

# INTRODUCTION TO MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

## **What Is Mindfulness?**

We spend much of our lives on autopilot, aimlessly shifting from task to task, with little conscious awareness of where we are, or what we're doing. For example, we drive to and from work, with little memory of the actual experience. Or we eat a meal, and it's gone before we know it. These experiences are quite common, and are the hallmark of mindlessness. In fact, one notable study found that we spend nearly half our waking hours in this sort of state. Worse yet, we tend to be most unhappy during these periods when our mind is wandering.

The antidote to this state of mindlessness is in fact mindfulness, an ancient practice that's only more recently come to be understood and appreciated by modern science. In a nutshell, mindfulness refers to:

- Maintaining moment-to-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, sensations, and surrounding environment.
- Practicing acceptance of these experiences without judgment, meaning we observe what's happening around and within us, without wishing for them to be any different than they are.

## **Why Practice Mindfulness?**

The past decade has seen a surge of research on the many benefits of mindfulness. As it turns out, the practice of mindfulness has been linked to a host of positive outcomes, including improved psychological health, enhanced physical well-being, and even improved interpersonal relationships and job performance.

## **The Psychological Benefits of Mindfulness**

Studies show that individuals who regularly practice mindfulness perform better across a number of areas when it comes to mental and emotional health. For example, people who practice mindfulness have been found to have lower rates of depression, stress, and anxiety, while having higher rates of happiness, well-being, and positive emotional states. Additionally, mindfulness has been linked to improved memory, concentration, and focus, along with enhanced problem-solving skills and creativity.

## **The Health Benefits of Mindfulness**

Not only are mindful individuals happier, research suggests that they are healthier as well. Studies have found that individuals who regularly practice mindfulness have better overall physical health, require fewer hospital visits, and spend fewer days in the hospital than their less mindful peers. Additionally, they have stronger immune systems, and have been found to be better equipped to combat chronic illnesses. Some studies have even found that mindfulness practice has been linked to lower levels of physical pain, even among patients with chronic pain.

## **The Interpersonal Benefits of Mindfulness**

Individuals who practice mindfulness reap a number of rewards beyond their physical and mental health. For example, interventions examining mindfulness in schools have found that students who practice mindfulness are less prone to behavioral problems and have higher rates of achievement. Furthermore, in studies of workplace success, researchers have linked mindfulness to higher rates of both job performance and job retention. Finally, studies examining the impact of mindfulness on relationships have found that mindfulness practice is strongly linked to closer interpersonal relationships, including enhanced romantic relationships.

## **The Mindful Brain**

The practice of mindfulness is believed to impact our brain in multiple ways. On a structural level, the practice of mindfulness has been linked to increased activation in the left prefrontal cortex, a part of our brain connected to positive emotional states. Additionally, practicing mindfulness over time has been connected to decreased activation in the amygdala, an area of the brain implicated in our fight-or-flight and stress responses.

Furthermore, regions of our brain pertaining to memory, learning, and emotion regulation have all been linked to the practice of mindfulness as well. A recent study conducted on individuals who regularly engaged in mindfulness practice has also found that mindfulness helps slow down a process known as "cortical thinning," which refers to the process in which we slowly lose brain cells as we age.

# MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

## EVERYDAY MINDFULNESS

**Duration:** Flexible

**Frequency:** Daily for one week

**Level of Difficulty:** Moderate

**Overview:** As shown in the “raisin meditation,” the practice of mindfulness can transform normal, everyday activities into something far more wondrous and meaningful. In this exercise, you are invited to take the lessons from the “raisin meditation” and apply them to other day-to-day experiences. Indeed, if we can turn the simple experience of eating a raisin into something profound, imagine what can be done for other areas of our lives.

**Instructions:** Begin by reflecting on a handful of activities that you engage in on a day-to-day basis, but which you often do in a “mindless” manner. Common examples of these may include (but are not limited to):

Walking the dog

Taking a shower

Driving to and from work

Brushing your teeth

Doing the dishes

Cleaning your home

Eating a meal

For the next week, choose one of these activities to focus on each day. You don't have to change anything about your normal routine; rather, the idea is to instead change the way you experience it. When doing each activity, try using all of your senses to fully immerse yourself, rather than simply rushing onto the next thing or finding your mind drifting aimlessly. For example, while taking a shower, you might pay particular attention to the sensation of the water hitting your skin, the temperature of the water, the smell of the soap or shampoo, and so forth. Remember, it's normal and natural for our minds to wander off, and that's okay! Simply redirect your awareness each time to the experience you're focusing on. *At the end of the week, using either this space or a separate piece of paper, take a moment to write down any reflections or reactions you have regarding your experiences:*

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**Key Points to Consider:**

Start with shorter activities as you get used to the practice, or break your activities up into smaller chunks. For example, if your commute to work takes an hour, don't worry about being "mindful" for the entire drive. Rather, commit to spending a shorter time period (even five minutes) in a more present manner.

If your mind wanders off, that's totally okay! The most important thing is that we simply notice this happening, without judgment, and gently redirect our awareness back to the present.

**How and why it works:** Countless studies have shown the link between mindfulness and improved mental and physical health. Although formal meditation is a great way to cultivate the practice of mindfulness, it can be just as helpful to practice through more informal methods. There are numerous activities that we often engage in mindlessly, with our thoughts taking us just about anywhere except the present moment. In this exercise, you are invited to choose one such activity each day, and approach it in a different manner.

**Notes/Impressions:**

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