

## **Mindfulness**

**What is it?** Mindfulness can be difficult to describe if you have not experienced it yourself. It would be like describing color to a blind person. But once you have experienced it first hand, you will understand directly what mindfulness is. It is very much worth the effort.

Imagine a wide open blue sky with white clouds. The sky is spacious, without boundaries, and accepting of whatever is in it. Even if the clouds are dark and dreary, the sky is accepting, open, and ultimately free and unaffected by any storm that may be occurring. The sky is always there even when it seems that there are only dark clouds. If you have ever been on an airplane, maybe you can recall that when you go above the clouds, there is always this open, bright, spacious sky, even if from the surface it looks very cloudy and dark. There are different layers to the sky, and it is the same with your mind.

Within you there is also this same open and spacious sky-like awareness that is always there, even when your experience is very stormy. Every single person has access to this or else they would not be alive. Thoughts, feelings, and sensations are all like clouds, but there is a deeper part of you that is always aware, present in every moment, and not affected by the content of your experience. It is not a matter of visualizing or creating this. Rather, it is a matter of noticing what is already there.

When you are mindful, you are connected with this spacious and open awareness. You are paying attention to what is happening right now, without judging, thinking, or reacting. You are simply staying present, accepting what is happening moment by moment, and letting go of the need to control. From this perspective, many of our stories and dramas are seen to be just that, stories and dramas. But from the perspective of thoughts, there is always something to worry about, always some problem to solve, always something to do. But if you can connect more and more with your deeper self, you will become more content, peaceful, and happy and begin to see the joy and wonder that is available in every moment.

**Why should I practice mindfulness?** It may seem like you are in control of your mind right now, but can you remember a time when things got rough and the mind spun out of control? Something may have gone wrong, or perhaps an unexpected situation or illness came up, and your mind started thinking and worrying over and over to the point of obsession. Did the worrying and obsessing help? Most likely it made things much worse, and a lot of anxiety started to come up which was difficult to control.

Most people live either in the past through ruminating or in the future by worrying. It is natural for our minds to be this way because we want to be in control. You want to predict the future so that you will have less uncertainty because the idea of not knowing what will happen can be scary, so you develop this habit of worrying as a way of staying in control. It is perfectly normal to worry, but the mind has a tendency to run away with itself. The worrying becomes obsessive, and the thoughts start turning negative. Pretty soon you're catastrophizing and getting very anxious. Does this really help? Everyone needs some anxiety to solve problems or survive in difficult situations, but worrying and thinking constantly only increase your suffering. These habits do not help you.

Mindfulness allows you to train your mind to stay in the present moment, to accept what is happening right now. This will not turn you into a zombie or get rid of your anxiety completely. Again, it is normal to have some anxiety, but the key is balance. You want to be able to stay calm during stressful situations but not be apathetic to whatever comes your way. You want to be able to react from a stable and grounded perspective. A tree is grounded because it has roots that go deep into the Earth, and if a big wind storm comes, the tree is most likely not going anywhere. Daily mindfulness practice gives you that same groundedness and balance. Even just 10 minutes a day can be very beneficial, but it has to become a habit. Diligence is key. It is like learning to play an instrument or working out a muscle. It has to be a regular habit for it to work, and eventually it will become part of your day, just like brushing your teeth.

It is not an easy practice to undertake, but it is very worthwhile. Mindfulness has been around for many thousands of years in ancient cultures, but now modern science has shown through many different experiments that mindfulness is very effective for reducing stress, preventing depression, and increasing quality of life.

Mindfulness allows you to connect with deeper parts of yourself that you have not accessed before, or perhaps you have but it has been many years. Remember to stay present no matter what comes up in your experience. Notice the mind's tendency to want to run away from painful emotions or to grasp onto pleasurable feelings.

As you stay present, you will start to notice a peaceful, open presence that is beyond thought. This is the deeper "observing self" that everybody has access to. It is a powerful presence that is always there in every moment, but often we are so lost in our thoughts we do not notice it. Mindfulness practice strengthens your connection with your observing self and allows you to directly realize that, like the tip of an iceberg, there is much more to you than just your thoughts and emotions. There is this calm and peaceful presence or sense of being that is more "you" than your thoughts and feelings are. This is not something for you to believe, but rather for you to experience directly. Don't just

take my word for it! Mindfulness is all about experience, going beyond your beliefs and assumptions. Try it and see. Be open and curious.

Start with doing belly breathing. This is a great practice for you to a) learn to breathe properly b) relax c) connect with your body instead of your thoughts d) practice focusing your mind e) serves as an anchor to connect to the present moment. If you are able to do yoga, that is also a great way to start to become connected to the present.

### **Belly breathing**

This is also sometimes called calm breathing or diaphragmatic breathing. If you ever watch a baby breathe, they naturally use their bellies. But as we grow up and start holding tension in our bodies, we breathe from our chest. Starting the breath in the abdomen instead of the chest allows your whole lungs to get more oxygen in. This also releases calming hormones that help to relax the body. When people get anxious, we tend to take short, quick, and shallow breaths. This actually worsens anxiety, so getting in the habit of breathing properly (slow, deep belly breaths) will help you to manage stress and anxiety.

Calm breathing can be done in any situation: walking, laying, standing, sitting. But it is best to practice while you are sitting upright because this will keep you from falling asleep and minimize distractions. If you are feeling very agitated, try lying down.

Take slow deep breaths in through your nose and into your lower belly. At first, it may be helpful to get into the right rhythm and then let your body take over. Start by breathing in slowly through your nose for about 4 seconds, hold for 1 or 2 seconds, then exhale slowly for about 4 seconds. Wait a few seconds before taking another breath. Go at whatever pace you feel most comfortable with.

### **Letting go**

After you have practiced belly breathing for a while, let's add the quality of letting go and acceptance into your practice. As your body breathes in and out, let go of any resistance you have towards something within your experience. What is resistance? It is usually felt as a subtle tension in the body. Pay attention in your body for any tension and breathe into that area. You may feel tension in your jaw, your chest or abdomen, or your hands or feet. Feel the resistance and tension melting away as you take slow deep breaths. If you are feeling anxiety, pain, sadness, anger, or any other uncomfortable feeling, notice that there is resistance to the feeling. The resistance is how you have been protecting yourself all these years, but the resistance actually has the opposite effect and increases

your suffering. If you let go of resistance, you will notice that your relationship to the painful feeling changes. There may still be pain, but there will be less suffering.

With each in breath, connect with all of the sensations in your body. With each out breath, feel the resistance melting away. Keep doing this and get into the rhythm of letting go and opening until it becomes effortless. Then relax into the sky-like awareness which is vividly present to anything happening within your experience but ultimately free. Notice how good it feels as you continue letting go. It can be a very powerful experience in the beginning because you may have never connected with this deeper part of yourself. Keep breathing. Keep connecting. Allow yourself to let go of old ways of resisting and avoiding. Let all of that melt away and be present and open.

If there are a lot of thoughts or distractions, simply come back to the breath and let the thoughts go. Don't be hard on yourself. Be patient and eventually you will get the hang of it. With each breath, keep letting go of the need to control. Be open to your experience no matter what you may be feeling. Remind yourself that there is a deeper part of you, the "observing self" which is like a sky-like open and accepting awareness. The reason why it is so hard to connect with this part of you, and why thoughts and feelings can be so overwhelming, is because of mental habits. Any habit can be broken, so keep working toward breaking your addiction to obsessive thinking and strengthening your connection with your deeper self. As you do, you will notice that you will be less stressed, more happy and content, and more able to hand anything that life throws at you.

### **Somatic loving-kindness**

The word Somatic means body-centered. In our modern culture, we are constantly thinking, planning, judging, always looking for problems to solve etc. We live in our heads and have grown to become disconnected from our bodies. If you want to live a happy and joyous life, it is very important to reconnect with your body. Your body is where you feel emotions, so reconnecting with your body allows you to feel a greater range of feelings. It also allows you to let go of old traumas which have been stored in the body as tension. As the tension releases, you may experience negative emotions like fear, anxiety, anger, or sadness. This is normal. Just breathe, be open to the experience, do not resist or avoid the painful feelings. You can handle them, and they will go away once they have been fully experienced. Also, connecting with your body is an effective way of riding out difficult emotions. Again, it seems paradoxical, but avoiding negative emotions actually makes them worse. Opening up to your body and allowing yourself to really feel with an accepting and willing attitude will help to transform negative feelings and minimize your suffering. It all comes down to your resistance. Remember: pain x resistance = suffering. Let go of resistance, develop an open, willing, and accepting

attitude toward whatever is in your experience, and your suffering will be drastically reduced.

Let's think of all of the negative emotions as poison. This describes their nature of causing suffering. Like with any poison, there is some sort of antidote which counteracts or heals the toxin. One antidote to the negative feelings which cause depression, anxiety, and other forms of suffering is acceptance and openness. Another is an attitude of loving-kindness, which is a feeling of love and acceptance that is evoked and felt very deep in the body. It melts away pain and transforms suffering into peace and contentment. It also goes deep into your unconscious to heal old emotional traumas, even from childhood. Our brains are unfortunately wired to focus on the negative. This seems to have helped our ancestors survive difficult situations, but today this is not helping us at all. This is why it is very important to cultivate positive emotions because it counteracts our innate tendency to get stuck in the negative. Loving-kindness practice does that.

**Method 1:** Through this practice, it is best to have the mind unified upon a single phrase that evokes a feeling of loving-kindness. Experiment and find one that works for you. This might be “May I be happy,” or “May I be happy and calm” or “May I be loved and loving” or “May I feel safe and protected” or “May I be free from suffering.” Whatever works for you. The idea is that the phrase resonates with your own deepest intentions such that the mental impression of the words evoke pleasurable feelings in the body. It may be useful to familiarize oneself with the location and sensations associated with certain feeling words. This step is not necessary, but may be useful in the beginning. To do this, recall a time you experienced deep joy, happiness, or contentment, or simply imagine the experience of such feelings. When the pleasurable feeling is evoked get a sense of where this is located in the body and the associated sensations.

Next, feel what it is to experience life as the body. Let go of thought and drop into this vivid pattern of sensations. It may help to feel the center of your awareness literally drop from behind your eyes to your chest or abdomen. Do this until the mind is relatively calm and the experience of the body predominates. Then begin mentally reciting (not out loud) the phrase of choice, except rather than “May I be happy.” try using the phrase “May this body be happy”, or “May the body be happy and calm”. Saying the phrases in such a way draws one's attention towards the experience of the body. When the intensity of pleasant sensations begins to rise, feel into the sensations after each phrase, sustaining awareness on the body or the phrases throughout. If difficult feelings arise, feel into them in the body and direct the pleasant sensations toward that area of your body where tightness/resistance is felt.

**Method 2:** This is a slightly simpler method. Put your attention on the area in the center of your chest, which is an important emotional area of your body. Spend five or ten minutes experiencing the sensations in this area as a unified whole. When your attention drifts, return it to this area. After several minutes begin mentally reciting the following words, alternating between the three: “happy,” “peaceful,” and “loved” at the beginning of the out-breath while bringing the feeling of that word into your chest. For example, put your attention on the in-breath at the center of the chest, then at the beginning of the exhale imagine you are sending the energy of the word happy, or peaceful, or loved, right into the center of the chest, alternating between the three at the beginning of each out-breath. After saying the word, let the attention rest on the center of the chest and the associated feelings that the word conjures up. Feel deeply and open up to anything that arises within your experience with acceptance and willingness. This practice can lead to deep, joyous states, as well as the nourishing qualities of loving-kindness.

### **Guided meditation**

Sometimes practicing on your own can be too difficult. Maybe the mental habits are too strong or you're too easily lost without the ability to focus. Guided meditations are a great way to learn and stay focused on the practice because there is a voice guiding you and keeping you on track. I suggest the smartphone app called **Stop Breathe Think**. It is also available on the web at <http://www.stopbreathethink.org>. Most of the guided meditations are free and do not require a subscription. All of the ones below are free. I recommend trying these guided meditations first, but they are all worth exploring:

- Body scan
- Relax, ground, and clear
- Mindful breathing
- Mindful walk

### **Integration**

As you continue to practice mindfulness, you will start to feel more joy and happiness in your life. Try to integrate mindfulness into your daily life. Whenever you are walking, practice mindfulness. Whenever you are washing dishes, practice mindfulness. Notice how often throughout the day you get caught up in unconscious thinking patterns. As you notice this, pat yourself on the back! Noticing is the first step to changing for the better. Try to do some sort of mindfulness practice every day, even if it is 10 minutes. Eventually it will naturally become a part of your life leading to more happiness and the strength to deal with any difficult situation.