

An Ounce of Prevention

Complimentary

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Benefits of Mindfulness

Practices for Improving Emotional and Physical Well-Being

Understanding mindfulness

Key Points

- Practicing mindfulness improves both mental and physical health.
- Mindfulness involves both concentration (a form of meditation) and acceptance. Deliberately pay attention to thoughts and sensations without judgment.
- It takes practice to become comfortable with mindfulness techniques. If one method doesn't work for you, try another.

It's a busy world. You fold the laundry while keeping one eye on the kids and another on the television. You plan your day while listening to the radio and commuting to work, and then plan your weekend. But in the rush to accomplish necessary tasks, you may find yourself losing your connection with the present moment—missing out on what you're doing and how you're feeling. Did you notice whether you felt well-rested this morning or that forsythia is in bloom along your route to work?

Mindfulness is the practice of purposely focusing your attention on the present moment—and accepting it without judgment. Mindfulness is now being examined scientifically and has been found to be a key element in happiness.

Ancient roots, modern applications

The cultivation of mindfulness has roots in Buddhism, but most religions include some type of prayer or meditation technique that helps shift your thoughts away from your usual preoccupations toward an appreciation of the moment and a larger perspective on life.

Professor emeritus Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder and former director of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, helped to bring the practice of mindfulness meditation into mainstream medicine and demonstrated that practicing mindfulness can bring improvements in both physical and psychological symptoms as well as positive changes in health attitudes and behaviors.

Mindfulness improves well being

- Increasing your capacity for mindfulness supports many attitudes that contribute to a satisfied life.
- Being mindful makes it easier to savor the pleasures in life as they occur, helps you become fully engaged in activities, and creates a greater capacity to deal with adverse events.

- By focusing on the here and now, many people who practice mindfulness find that they are less likely to get caught up in worries about the future or regrets over the past, are less preoccupied with concerns about success and self-esteem, and are better able to form deep connections with others.

Mindfulness improves physical health

If greater well-being isn't enough of an incentive, scientists have discovered the benefits of mindfulness techniques help improve physical health in a number of ways. Mindfulness can:

- help relieve stress
- treat heart disease
- lower blood pressure
- reduce chronic pain
- improve sleep
- alleviate gastrointestinal difficulties

Mindfulness improves mental health

In recent years, psychotherapists have turned to mindfulness meditation as an important element in the treatment of a number of problems, including:

- depression
- substance abuse
- eating disorders
- couples' conflicts
- anxiety disorders
- obsessive-compulsive disorder

Some experts believe that mindfulness works, in part, by helping people to accept their experiences—including painful emotions—rather than react to them with aversion and avoidance.

It's become increasingly common for mindfulness meditation to be combined with psychotherapy, especially cognitive behavioral therapy. This development makes good sense, since both meditation and cognitive behavioral therapy share the common goal of helping people gain perspective on irrational, maladaptive, and self-defeating thoughts.

Mindfulness Techniques

There is more than one way to practice mindfulness, but the goal of any mindfulness technique is to achieve a state of alert, focused relaxation by deliberately paying attention to thoughts and sensations without judgment. This allows the mind to refocus on the present moment. All mindfulness techniques are a form of meditation.

Basic mindfulness meditation – Sit quietly and focus on your natural breathing or on a word or “mantra” that you repeat silently. Allow thoughts to come and go without judgment and return to your focus on breath or mantra.

Body sensations – Notice subtle body sensations such as an itch or tingling without judgment and let them pass. Notice each part of your body in succession from head to toe.

Sensory – Notice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches. Name them “sight,” “sound,” “smell,” “taste,” or “touch” without judgment and let them go.

Emotions – Allow emotions to be present without judgment. Practice a steady and relaxed naming of emotions: “joy,” “anger,” “frustration.”

Accept the presence of the emotions without judgment and let them go.

Urge surfing – Cope with cravings (for addictive substances or behaviors) and allow them to pass. Notice how your body feels as the craving enters. Replace the wish for the craving to go away with the certain knowledge that it will subside.

Meditation and other practices that foster mindfulness

Mindfulness can be cultivated through mindfulness meditation, a systematic method of focusing your attention.

You can learn to meditate on your own, following instructions in books or on tape. However, you may benefit from the support of an instructor or group to answer questions and help you stay motivated. Look for someone using meditation in a way compatible with your beliefs and goals.

If you have a medical condition, you may prefer a medically oriented program that incorporates meditation. Ask your physician or hospital about local groups. Insurance companies increasingly cover the cost of meditation instruction.

Getting started on your own

Some types of meditation primarily involve concentration—repeating a phrase or focusing on the sensation of breathing, allowing the parade of thoughts that inevitably arise to come and go. Concentration meditation techniques, as well as other activities such as tai chi or yoga, can induce the well-known relaxation response, which is very valuable in reducing the body’s response to stress.

Mindfulness meditation builds upon concentration practices. Here’s how it works:

- **Go with the flow.** In mindfulness meditation, once you establish concentration, you observe the flow of inner thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations without judging them as good or bad.
- **Pay attention.** You also notice external sensations such as sounds, sights, and touch that make up your moment-to-moment experience. The challenge is not to latch onto a particular idea, emotion, or sensation, or to get caught in thinking about the past or the future. Instead you watch what comes and goes in your mind, and discover which mental habits produce a feeling of well-being or suffering.

- **Stay with it.** At times, this process may not seem relaxing at all, but over time it provides a key to greater happiness and self-awareness as you become comfortable with a wider and wider range of your experiences.

Practice acceptance

Above all, mindfulness practice involves accepting whatever arises in your awareness at each moment. It involves being kind and forgiving toward yourself.

Some tips to keep in mind:

- **Gently redirect.** If your mind wanders into planning, daydream, or criticism, notice where it has gone and gently redirect it to sensations in the present.
- **Try and try again.** If you miss your intended meditation session, you simply start again.

By practicing accepting your experience during meditation, it becomes easier to accept whatever comes your way during the rest of your day.

Adapted with permission from [Positive Psychology: Harnessing the Power of Happiness, Personal Strength, and Mindfulness](#), a special health report published by Harvard Health Publications. Article retrieved from <http://www.helpguide.org/harvard/mindfulness.htm>

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Parenting Corner

Search: ["Children should be allowed to get bored, expert says"](#)

Search: [Little Kids, Big Questions: A ZERO TO THREE Podcast Series on Early Childhood Development](#)

Search: [Why Can Some Kids Handle Pressure While Others Fall Apart?](#)

Apps

[Mindfulness - Everyday guided meditations that help you focus, sleep better, stay calm and reduce stress & anxiety.](#)

[By Mindvalley Creations Inc.](#)

Net News

Here are some web sites you & your family may find helpful:

Search: [Mindfulness Can Avert Bodily Responses to Emotional Stress](#)

Search: [Mindfulness Talk by - Jon Kabat Zinn](#)

Search: [Can Meditation Change Compassionate Behavior?](#)

Self-Help Corner:

City of Edmonton Community Resources: 211

Support Network / Distress Line: 780-482-HELP

Kids Help Line: 1-800-668-6868