

Mindfulness

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WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness comes from the word to be “mindful” or to pay attention. It is the skill of training your brain to focus and pay attention—in a calm, compassionate, and curious way—to what is happening at the present moment, instead of being distracted by other thoughts, things, or worries.

Mindfulness brain-training helps you become more aware of your thoughts, feelings, and actions—and the effect they have on others—so you can react wisely in difficult situations.

You train your brain to be mindful by daily doing a few simple, easy exercises to improve mental focus. Even children can do them! If your mind wanders from what you’re focusing on—gently bring your attention back to your focus. Repeatedly bringing your attention back to your focus grows new brain cells, which strengthens and makes your brain more powerful.

Mindfulness is developed through daily formal exercises, like in this handout. But it can also be done informally anytime by focusing on your breath or what you’re doing. Begin doing the “breath awareness” exercise each night and morning for a few minutes, repeating the focusing phrase. Then add a new exercise each week.

BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS

- Improves impulse control and ability to stay on task
- Reduces stress response and feelings of anxiety
- Improves ability to regulate emotions
- Increases sense of emotional well-being
- Increases density in the good judgment part of the brain
- Lowers blood pressure

WHY MINDFULNESS WORKS

When you repeatedly bring your attention back to your focus, it signals to the brain that you want to increase your ability to pay attention. So it grows more dendrites and receptors (like branches and leaves) on those neuron “trees,” making your brain more powerful. Deep breathing helps, for as you take slow deep breaths through your nose, it triggers special cells to release nitric oxide, which relaxes vessels to carry more blood to the brain. Plus, when you take a deep breath and hold it for a moment, your full lungs put pressure on your vagus nerve, which runs from your brain down your spine, triggering a release of serotonin, a calming neuro-chemical.

INTRO: Breath Awareness Exercise

Begin each mindfulness session with a breathing exercise.

1. Find a quiet place and sit straight, silent, and still.
2. Close your eyes and begin taking slow deep breaths through your nose.
3. As you breathe, focus all your thoughts and attention on how the air feels as it enters and exits your nose.
4. As you breathe, mentally repeat these focusing words:
Breathing in, think: **“Enjoy breath. . .”**
Breathing out, think: **“. . .love life.”**
5. Each time your attention wanders (and it will wander because that’s what minds do), gently bring it back to focus on the feeling of the air going in and out of your nose.

Begin by doing the breath awareness exercise for one minute every morning and night. Each week, increase it by a minute until you can do it for five minutes twice a day.

1. Appreciate the Gift of Thought & Choice

1. Find a quiet place and sit silent and still.
2. Close your eyes and begin taking slow deep breaths through your nose.
3. As you breathe, focus all your thoughts and attention on your amazing brain. Feel delight that you have the most awesome supercomputer ever created—right inside your head. It’s your best friend, keeps you alive, and allows you to think and choose.
4. Contemplate on how it grew from two tiny cells that self-directed into billions of parts to form the world’s most powerful computer. Contemplate on its ability to think and direct every thought, feeling, or movement in your body
5. As you breathe, gratefully repeat these focusing words in your mind:
Breathing in, think: **“I can think. . .”**
Breathing out, think: **“. . .and I can choose.”**
6. Each time your attention wanders, gently bring it back to focus on your amazing brain.

Do this exercise for two minutes each morning and night.

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2. Observe & Dismiss Negative Thoughts

Mindfulness offers the ability to observe your thoughts and dismiss negative ones without dwelling on them. This includes accepting things in the past you can't change. Once you have made amends and asked for forgiveness, let it go. Feel happy you can now act wisely and kindly in the future. If troubling thoughts arise, repeat a coping phrase, like: **"I've learned and it's past."** Then use this exercise to dismiss them:

1. Sit quietly, close your eyes, and begin a three-minute breath awareness exercise, silently repeating these focus words as you breathe in and out:
Breathing in, think: **"I am unique..."**
Breathing out, think: **"...and wonderfully made."**
2. Each time your attention wanders, gently bring it back to your breath.
3. If a troubling thought or emotion appears, devalue and dismiss it by reminding yourself that it is not worth the brain neuron it rides on.
4. Each time the negative thought reappears, dismiss it.
5. Smile and return your attention to your peaceful breathing.

4. Think Compassion, Not Criticism

An essential part of mindfulness is the ability to view yourself and others with kindness and compassion. When we view others with criticism and judgment, we filter reality through our own prejudices, which prevents us from seeing reality. All people suffer hardships; all deserve compassion.

1. Decide that you will stop looking at others with a critical eye, and choose to be patient and feel compassion instead.
2. Close your eyes and begin a breath awareness exercise. As you breathe in, repeat this focusing statement:
Breathing in, think: **"I am compassionate..."**
Breathing out, think: **"...and non-critical."**
3. As you breathe, visualize your body becoming filled with a gentle compassion for humanity, and visualize the negative, critical part leaving your body. Smile. Repeat daily.
4. Track your progress. Carry a card and put a mark each time you think a critical thought. Immediately stop the thought by saying to yourself: **"They're just like me."** Or, **"I wish you well."** Replace it with a positive thought about the person.

NOTE: You can feel compassion while still seeing a need for change. Compassion never means you tolerate abuse.

3. Mindfully Observe Your Amazing Body

Use mindfulness to pretend you are seeing your body as an amazing, bio-machine for the first time. Focus on each part with awe.

1. Lie down in a quiet, comfortable place, with your knees slightly bent. Close your eyes and take three deep breaths.
2. Focus all your attention on your body, beginning with the toes of your right foot and moving your attention up the right half of your body, until you reach your neck.
3. As you focus on each body part, tense and relax it. Take a deep breath, and imagine your breath flowing to that part. Contemplate on how wonderfully each part of your body is made and what it can do. If your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to your body.
4. Then focus your attention on the left side of your body, moving from the toes of your left foot, up to your neck. Now focus on your heart, lungs, and stomach.
5. Last, focus on your head, your hair, and face with its remarkable eyes, ears, nose, mouth, and tongue. Contemplate on what each amazing part can do.
6. When you finish, take a deep breath, and feel awe and gratitude for the amazing body you get to live in.

5. Find Your Inner Quiet Center

We all have an "inner quiet center" we can connect with and experience a sense of well-being and self-worth. Three previously learned mindfulness skills help us with this: breath awareness; dismissing negative thoughts; and thinking with compassion, not criticism. As we practice those skills, it helps us calm our brain and put it in tune with the quiet resonance of our body. As we practice taking slow, deep breaths, and "feel within" ourselves, we can feel a subtle inner peace and sense our true worth.

1. Find a quiet place where you can close your eyes.
2. Begin a breath awareness exercise, with full, deep nose breaths. Silently say these focus words from Lesson 5.
Breathing in, think: **"I am fair..."**
Breathing out, think: **"...and find solutions."**
3. As you breathe out, mentally feel within, and try to connect with an inner quiet sense of peace.
4. Practice this exercise for three minutes each night and morning. You can also "feel within" anytime you get asked to do questionable things, to get a sense of which choice is right.

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6. Be Mindful of Interactions with Others

One goal of mindfulness is to be aware of your thoughts and feelings during interactions with others, and to manage them well, so you listen objectively and speak and act wisely and compassionately. This skill will help you get along better with others and have a happier life.

When you start to feel angry in a situation, use the steps below to be mindful. Remember the letters “A-B-C-D-E” so it comes to mind quickly.

1. **A=Aware**—Practice being aware of your body cues so you notice when you start to get stressed or angry.
2. **B=Breathe**—Take a deep, calming breath.
3. **C=Calm** and question your “hot thoughts.”
4. **D=Defuse** the situation by asking polite questions to understand the other person’s concerns and by validating their point of view, even when you disagree.
5. **E=Escape**—Take a little break if things get too heated. Thank the person for listening; say you need to think about it and you’ll get back to them soon.

PRACTICE a breath awareness exercise for each night using this focusing statement: **“I breathe and de-fuse / I listen and validate.”**

8. Mindfully Delight Your Five Senses

1. **TASTE:** Pick up a small piece of food. Notice how it looks and smells before putting it in your mouth. Then chew slowly as you savor the taste and texture.
2. **SMELL:** During a meal, pause and close your eyes and smell each different food before you eat. If weather permits, sit near a garden to smell the flowers or grass.
3. **TOUCH:** Feel different textures, like water, flowers, trees or grass. For example, feel the warmth of the water on your body as you shower. Feel the wet bar of soap in your hand. Pay close attention and experience the delight of the water.
4. **HEAR:** At night, sit by an open window for a few minutes, close your eyes, and carefully listen to and try to identify every sound.
5. **SEE:** Take a walk in nature, or around your neighborhood. Notice every detail about the place and the people. Be thankful for sight.
6. Practice the breath awareness exercise for four minutes each night and morning saying this focusing statement:
Breathing in, think: **“Nature gives me...”**
Breathing out, think: **“...precious gifts.”**

7. Mindfully Perform Tasks

Training your brain to focus with intense interest on daily activities that you usually do without much thought increases your ability to be aware. This exercise takes no extra time, as you’re doing the tasks already.

1. Think of the tasks you do daily that you could focus on, like getting dressed, brushing your teeth, washing dishes, working in the garden, walking to school or work, etc.
2. Make each task mindful by beginning it with three slow, deep breaths. Then mindfully focus fully on each aspect of the activity. Notice all the little details you usually take for granted. Example: As you brush your teeth, notice how the toothbrush feels in your hand, how the toothpaste tastes, and envision each tooth as you brush it; or how your foot feels stepping on the ground as you walk around the bathroom.
3. If any distracting thoughts arise while doing the activity, dismiss them and bring your focus back to the task.
4. Daily practice the breath awareness using these words:
Breathe in and think: **“I am grateful...”**
Breathe out and think: **“...I can move.”**

9. Loving-Kindness Meditation

A Loving-Kindness Meditation involves closing your eyes and taking slow, deep breaths through your nose while you focus on a few positive outcomes you desire for yourself and others. The steps are:

1. Sit quietly, eyes closed, hands and face relaxed, and begin a breath awareness exercise.
 2. As you breathe, repeat three positive desires like, **“May I be healthy.” “May I be kind.” “May I be peaceful.”** Then imagine happiness and vitality coming into you.
 3. As you inhale, visualize your body filling with wellness, happiness, and goodness. As you exhale, visualize distress and negativity leaving your body.
 4. Next, focus on a person that you feel thankful for. Repeat the same phrases as above for him or her. As you exhale, visualize sending this person happiness, vitality, and goodness.
 5. Next, focus on someone with whom you are having difficulty. Visualize sending them wellness, vitality, and goodness.
 6. Last, focus on the suffering in the world. As you exhale, visualize sending kindness and goodness into the world, saying: **“May all persons be kind and full of goodness.”**
- Do nightly and morning for more positive emotions, less stress.

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10. Become a Mindful Parent

Becoming a mindful, nurturing parent is essential. A long-term study showed that children who had nurturing parents who paid sensitive attention to them were much more secure and successful as adults than those who lacked nurturing parents. Learn and daily practice the key skills in the Strengthening Families Program (handout 10-7).

Practice doing the following:

1. Have a non-judgmental attitude toward your children and yourself, while still providing clear standards for behavior.
2. While your child is sleeping or quietly playing, look at his or her face. Notice with delight the unique features, the shape of the head, the color of hair. Smile with gratitude for this unique human being.
3. Imagine you can see into his or her heart. How is it feeling? Imagine you are saying kind, loving things to your child. How does his or her heart react to your words?
4. Recall your last interactions. How did your child's heart feel in those situations? Resolve to use kind, loving, and peaceful words with your child. Do a daily "Loving-Kindness Meditation" for each child.
5. Listen with your full attention when your child talks to you. Put away your electronics. Seek to understand their feelings and needs. Be kind and present. Remind yourself to practice mindfulness when dealing with your children.
6. Notice and tame your emotions during difficult interactions. Help your children label their emotions. Example: **"It seems like you might be feeling frustrated."** (See Lesson 6.)
7. When you are annoyed or stressed, take a deep breath and say these focus words to yourself: **"Stop. Be calm. Be mindful."** Then choose the best, most kind response for the situation.

11. Overcome Obstacles

1. Take a deep breath and close your eyes. Mentally identify the obstacles that keep you from doing a daily mindfulness practice, or other things that you want to do, but put off.
2. As you take deep mindful breaths, mentally see the name of each obstacle as a single word and focus on the word.
3. Ask yourself: **"Why is this obstacle hard for me?"** and **"What do I need to learn or to successfully deal with it?"** Make a note of your answers. Take steps to learn or do those things.
4. Visualize that word clearly written across two sliding glass doors that slide open as you approach them.
5. Give yourself a countdown, saying "5, 4, 3, 2, 1," and then imagine yourself walking confidently towards the glass doors. As you approach, see the doors part, and see yourself walking through. Then begin the task.

Use this technique each time you face an obstacle.

Practice the breath awareness exercise for five minutes each night and morning using this focusing statement:

Breathing in, think: **"I have power..."**
Breathing out, think: **"...to do good."**