

PRACTICING MINDFULNESS

What if there was a practice that had been shown to decrease stress response, facilitate a fuller sense of time, and improve concentration, memory, and interpersonal relationships? Fortunately the practice is free and you can begin with very little training.

Because of the evidence supporting the benefits of mindfulness practices, virtually all healthcare organizations that provide programming to combat clinician burnout offer mindfulness training. Frequently that is the primary or only such programming offered, which underscores the need to fully understand what mindfulness practice entails.

What images does the term "mindfulness practices" conjure? A person sitting on the ground, legs crossed in the lotus position? Perhaps in a beautiful outdoor setting? Indeed, that is one possibility--a classic image of formal meditation practice. However, there are other practical ways to practice mindfulness in the context of daily living, which is fortunate for those who may not have the time or interest in traditional meditation.

First we need to be clear on what constitutes mindfulness. A now-classic definition was provided by Jon Kabat-Zin (2003, p. 145): Mindfulness “. . . is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experiences moment by moment.” Note that the definition starts with attention, and so a useful metaphor here is a spotlight. Whatever the spotlight shines on is what is in your field of attention. You can make your spotlight broader or narrower, but there is only one spotlight. Some strong stimuli, such as a loud noise or sharp pain, grab control over the spotlight on occasion, but for the most part, you have potential control over where the spotlight shines.

Now imagine that controlling your spotlight, where it shines and how intensely, uses a particular muscle. How toned is yours? To what extent are you able to hold your spotlight of attention firmly on one thing for an extended period without a great deal of effort?

Practicing mindfulness builds that muscle, much like lifting weights in the gym builds skeletal muscle. As you regularly hit the gym your strength gradually increases. Similarly, as you practice mindfulness so too your ability to concentrate, remember, and live in the present moment increases incrementally. Just like with physical muscle, it's not a sudden, all-or-none achievement, but a subtle realization that your daily experience is different.

So how can you practice mindfulness apart from formal meditation? Let's return to the classic definition of mindfulness as paying attention, on purpose, to your present experience, without judgment. Here "judgment" means more than good/bad or right/wrong, and includes thoughts that detract from simply focusing on your present experience as it unfolds, moment to moment.

So practicing mindfulness simply means focusing solely on what you are doing, or experiencing, at that moment, without additional commentary running through your head. It is simple and yet so difficult if your spotlight muscle is weak. You might start by picking an activity that has a definite beginning and end, and occurs on a regular basis so that its occurrence acts as a cue or reminder to practice. Examples include brushing your teeth, showering, cooking, or commuting to work.

Let's say you choose brushing your teeth. As you reach for the toothbrush, shift your attention to what you are doing and simply do not think about it or anything else. That will last for about one second and you will have a thought. As soon as you recognize it, let the thought dissolve--simply quit following wherever the thought was leading. About one second later you will have another thought, and so do the same. Each time bring your attention back to simply observing the actions and sensations involved in that particular second in the process of brushing your teeth.

Each time you bring your attention back to your present experience you are performing a "rep" similar to a bicep curl or leg press at the gym, strengthening the mental muscle that controls your spotlight of attention. It's that simple.

It is easy to feel discouraged at the start of mindfulness practice, as it seems nearly impossible to go more than a couple of seconds without "failing" by having a distracting thought. So it's important to recognize that successful practice is the act of coming back to the present, just as a successful trip to the gym is defined by the amount of times muscles are worked, rather than how long you spent there.

Over time you will notice it getting easier to get present and stay there, and eventually it may come to dawn on you that you tend to concentrate more completely on whatever you're doing than you used to. You'll also begin to notice that you remember more of your experience, and you are less likely to walk around absentmindedly, stubbing your toe, knocking things over, forgetting where you placed something or why you entered a room, and so forth.

At the start of this paper were some claims about the benefits of practicing mindfulness. The improvements in concentration and memory make sense, as strengthening the spotlight muscle is the process of concentrating, and a prerequisite for memory is paying attention. What about the fuller sense of time? As you pay more attention to your present experience, and remember more of it, each day feels longer or fuller. If you've ever gotten to the end of a day and wondered where it went, barely remembering most of it, you've had the opposite experience.

Other benefits of mindfulness practice include improved interpersonal relationships and decreased stress response. The improvement in relationships likely comes from being more present, and thus more likely to truly listen, remember the detail of interactions, empathize, and communicate more effectively. So what about the relationship between mindfulness practice and stress?

If you think about it, only rarely is the present moment actually a stress-inducing experience. Yes, there are instances in which your actions in the present have very high stakes, and thus the pressure of the consequences is stressful. What is much more common, however, is stress from thinking about what is going to happen (or might happen) or what has already happened. Being entirely focused on the present moment allows you to avoid both of these unproductive, manufactured sources of stress.

Are you convinced? Are you ready to build into your daily routine periods of mindfulness practice? What is your plan? Perhaps you have some questions or concerns, such as those noted below.

"How do I know whether I'm practicing mindfulness correctly?"

Fortunately there is no right or wrong way. Whatever works for you is going to be more beneficial, and sustainable, than trying to follow advice, instruction, or someone else's practices. This document is meant as an initial guide, but an internet search of the term "practicing mindfulness" reveals descriptions of many other experiences.

"What about multitasking? I rely on it to get done everything I have to do, and it sounds like practicing mindfulness is anti-multitasking?"

Yes, it's true; multitasking is the antithesis of being mindful, as your spotlight of attention can only be focused on one thing at a time. That begs the question of what actually constitutes multitasking. Now, it is possible to multi-task in the sense of performing physical tasks that are automatic or on autopilot, and think about something else or perform some mental work at the same time. However, psychologists who study multitasking have pointed out that, for tasks that require at least a little bit of cognitive effort, we technically only perform one at a time. What we refer to as multitasking involves switching our spotlight of attention back and forth between tasks, so indeed it looks like we're doing two things simultaneously.

The problem with switching the spotlight back and forth is that it is inefficient, as there is always a little lag as it catches up to accurately focus on what is at hand. Also, whatever is happening outside the focus of the spotlight is unmonitored, leaving the possibility for error. Last, switching back and forth can be stressful because of the downsides to multitasking we just noted.

So, please reconsider your dedication to multitasking. Is there a way to more consistently focus on one task at a time, even though perhaps there is not much time available before you must shift your focus to something else? That is, even if your work entails shifting attention frequently, can you commit to more mindfully focusing on just the task you are engaged in at that second?

"But it feels like I'm being more productive if I think about things while I'm doing something else. For example, when I'm brushing my teeth in the morning I think about what I need to do at work, and on the way home from work I tend to rehash things that happened during the day."

First, we don't want to be fundamentalist and declare that it's wrong to think about things other than our present experience. Building in times to practice mindfulness seems to be beneficial in several ways, but to live mindfully 100% of the time is unrealistic, and probably undesirable.

That said, let's examine the assumption that it is productive to focus on the future or the past. Certainly there is benefit in planning and preparing for something that is coming up. However, what frequently passes for planning is really just worrying, or envisioning various scenarios. If what you're thinking about while brushing your teeth is simply the litany of tasks that await, and there is nothing you can do about those tasks until you arrive at work, then what is productive about shining your spotlight on them? Is the result a feeling of anxiety or dread, even if very small? If so, we see the stress-reducing benefit of practicing mindful tooth brushing instead.

What about rehashing the day's events on the way home from work? Reflecting on our experience is a prerequisite for learning from it, and such reflection is the backbone of counseling or psychotherapy. The question, then, is how and when to best reflect.

Is there adequate time and attention to devote to reflection while you're commuting, cooking, or whatever else you're doing? Are you examining your experience for the purpose of self-development, or are you ruminating and focusing on blame and feeling badly about yourself or someone else? If you value reflection for self-improvement, is it worth devoting quality attention to it, perhaps in the form of journaling or conversation with a trusted person?

"What about formal meditation practice?"

What is typically thought of as "meditating" simply consists of setting aside the time to practice being mindful while not doing anything other than just being. To get a taste of it, try the traditional method of meditation practice. While alone, get into a comfortable position. The classic body posture is sitting upright on the floor, back straight, legs crisscrossed and palms facing up resting on the inner knees/thighs. This is the traditional position, but it's not mandatory.

Once you're comfortable, try closing your eyes or relaxing them to lazily gaze at a spot in front of you. Then, simply be aware of what you sense, feel, and think. The difficult part is to have awareness without latching onto a particular thought and running with it or trying to control it. We have a habit of thinking rather than simply being in the moment. This is where practice comes in; it gets easier over time. Many people find it best to focus on breathing, especially at first. Slowly draw air in through the nose and let it leave naturally through either your nose or mouth. Try focusing on simply observing your breathing, letting it happen as needed.

Within a second or two you'll find yourself thinking something, anything. "This is stupid. What's the point of this? What was that noise? That reminds me . . ." Of course this is just one example of an endless string of possible mental chatter. It's this tendency to talk to ourselves that's the opposite of mindfulness.

Realize that thoughts will emerge, even as you try not to have any. Rather than trying to suppress your thoughts, or chastise yourself for having them, let them emerge and settle as they will. Imagine a stream running through your head, filled with fish (thoughts) all swimming in the same direction. As one fish (thought) swims by there is probably another right behind it. Try to observe the flow rather than grabbing onto any one thought. As you catch yourself following a thought that popped up from the stream, simply let go of the thought (stop thinking about it) and go back to observing. It's common, at first, to then think about how you grabbed onto that thought, and how difficult this is, and how poorly you're doing at it. Of course these too are thoughts, so let them go. Just observe.

It's that simple. Meditation is not only a great way to work the spotlight muscle, but also a tried-and-true method for clearing away accumulated stress. And it's a practice you can do just about anywhere, and for as little as a minute at a time.

"What about mindfulness apps?"

There are numerous apps to facilitate mindfulness practice. They typically involve guided meditations of various lengths. That is, a narrator verbally guides the listener to focus on creating a particular mental scene, or the listener's breathing, or thoughts. In this way the app is facilitating focus by providing something to focus on. You may ask whether the narration distracts from focusing on your present experience, so that may or may not be helpful for you. These apps also may include timers to use for practicing meditation on one's own, and may also include instructional sessions in video or audio format. Fortunately there are several free apps that provide enough content to justify their use (many are "freemium" apps in that some content is free but to access all of the content requires purchase or a subscription). The following are recommended free apps:

- **Insight Timer** ([insighttimer.com](https://www.insighttimer.com)) – In addition to a timer, a treasure trove of guided meditations, talks, and music, all curated according to how much time you have.
- **Calm** ([calm.com](https://www.calm.com)) – Tips and guided meditations for various purposes, including brief "sleep stories."

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- **Stop, Breathe, & Think** (app.stopbreathethink.org) – Offers basic tutorial on practicing mindfulness, as well as numerous free guided meditations.
- **Let's Meditate**– Offers 30 free guided meditations.
- **bNirvana** (bnirvana.com) – Offers free guided meditations ranging from 5-30 minutes.
- **Aware** (awaremeditationapp.com) – Offers a free 7-day course to get you started, then numerous free guided meditations and breathing exercises, tips, and reminders.
- **Shine**– Free meditations sent daily, plus other resources for anxiety and depression
- **Simple Habit Meditation** (simplehabit.com) – Offers 50+ free meditations.
- **Prana Breath** (pranabreath.info) – Easy to use; 8 guided breathing patterns.
- **Randomly Remind Me**– Many options (location, time, etc.) for being randomly reminded to do whatever the reminder is set to trigger (by the title you select for it). Could be used as a random reminder as to whether you are being mindful.

Do you have questions, comments, or suggestions? Email Michael Wiederman, Ph.D., at mwiederman@uabmc.edu.

Reference

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003) Mindfulness-Based Interventions in Context: Past, Present, and Future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10, 144-156.