

## **Mindfulness and Mindfulness (or Insight) Meditation**

### **What is mindfulness?**

At its essence, mindfulness results from paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, without judgment. When we are mindful, we are maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, with a gentle, kind presence.

Mindfulness also involves acceptance, meaning that we pay attention to our thoughts and feelings without judging them—without believing, for instance, that there’s a “right” or “wrong” way to think or feel in a given moment. There’s recognition and understanding that “how it is” is “how it is” in this moment, which is not like the next one or the previous one.

Though mindfulness has its roots in Buddhist meditation, the core elements are universal. The practice of mindfulness has become mainstream in recent decades, in part through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn and the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, which he launched at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979 to help chronically ill patients live with more ease. Since that time, thousands of studies have documented the physical and mental health benefits of mindfulness in general and MBSR in particular, inspiring countless programs to adapt the MBSR model for schools, workplaces, hospitals, veterans centers, prisons, addiction recovery programs, and beyond.

### **How do I cultivate it?**

Jon Kabat-Zinn emphasizes that although mindfulness can be cultivated through formal meditation, that’s not the only way. “It’s not really about sitting in the full lotus, like pretending you’re a statue in a British museum. It’s about living your life as if it really mattered, moment by moment by moment by moment.” The practice of formal meditation helps strengthen our capacity to experience our moments with this presence.

Here are a few key components of practicing mindfulness:

- Bring awareness to your breathing, especially when you’re feeling intense emotions
- Notice—really notice—what you’re sensing in a given moment, the sights, sounds, and smells that ordinarily slip by without reaching your conscious awareness.
- Recognize that your thoughts and emotions are fleeting and do not define you, an insight that can free you from negative thought patterns.
- “Emotions are data, not directives.”
- Tune into your body’s physical sensations, from the water hitting your skin in the shower to the way your body rests in your office chair.
- Find “micro-moments” of mindfulness throughout the day to reset your focus and sense of purpose.

There are many formal practices that cultivate mindful and kind presence:

- Awareness of breathing is a common approach to many forms of meditation that involves bringing attention to the physical sensations of the breath as it flows in and out.
- The body scan meditation is another common practice where you bring attention to different parts of your body in turn, gently moving from each area, from head to toe (or toe to head!)
- In walking meditation, instead of focusing on the breath, you focus on the movement of your body as you take each step, your feet touching and leaving the ground—an everyday activity we usually take for granted. This meditation is often practiced walking back and forth along a path 10-20 paces long, though it can be practiced along most any path.
- Loving-kindness meditation involves extending compassion toward people, starting with yourself then rippling out to someone close to you, then to an acquaintance, then to someone where there's difficulty, then to all beings everywhere.

Each practice offers a different approach that brings you to the same place – the present moment. One approach isn't better than another.

### **What are the benefits?**

Studies have shown that practicing mindfulness, even for just a few weeks, can bring a variety of physical, psychological, and social benefits. Here are some of these benefits, which extend across many different settings.

- Mindfulness is good for our bodies: A seminal study found that, after just eight weeks of training, practicing mindfulness meditation boosts our immune system's ability to fight off illness. Practicing mindfulness may also improve sleep quality.
- Mindfulness is good for our minds: Several studies have found that mindfulness increases positive emotions while reducing negative emotions and stress. Indeed, at least one study suggests it may be as good as antidepressants in fighting depression and preventing relapse.
- Mindfulness changes our brains: Research has found that it increases density of gray matter in brain regions linked to learning, memory, emotion regulation, and empathy.
- Mindfulness helps us focus: Studies suggest that mindfulness helps us tune out distractions and improves our memory, attention skills, and decision-making.
- Mindfulness fosters compassion and altruism: Research suggests mindfulness training makes us more likely to help someone in need and increases activity in neural networks involved in understanding the suffering of others and regulating emotions. Evidence suggests it might boost self-compassion as well. Mindfulness enhances relationships: Research suggests mindfulness training makes couples more satisfied with their relationship, makes each partner feel more optimistic and relaxed, and makes them feel more accepting of and closer to one another. Mindful couples may also recover more quickly from conflict.

- Mindfulness affects the way we see ourselves: More mindful people have a stronger sense of self and seem to act more in line with their values. They may also have a healthier body image, more secure self-esteem, and more resilience to negative feedback.
- Mindfulness makes us more resilient: Some evidence suggests that mindfulness training could help veterans facing post-traumatic stress disorder, police officers, women who suffered child abuse, and caregivers.
- Mindfulness can help combat bias: Even a brief mindfulness training can reduce our implicit biases and the biased language we use. One way this works, researchers have found, is by attenuating the cognitive biases that contribute to prejudice.
- Mindfulness is good for business: Mindfulness training could help make leaders more confident, improve creativity, reduce multitasking, and improve client satisfaction.
- Mindfulness is good for parents and parents-to-be: Studies suggest it may reduce pregnancy-related anxiety, stress, and depression in expectant parents, and may even reduce the risk of premature births and developmental issues. Parents who practice mindful parenting report less stress, more positive parenting practices, and better relationships with their kids; their kids, in turn, are less susceptible to depression and anxiety, and have better social skills. Mindfulness training for families may lead to less-stressed parents who pay more attention to their kids.

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