

Practicing Mindfulness

By Orlando E. Blake, PhD CPT

A major benefit of mindfulness is that it encourages you to pay attention to your thoughts, your actions and your body. For example, studies have shown that mindfulness can help people achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

One NIH supported study found a link between mindfulness meditation and measurable changes in the brain regions involved in memory, learning and emotion. Another NIH funded researcher reported that mindfulness practices may reduce anxiety and hostility among urban youth and lead to reduced stress, fewer fights and better relationships.

For mindfulness to make a difference to an individual and also to an organization, it is essential that;

- The leaders and the managers of the organization are committed to it and practice it themselves too.
- That all people who want to learn about mindfulness come to sessions, courses of their own free will, i.e. it is not compulsory.
- That mindfulness is formally practiced on a daily basis. Just as you can't go for one run and think--that's it, I will be fit for the rest of my life, mental fitness requires daily exercise.
- The person learning is willing to look at themselves. Mindfulness creates awareness and a mirror whereby we start to see the things we are doing that are causing stress (to ourselves and others).

Finding time for mindfulness in our culture, however, can be a challenge. We tend to place great value on how much we can do at once and how fast. Still, being more mindful is within anyone's reach.

You can practice mindfulness throughout the day, even while answering emails, sitting in traffic or waiting in line. All you have to do is become more aware —of your breath, of your feet on the ground, of your fingers typing, of the people and voices around you.

As people start to learn how to be more mindful, it's common and normal to realize how much your mind races and focuses on the past and future. You can just notice those thoughts and then return to the present moment. It is these little, regular steps that add up and start to create a more mindful, healthy life.

So, before you roll your eyes again, take a moment and consider mindfulness.

Being Mindful

The concept of mindfulness is simple, but becoming a more mindful person requires commitment and practice. Here are some tips to help you get started:

Take some deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose to a count of 4, hold for 1 second and then exhale through the mouth to a count of 5. Repeat often.



Enjoy a stroll. As you walk, notice your breath and the sights and sounds around you. As thoughts and worries enter your mind, note them but then return to the present.

Practice mindful eating. Be aware of taste, textures and flavors in each bite, and listen to your body when you are hungry and full.

Simply, this means paying full attention in the present moment, consciously noticing every detail outside and within you. A simple way to start practicing mindfulness is a 2-minute breathing exercise that you can do anywhere, anytime, and multiple times during the day.

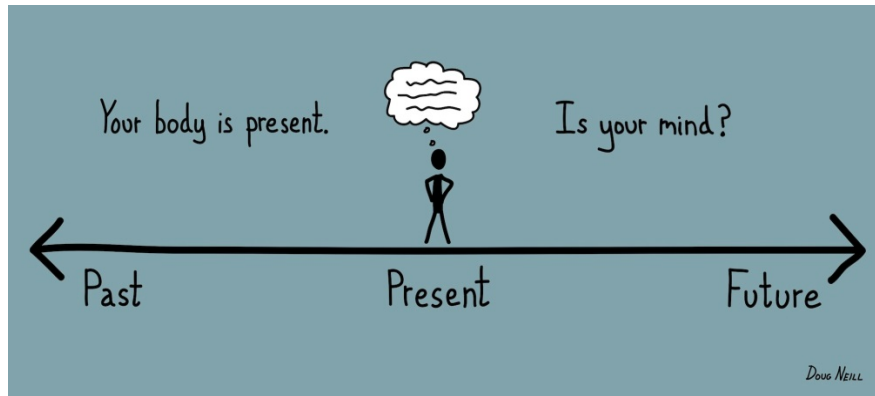
Concentrate on your breathing, feel the air entering your nostrils and travelling into your body. Notice the smell, temperature and texture. Notice how your body responds to it, where it expands or contracts, how it absorbs. Be an active participant in the release, feel the air flow out of the body to make space for the next refreshing breath.

Do not feel under pressure to stop your thoughts or empty your mind. This will only create stress and negative noise. Mindfulness is not about silencing unwanted thoughts; it is about regulating how much attention you give to those thoughts. Allow thoughts to pass through your mind, do not resent their presence. Instead, focus your attention and energy on breathing.

As you master the breathing exercise, slowly try applying the same focused attention to everything-your food, your conversations, your meetings. It will take practice but once it becomes a habit, you will naturally notice a lot more than you did, you will function at a higher level of awareness and most of all, you will master your attention.

The biggest challenge can be remembering to be mindful. It is important to stay on track when you feel your commitment wavering after the initial enthusiasm dies down. These few practices can help develop this as a habit.

Create rituals: Weave mindfulness into your daily routine by using regular activities as triggers to practice it. For example, someone may decide to be mindful while they use the elevator at office every day-it may start with concentrating on the textures, sounds, physical sensations during the elevator ride, but slowly they'll also become aware of their mental chatter.



They might notice passive irritation when people hold up the elevator too long, they might notice that they use the ride to prepare themselves mentally for their next steps and don't like their thoughts being interrupted. They might notice their "mood" after a

"pleasant" versus "unpleasant" elevator ride. As they simply practice noticing this mental chatter as it arises, it will gradually quiet the mind down. The best way to make peace with and let go of thoughts is to acknowledge them; trying to ignore unpleasant thoughts often just leaves you with a nagging sense of dissatisfaction.

Rekindle your curiosity by exercising it: Remember how inquisitive you were when you were a child? Almost anything from a line of marching ants to a twinkling star could mesmerize you. Revive that inquisitiveness. Start by finding something personally interesting to you that can provoke your curiosity. When you've practiced this, try approaching your own thoughts with the same curiosity: What am I thinking in this moment? What may have ignited this thought? What feelings does it evoke?

As with every good practice, the best time to start is always now.

