

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through 'paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgementally, to things as they are'

Source: Kabat-Zinn, J. *Mindfulness for Beginners*, p 1.

Mindfulness is an 'awareness of present experience with acceptance'

Source: Germer, C. K., et al. *Mindfulness and Psychotherapy*, p 7.

Mindfulness is about cultivating a particular *quality of attention* towards present experience AND a particular quality of *attitude* towards that experience.

To practice mindfulness, observe (pay attention to) your present experience with curiosity.

Ask yourself:

- What is happening now?
- Where can I feel it?
- What can I feel?

Notice everything about that experience, not to change it, but simply to observe it.

There is no 'right way' to experience mindfulness. It is about the practice of observing, without judgement, even when it is uncomfortable.

It is not about striving for some blissful non-thinking state. Even after years of practice, thoughts will come, you will notice sounds and sensations, maybe a car going past, or an itch you want to scratch. The important thing is what you do with those distractions. *Do not fight them. Simply notice them.*

I find it helps to name any distractions, not in a specific way, but just say to yourself, 'thinking,' once or twice when you notice your mind drifting into thought, and then gently bring your attention back to the breath, the body, or whatever you are focusing on for the session. If it is a sensation in the body, say, 'sensation, sensation', and bring your attention back. If it is a sound, say 'hearing, hearing.' Maybe you are running movies behind the eyes, so you can say 'seeing, seeing' and so on. ***Whatever happens, simply notice it, and bring your attention back.***

Exercises

Pick one of the exercises below and do it for 5 minutes each day for a week. Find a time in your routine that suits. Mornings, just before bed, sitting on a tram, when you first get home from work, wherever you can squeeze it in. Even when you do not feel like it, when sitting quietly is the last thing you want to do, you should make time for your practice (it is actually these times you will benefit most, as you are teaching your brain to sit with discomfort).

Next, try your selected exercise for 7-10 minutes, and then 15, and up to 20. If you do not have time for a full session, squeeze in 5-7 minutes. Aim to build up to 3 x 20 minute sessions per week, or the equivalent duration in shorter sessions. If you can, do one longer sitting per week.

Some days you will find it easy to sit; other days it will be more challenging. You might spend the entire session noticing that you are thinking, and that is okay. Simply observe that. Notice also, how you are feeling during the exercises about the exercises themselves. Are you anxious to focus your attention elsewhere, or have a desire to rush, to get to the next thing? Do any feelings arise? Do you feel calm, silly, anxious, bored, or something else? Observe what you are feeling, without judgement. Are you resisting being present? Simply notice that your thoughts, your feelings, are there, and bring your attention back to your practice.

Exercise 1: Mindfulness of breathing

Most people focus on the breath to begin, taking the attention to the points of the breath, whether it is the feel of the air entering the nostrils, the rise and fall of the chest or abdomen, the rhythm, where the air passes through the back of the throat, or the movement of clothing against the skin.

To do this exercise, sit comfortably, with your back gently upright, your feet flat on the floor, or if you are kneeling or sitting cross-legged, in a position that is comfortable for you, and allow the eyes to close.

Begin by noticing your body, where your back is resting against the chair (if you are seated), the weight of your buttocks against the seat of the chair, your feet where they come into contact with the floor, and your hands, resting on the chair, your knees, or against each other.

Take your attention to the sounds around the room. Notice them come and go for a few moments.

Then take your attention to the breath. Notice where you feel it most. What is the air like? The temperature? What does it feel like entering and leaving the body? Notice all the physical sensations of the breath. Take your attention to the point where you feel your breath the most, and just notice the breath going in and out. You might notice the body relaxing, letting go with each out breath. You might want to say 'relax' or 'let go' to yourself a few times.

When the mind starts to wander off, simply notice that, name where it wanders to, and bring the attention back to the breath.

Exercise 2: Mindfulness of the body, or the 'body scan'

In this exercise, take your attention to the entire body, inside and out, noticing all of the physical sensations. Pay attention to the temperature, the feel of the air on your skin, where your body meets the chair, the floor, your clothing, or itself. Notice if there is tension, heaviness, lightness, or nothing at all. There is no need to name what you observe, simply notice it. This exercise is not about changing what you experience, it is about being curious about what that experience is, and observing without judgement.

To do this exercise, sit comfortably, with your back gently upright, your feet flat on the floor, or if you are kneeling or sitting cross-legged, in a position that is comfortable for you, and allow the eyes to close.

Begin by noticing your body, where your back is resting against the chair (if you are seated), the weight of your buttocks against the seat of the chair, your feet where they come into contact with the floor, and your hands, resting on the chair, your knees, or against each other.

Take your attention to the sounds around the room. Notice them come and go for a few moments.

Then take your attention to the body. Begin with the toes, moving up through the legs, the torso and back, the arms and shoulders, neck, face, head, and scalp, inside the ears, around the eyes, nose and mouth, inside the mouth, down the throat, along the chest, into the abdomen, then the pelvis, the reproductive organs, the stomach, the lungs, and settling again in the chest. Notice each physical sensation, and if there is nothing to observe, notice that too. As you move through the body, the sensations might change, and that is fine, simply notice.

When the mind starts to wander, name where it wanders to, and bring the attention back to the body.

Once you have scanned the body, let the attention go to whatever part of the body you feel the sensation the most, particularly those points where you feel anxiety and tension. Simply notice how the anxiety and tension feels in the body.

Other focus points

You can choose to notice the sounds around the room, the smells, the tastes, or any of the senses. Just focus on each sense, and observe what happens. Shift between the senses, in turn, or allow the attention to drift to whatever seems most prominent. Keep focusing the attention, notice when the mind drifts into thought, and bring the attention back to your chosen focal point.

Bringing mindfulness into your everyday

In addition to the above exercises, try choosing one activity, such as taking a shower, doing the dishes, eating, or brushing your teeth, and do that activity mindfully. Notice the colours, the textures, the tastes, the smells, the sounds, the sensations. Take your time, simply pay attention with curiosity, and notice what happens. Pick one activity and observe it for a week, then pick a different activity the following week, and so on.

When feeling stressed, anxious, or emotional

Once you are comfortable practicing mindfulness, you can use this exercise when experiencing intense emotions. If you cannot do it on the spot, do it as soon as possible afterward, especially if your mind starts replaying the experience.

Start with the mindfulness of breathing, and then gently take your attention to wherever you are feeling tension in your body. Often it is in the chest, the muscles of the face, the mouth, the eyes, perhaps the shoulders, stomach, or the limbs. Notice where in the body you feel that tension.

Notice what it feels like.

- Is it tight? Heavy? Hot?
- Does it tingle?
- What does this emotion feel like?
- If it feels tight, what does 'tight' feel like? If it feels heavy, how does 'heavy' feel?

Keep doing this for 10 minutes and notice what happens.

If any thoughts come, simply notice that, say 'thinking, thinking', and take the attention back to the body. Allow your attention to shift to whatever parts of the body are experiencing the emotion the most. Do not fight it, and do not try to change what you are experiencing, simply observe it, without judging.

Know that each experience, each sensation, is temporary, whether pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral, and that it will pass.

Approach this task with curiosity. What does 'stress' feel like? What about 'anger'? How does 'sadness' feel?



My mindfulness progress

You may like to record your experiences before, during and after practicing mindfulness.

Before you start, answer the questions below. Throughout the week, repeat the questions. What do you notice after 7-10 days?

Where in the body do you experience tension? Pay particular attention to these parts of the body when you are doing your mindfulness practice.

How intense is the experience (on a scale of 0-10)?

When are these sensations worst? (In what context? At which time of day?)

What contributes to the distress (what specific thoughts/triggers?)