it didn't work,” then you were probably trying to practice mindfulness without acceptance. Without that critical ingredient your practice was probably doomed to “not work” before you even started.

Allow me to explain with an example...

For the next two minutes, don't think about a white bear. You can think about anything you want – but just not a white bear. No white bears. Don't even think about thinking about a white bear...

You probably can't do it.

Now, if we substituted that with "don't shoot a white bear," then the prompt might be more helpful. (Assuming you had access to the bear, the gun and a desire to shoot it.) This shows how – when it comes to external problems – being prompted to not do a specific behaviour, and actively trying not to do it, is quite effective.

But we get ourselves into trouble when try to use the same strategy for dealing with internal problems, like difficult thoughts or feelings.

For example, if we substitute that "white bear" with anxiety (or any other unpleasant thought, physical sensation or emotion), it's like trying to put out a fire by pouring gasoline over it. The harder you try to not think about or experience the anxiety, the more that your focus on anxiety begins to consume your life.

This paradoxical effect explains why being mindful in order to feel better may sound like disappointing advice. But, remember, mindfulness isn't about feeling BETTER, its about FEELING better.

Before you get discouraged, remember that mindfulness is a very effective way of finding relaxation and stress relief. However, this is the byproduct, not the goal.

If your perspective is that you absolutely NEED to feel relaxed, then we can be sure that you won't. On the other hand, if you are truly willing to make space for discomfort, then you will be able to nurture that part of yourself that is uncomfortable from within an oasis of tranquility.

Accessing the benefits of mindfulness is very doable for most people with some adjustment in their mindset. However, it requires us to let go of our need for control by recognizing and allowing that anxiety to be there without resistance – even though you don't like it. In doing so, the "fire" of your anxiety will be deprived of the fuel it needs to survive and it will burn itself out.

Letting go of our agenda for control can be a very difficult concept to wrap our minds around, especially when it comes to our most painful traumas. So, start with something more manageable.

Try practicing mindful acceptance by bringing your attention to small amount of physical pain or discomfort in your body. Notice how your body tenses up or braces itself. Also note any internal dialogue to the effect of, "I can't deal with this!"

Then, try letting go of this reactivity by releasing any of that physical tension and distancing yourself from unhelpful thoughts by saying, "My mind is telling me a story that I can't deal with this."

With practice, exercising this "muscle" of the mind on the little things, you will increasingly have the skills to handle the big things.