

The Point of Mindfulness

Paying Attention on
(and with) Purpose



Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally in the service of self-understanding and wisdom.

— JON KABAT-ZINN, PH.D.



It's been estimated that our minds process anywhere between 6,000 to 60,000 thoughts per day. That's a lot.

Granted, each of us carries what amounts to the world's most powerful supercomputer in our skulls. Even so, with that many thoughts to manage each and every day, it's inevitable for things to get a bit jumbly up in there.

When our thoughts get too jumbled, it becomes easy for us to get stuck in the past, worried about the future, and more likely to struggle with distressing thoughts and emotions.

When that happens, a little mindfulness can help.

Focusing a Jumbly Brain

A common misconception about mindfulness is that it's meant to be a relaxation exercise or a way to empty our minds and shut off thoughts and emotions.

In reality, it's a practice that teaches us to be more alert and aware of what's going on with our thoughts and emotions without judging ourselves for having them.

The goal of any mindfulness practice is to make self-awareness second nature. By registering thoughts and emotions as they happen, we can respond more thoughtfully, calmly, and positively—even in stressful or overwhelming situations.

Learning to observe our inner lives in this intentional, nonjudgmental way gives us space to recognize and address strong thoughts and emotions before they can overwhelm us. This, in turn, helps us put the brakes on and reset when we're feeling overly stressed or anxious or get stuck in a negative thought loop.

The Many Benefits of Mindfulness

Research shows that regular mindfulness practices can reduce stress and improve:



Physical and mental health



Emotional wellbeing



Communication and relationships



Sleep quality

Though effective by themselves, mindfulness practices are commonly used to supplement more traditional mental health care methods, like counseling and cognitive behavioral therapy. They've even proven to be as effective as some anti-depressant medications for treating anxiety and depression.

A Simple Do Anywhere Mindfulness Exercise

Another great thing about mindfulness is that it doesn't have to be complicated. You don't need extra tools or equipment—just your brain and a little bit of quiet time to practice a focused attention exercise like this one:

- Take a couple of deep breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth.
- Return your breathing to normal and notice where you most feel it. Your nose? Your chest or stomach?
- Now, note any other physical sensations, such as the feel of sitting or standing, the movement of air, or the feel of clothing on your skin.
- Whenever a stray thought comes up, notice it and think, "I'm having a stray thought."
- Gently guide your attention back to your breathing and body.

This might feel awkward, and it's completely normal to get distracted by a thought or two. Try not to judge yourself or any thoughts or feelings. Instead, acknowledge and refocus your attention.

Finding More Mindful Moments

According to our guided mindfulness partner, eM Life, participants in their mindfulness programs reap the most benefit in lowering stress levels when practicing for 14 minutes daily, but even short sessions show an impact.

Here are some ideas for peppering long and short mindfulness moments throughout your day. Mix and match to find something that works for you, remembering that you're not trying for perfection – just practice.



Time It – Use a timer when performing the focus exercise outlined above. Start with one or two minutes—and then gradually work your way up to 5, 10, or 15-minute sessions if you can.



Practice Presence – Pause throughout your day and use all your senses to observe the world around you. Notice and name 3 or 4 things you can see, hear, smell, or touch. Pay attention to physical and emotional reactions as you name each one and then move on to the next without judging or giving in to distraction.



Listen Actively – Practice being in the moment and focused on conversations and interactions with others. Acknowledge emotions and attention drift, and then guide your attention back to what your conversation partner is saying just as you'd redirect your internal focus when it strays. [Check out this video](#) for 5 tips on being an active listening superstar.



Embrace the Everyday – Chances are you do dozens of daily tasks on autopilot, like brushing your teeth, getting dressed, making tea or coffee, and feeding pets. Use those as opportunities to practice quiet breathing and deliberately focus your attention on the mechanics and sensations of each task.

PRO TIP

Visit eM Life and try [10 Short Everyday Mindfulness Practices](#) to get started, [Mindful Daily](#) to get your recommended 14 minutes, or [Mindfulness Based Cognitive Training](#) for more advanced practices. (First-time visitors will need to create a free eM Life login at no cost through [Concern's Digital Hub](#).)



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