

## What Is Mindfulness?

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Go to nearly any self-help or psychology section in a bookstore these days and you'll probably find books with mindfulness in the title. This handout provides a brief introduction to mindfulness. It includes information you might find useful if you are learning how to experience mindfulness in your life.

You can think of mindfulness as “awareness with a twist”. Specifically, mindfulness describes moment-to-moment awareness of one’s experience with the twist that we try to bring to this awareness an attitude of openness, curiosity, and non-judgement. Non-judgment means that we do not condemn, reject, criticize, shame or be harsh toward whatever we are noticing in our awareness in the moment (Gilbert, 2009a). This does not mean, however, that we cannot and do not have preferences in life nor that we have to passively accept everything we observe (Gilbert, 2009a). Jon Kabat-Zinn (2011) has described mindfulness as *the cultivation of presence*.

When we practice mindfulness, we direct our attention to the present moment, using our conscious awareness to observe whatever is happening in this moment, and we try as best we can to refrain from condemning or rejecting it. This involves observing and letting things be as they are, not reacting to or trying to change anything in a particular moment, but instead allowing what is there to be there -- to tune in to and be present with that.

Awareness of what is happening in the present moment can include just about anything--feelings, sensations, thoughts, sounds, colours, or other details of the world you exist in in any given moment: all can become an observation in your awareness. When practicing mindfulness, we can give our attention an anchor, something for it to try to focus on, such as our breath, an object (like a candle, a leaf, or a stone), or a sound (such as the sound of birds or even traffic!). Because we refrain from judging as good or bad whatever we observe, mindfulness can be thought of as “observing and only observing” (Gilbert, 2009b).

As Paul Gilbert (2009b) describes it, you can think of your attention as like a spotlight that you can move around and direct at a particular thing. When we focus our attention on our breath, we are moving the spotlight onto our breathing and are aware of it moment-to-moment. When we focus our attention on a body part (such as the tips of our fingers or the sole of our right foot), we are directing the spotlight of our attention there.

Although mindfulness is something we cultivate through our effort and intention, at the same time, it isn't something we create; rather it's a quality and a way of being that we already have. We simply need to intentionally re-connect to it.

When practicing mindfulness in formal ways such as through a body scan meditation or an awareness of breathing meditation, it is helpful to try not to get anywhere with it, to not strive to get to some set goal or specific feeling or experience. Instead, it's helpful to try to simply show up with freshness and openness to

whatever happens without specific expectations of what you think will happen or what you want to happen -- to not try too hard to get anywhere with it.

At the same time, it's helpful to hold a vision of why you are practicing mindfulness, why it feels personally important and meaningful for you to take time to practice formally, such as through meditations, and to practice informally, such as when you pause during your day and tune-in to your breath, or to sounds, or to thoughts and feelings or sensations, to some aspect of your internal or external environment. You might want to take time to reflect on your own vision, perhaps write it down or place an image that represents this vision somewhere in your work, living, or journal space. The image might be a picture from a magazine, a collage, or alternatively, it might be a single word.

When practicing mindfulness, I believe it is important that your own direct experience be the authority of what mindfulness offers to you in your life. Nevertheless, it might be helpful to know that many people have found these kinds of practices to be helpful to them in some way (Davis & Hayes, 2011). Examples include feeling greater calm and inner strength, increased energy, improved concentration and ability to navigate emotions; feeling less anxious or less depressed, and less reactive to stressful situations. Regular mindfulness practices have also improved individuals' immune functioning, sleep, and other aspects of physical and psychological health and well-being.

Mindfulness often helps with calming the mind and body and can aid with developing soothing compassion. However, when practicing mindfulness (and with compassion practices as well) difficult emotions, thoughts, sensations and memories can also be present or arise. There are many reasons for this. Sometimes the reasons related to mindfulness can be different from those related to compassion. Nevertheless, in both instances, part of what is happening is we are tuning in to ourselves. Mindfulness is an invitation to be present with whatever is there. When we slow down and make contact with ourselves, our bodies (all the different parts), and the sensations and feelings we do have, sometimes distressing feelings, sensations, or thoughts are part of what we find there. These are things we may often try to keep out of our immediate awareness for various reasons: because of life responsibilities, tasks, or out of a need for a break or space from them; sometimes it can be due to fear, shame, other hard thoughts and feelings, being very overwhelmed, or due to a combination of all of the above.

This may not happen to you when practicing mindfulness but if it does and things come up that feel hard, it is really important to be gentle with yourself. See if you can find connections and anchors that feel calming and safe for you. Perhaps you can find even a bit of solace in the rhythm of your breath or the feel of a special stone held in your hand, from time with a pet, or from viewing a photo or picture or another soothing object such as a note from someone who cares about you, a poem, or a piece of music. You might make time to be outdoors, in nature, or in other public places.

It can also be helpful to express what you are experiencing. There are many ways to do this. For example, you might write, draw, or make collages about it, or you might express what you are feeling through movement and dance. It is often helpful to talk about it with safe others in your life such friends, family members, a partner, a spiritual leader, or a therapist. The value of talking with others applies even if you are not feeling distressed. Awareness leads to reflections that need and deserve spaces and times for expression and processing including through writing, the expressive arts if desired, and talking with others.

### Selected References

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Kabat-Zinn, Jon (December 14, 2011) in an interview with Dr. James Doherty. Conversations on compassion. Available on-line at <http://ccare.stanford.edu/content/conversations-compassion-dr-james-doty-and-jon-kabat-zinn>.

If the qualities and cultivation of mindfulness or compassion are something you want to explore further and you're not sure where to start, please visit [www.inspiringconnections.ca](http://www.inspiringconnections.ca) for ideas and resources.