

Practicing Mindfulness To its Fullest Potential

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Chapter 1: What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a methodology and a state of being. The practice of mindfulness helps people in all aspects of their lives, providing benefits for the mind, body and spirit.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a leading authority on mindfulness in the United States, has defined it as “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment to moment.”

Though this is an excellent definition, it's far easier to describe what mindfulness can accomplish than to actual explain what it is. This is because mindfulness is something one must learn and experience personally to fully understand it.

By focusing the mind on the here and now, as it happens, one can begin to attain mental clarity and full awareness, which leads to better concentration in a relaxed state, reducing stress and offering an overabundance of physical, mental and emotional benefits.

The practice of mindfulness is becoming increasingly popular in the United States, and its use has spread to many areas, from stress reduction and pain management to treating depression and other mental health applications.

Mindfulness has origins dating back about 2500 years and was adopted by Buddha in the practice of meditation. Today, mindfulness is accepted by medical and psychology professionals for its success in helping individuals with their health and well-being.

Chapter 2: How do I Begin Using Mindfulness?

The philosophy behind mindfulness is a commitment to focusing on the present moment and being truly aware. Most people have untrained minds and they find themselves constantly living for the future and contemplating what might be, dwelling in the past and unable to leave it behind, or a combination of both.

To master mindfulness, you need to start by being fully aware. Begin paying attention to your experiences, thoughts, feelings, environment and both internal and external stimuli as life happens.

Don't judge what is good or bad. Simply focus on being mindfully aware as each moment unfolds. And experience thoughts, feelings and sensations without embellishment or adornment – but simply as they actually are.

It's important to give all experiences equal attention and value, whether they be positive, negative or neutral. And your awareness must be a deliberate and purposeful action. This basically means actually concentrating on each experience, sensation, thought and feeling as it happens, rather than simply "being aware" without engagement.

An example of this is driving to and from work so many times that you do it somewhat mindlessly. You are aware that you are driving and you understand that you are heading towards a specific destination.

However, you are typically not truly engaged in the act of driving, the sound of the engine, the traffic noises outside your vehicle, the music on your radio and many other stimuli that go unnoticed and unexperienced.

With mindful awareness, you are both aware of all of these sensations and engaged in experiencing them as they happen. To accomplish this, you must exercise discipline.

Don't be put off by the negative connotations often associated with the use of self-control and discipline, and do not set yourself up for failure by creating unrealistic goals. Willpower and self-discipline are difficult skills to master.

Give yourself time and treat yourself kindly. Remember that mindfulness is meant to help and to improve your life. Much can be accomplished when you allow yourself the right to make mistakes.

Chapter 3: Learning How to be Mindful

As children grow into adults, they are taught to plan for the future, think about the consequences of their actions, set goals, learn from their mistakes and essentially to stop lolly-gagging around in the present.

These are valuable life skills and they are not to be discarded. However, it is possible and indeed necessary to also maintain awareness and mindfulness without sacrificing responsibility and maturity.

The problem is that you've probably been trained and conditioned for so long to plan, multi-task and anticipate future issues and problems, that returning to the mindset of your youth is no easy task.

In order to practice mindfulness, you must commit to regular exercises. Understand that perfection is not the goal during these exercises. Mindfulness is a skill that must be learned through practice and patience over time.

You can start slow with a small time commitment, say five minutes each morning or evening. Your daily mindfulness exercises will help you learn to focus, to practice engaged awareness, and teach you to be kinder to yourself and more accepting of your fallibilities.

Below are some basic mindfulness exercises you can use to help you begin to practice mindfulness.

1. **Grounding** – This is a way to help keep your mind from wandering during your mindfulness exercises. There are several techniques.
 - a. **Mindful breath.** Take a deep breath in through your nose while visualizing the passage of air in your mind. Hold it for 2 or 3 seconds and then release, again seeing the air pass out of your body in your mind.
 - b. **Ground.** Push your feet into the floor for 5 seconds and concentrate of the sensation in your muscles and tendons throughout your body.
 - c. **Three things.** Close your eyes and focus on what is around you. Notice three sounds and then three sensations. Open your eyes and take note of the first three things you see.

2. **Mindful Observation** – Select something natural in your surroundings, such as a tree or a flower. Notice everything about the organism. Look at it as if you have never seen this before. Explore every aspect of the living organism visually.
3. **Observe Your Thoughts** – Sit quietly with your eyes closed and merely observe your thoughts, while remaining detached from the emotions that they usually evoke. Observe and be aware of them without being swept away into daydreams or emotional angst.
4. **Breathing** – Focus on your breathing for one full minute. Take slow, deep breaths and hold them for a count of six before exhaling. If your mind wanders during the exercise, simply take notice of your wandering thoughts and gently focus back on your breathing. Over time, once you are able to focus completely on your breathing for a full minute, increase it to two minutes, three minutes, up to five minutes.
5. **Body Scan** – Lie or sit in a comfortable, relaxed position with your eyes closed wearing comfortable clothing with no constriction. Beginning with your toes, and working up throughout your entire body, concentrate on the physical sensations and feelings you are experiencing in every area, one by one. Notice any tightness, pain, irritation, heat, cold, or discomfort. Once you have reached your head – to include your eyes, cheeks, nose, mouth and jaw individually – work your way back down your body until you reach your toes again. Simply pay attention to and be aware of each sensation, nothing more.

Chapter 4: Practicing Mindfulness for its Fullest Potential

To realize its full potential, mindfulness must not be relegated to merely a small corner of your life, practiced through regular five minute exercises, yoga classes, tai-chi classes or meditation sessions.

These classes and exercises certainly help you learn how to practice mindfulness, but they are not sufficient to reap the full rewards and benefits that mindfulness offers.

Practicing mindfulness throughout your normal daily activities opens up your senses, fosters health and well-being and empowers you on emotional and psychological levels.

There are several openings throughout your day to practice mindfulness. Take eating, for example. This has become a mindless activity for many people. And even if you enjoy the taste of your food, you are likely not truly experiencing the food and your body's relationship with it.

With mindful eating, you focus completely on your food, and the act of eating it. You don't allow distractions, such as the TV, radio or your smart phone to intrude on the experience. Take time to eat your food and notice what you're eating, the taste, the flavors and the sensations.

Some benefits of mindful eating are a deeper enjoyment of the flavors of your food, better digestion and a heightened awareness of your body's hunger signals.

Mindfulness also promotes efficiency by encouraging "uni-tasking" over multi-tasking. While working, your ability to concentrate and stay on task is enhanced by mindfulness. If you find your mind wandering, simply use your training to gently guide your thoughts back to the task at hand.

Remember that drive to or from work where you are on autopilot? This is an excellent opportunity to practice mindfulness in your daily activities. Rather than zone out during your drive, be aware of the experience.

Notice the sensation of the steering wheel beneath your hands. Take in the colors and sounds of the other vehicles on the road. Look at the drivers, bikers and pedestrians. Take note of the weather, the smells and sensations.

Live in each moment, from starting point to destination with no judgment and no bias. If your commute has been a stressful experience in the past, practicing mindfulness can help you relax and enjoy the drive instead.

Look around for opportunities to practice mindfulness in your daily life - waiting in line at the bank or grocery store, taking a walk or showering and getting dressed in the morning. The more aware you become, the more plentiful the opportunities will be.

Chapter 5: Benefits of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is recognized by the scientific and medical community for its many beneficial properties.

- **Improved Physical Health** – Mindfulness has been found to alleviate gastrointestinal problems, lower blood pressure, treat heart disease, bolster the immune system and improve sleep.
- **Improve Mental Health** – Mindfulness has been used in the treatment of depression, anxiety, eating disorders, substance abuse, relationship conflicts and obsessive-compulsive disorders.
- **Stress Reduction** – Studies show that mindfulness not only helps people feel less stress, it's actually linked with lowered levels of cortisol, a stress hormone.
- **Memory Improvement** – Students who practice mindfulness have demonstrated better verbal reasoning and memory improvement.
- **Enhanced Focus** – The practice of being present in the moment and experiencing life as it happens teaches excellent focusing skills and helps in tuning out distractions.
- **Improved Cognitive Flexibility** – By enhancing focus and improving memory, mindfulness is good for the brain, increasing cognitive abilities.
- **Pain Management** – Mindfulness meditation has proven to be a useful tool for pain management and easing chronic pain. It also helps considerably in reducing the sufferer's emotional reaction to pain.

Another great thing about mindfulness and its practice through meditation is its lingering beneficial effects. Once you have begun meditating, the beneficial aspects start to kick in and continue on even while you aren't meditating.

Conclusion

Practicing mindfulness clearly provides a plethora of benefits and enhancements for your life. This unobtrusive, yet powerful approach has endless practical applications in your daily activities.

By learning to live in the moment and experience life with purposeful awareness and engagement, you teach yourself valuable skills and lessons that resonate throughout all aspects of your health and well-being.

Mindfulness and meditation with mindfulness can be used to improve your mental, emotional and physical health. It boosts self-esteem, helps you communicate better with others and supports a fuller enjoyment of life.

By learning how to be mindful and approach much of everyday living with mindfulness, you can arm yourself with effective tools for enrichment.

Mindfulness is not difficult to learn, though it does take commitment and self-discipline. It's important that you understand that it won't happen overnight, and you need to be patient and forgiving with yourself.

The good thing about learning how to be mindful is the numerous opportunities to use and practice mindfulness. There are easy to follow exercises to get you started and chances to use mindfulness nearly everywhere.

Once you feel comfortable with the basics of mindfulness and become more attuned to paying attention and being mindful, there is no end to the different ways you can practice mindfulness every single day. So, take a mindful breath and get started on discovering the wonderful benefits mindfulness has to offer.