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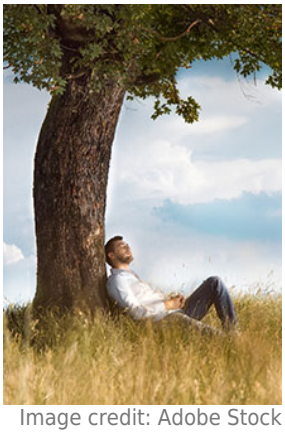
Mindfulness 101: The Basics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Summary: Mindfulness is focusing on the present without getting overly focused on the past or future. It is an easy concept to grasp quickly; it is nonetheless a skill that takes time and practice to develop. The benefits of mindfulness are many, including better emotional and physical health, better relationships and improved productivity. “Pay attention to what you are doing. When your attention wanders, bring it back to what you are doing. Repeat one billion times.”

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness means paying attention to what’s happening right now. When you practice mindfulness, you turn your attention to your thoughts, emotions and body sensations in the present moment. While doing this, you do your best to accept what you’re experiencing without labelling it as ‘good,’ ‘bad,’ or anything else. This can help you feel calmer and cope better with stress and frustration.
Mindfulness includes ‘formal mindfulness’ such as doing meditation or yoga. Mindfulness also includes anything we do where we are focused on the present, such as going for a walk, cleaning, or having a meal.

Focusing on the present helps us to:

• Feel less depressed – as we often do when we worry about the past
• Feel less anxious – as we often do when we worry about the future

“Right here, right now
There is no other place I want to be”
-- Jesus Jones

How Can Mindfulness Help Me?

Research studies show that mindfulness can:

- Promote mental well-being.
- Help us calm our minds and relax.
- Help us handle our emotions.
- Have a positive impact on mood.
- Help to treat depression and anxiety disorders.
- Improve attention, such as with people who have symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

- Improve relationships: between friends, parents, partners and children.

How mindful are you? Are you mindful or mind full?

Do you tend to...	Or do you tend to...
❑ observe life as it happens	❑ analyze and judge
❑ accept how you are feeling	❑ feel bad about how you feel
❑ focus on the present	❑ focus on the past/future

How Can I Be More Mindful?

In today's world, it's not always easy to keep our minds in the present moment. Our attention often gets pulled away by many things, including our devices or other technology. So we end up not giving our full attention to what we're doing or the people we're with. Or we dwell in the past or worry about the future. Our minds are constantly jumping from one thing to the next. Mindfulness teachers say this is our 'monkey mind.' It's like our mind is filled with monkeys, all jumping, chattering and screeching to get our attention. Practicing mindfulness can help us to tame our 'monkey mind.' This might seem hard to do at first, but it really can be simple and easy.

You can practice mindfulness in everyday activities or try more formal mindfulness exercises (sometimes called 'mindfulness meditation).

Here are some steps to guide you on your path.

- Participate fully
  - Try to: Bring your full attention to what you're doing, e.g. "Let's keep phones away from the dinner table so we can talk to each other.
  - Try not to: Do many things at the same time, e.g. multi-tasking while talking with loved ones.
- Reflect
  - Try to: Observe your thoughts, emotions and body sensations with open curiosity, e.g. "My muscles are tense, and I'm feeling annoyed."
  - Try not to: Judge the experience (as good, or bad or anything else), or act on your feelings right away, e.g. "This is terrible, I can't relax, I'll never succeed!"
- Recognize
  - Try to: Remind yourself that your thoughts, emotions and body sensations are just thoughts, emotions or sensations. These don't always reflect the whole truth and can change from moment to moment. Focus on what you are observing or feeling, e.g. "It *feels like no one loves me right now* -- but this happens when I'm tired and I know I'll feel better after a good night sleep."
  - Try not to: Turn your emotions and thoughts into facts.
- Accept
  - Try to: Accept what you're experiencing without judgment, e.g. "I'm sad. My chest feels tight, and I feel like crying."
  - Try not to: Judge your experience or think about your thoughts, feelings and body sensations as 'good,' 'bad,' 'right,' or 'wrong.'
- Re-focus
  - Try to: Notice when your thoughts wander, then gently bring your awareness back to the present moment. Take a mindful pause.
    - E.g. "My thoughts are wandering -- okay, let's try to focus some more, maybe I need a break!"
  - Try not to: Judge yourself harshly when this happens.
- Be kind to yourself
  - Try to: Respond to your thoughts, emotions and body sensations with a gentle and compassionate attitude towards yourself, e.g. "I'd be kind to a friend who felt this way. I'd tell her to take care of herself. I should be as kind to myself as I would to my friend."

- Try not to: Criticize yourself for not being better. After all, would you be as hard on a friend or loved one?

Informal and Everyday Mindfulness

There are many ways to be more mindful in our busy lives. No matter what you're doing, you can bring your full attention to it. It is easier to do this with things we enjoy, but even the boring, mundane moments are an opportunity for mindfulness. Let yourself just be into it.

Waking up. As you wake up in the morning, lie in bed and pay attention to what you are:

- Seeing – the sun, clouds, trees and grass outside the window
- Hearing – birds chirping.
- Smelling – fresh air from outside the window
- Feeling – warm bedsheets.

In the shower, try noticing:

- As you shower, notice the steam rising, the sound of water, the scent of soap, the sensation of warm water on your body.

Cooking. Focus on:

- The feeling of food in your hands as you mix, peel, chop, wash.
- The colour, texture and smell of the food you're preparing.
- How foods change as you fry, grate, whip and boil.

Eating. When eating, try to:

- Turn off all devices.
- Look at your food. Notice the colour, texture and smell. Take a bite and chew slowly. Is it hot? Cold? Lumpy? Sweet? Salty? Does the taste change as you chew? How does it feel when you swallow? When do you start to feel full?
- Studies show that mindful eating helps people enjoy their food more and helps prevent overeating (which can thus help people lose weight).

Cleaning

- Cleaning can be meditative and mindful. Unfortunately, many people try to rush through cleaning, focusing on the result. Mindful cleaning is where cleaning is simply about cleaning. Set aside time for cleaning. Turn off the phone and any background distractions. And while you clean, use the opportunity to practice mindfulness.
- Mindful dishes: While washing the dishes, be aware of your breathing; the temperature of the water on your hands—practice gratitude by being grateful that you have dishes and the meals that have gone with them.
- Mindful sweeping: Sweeping lends itself well to mindfulness and forms an important meditative practice for Japanese monks, who may sweep several hours a day. You can do the same thing with sweeping or any cleaning activity. Imagine you are sweeping or cleaning out negative energy, allowing positive energy to fill its place. Consider a mantra with every movement, "May I be at peace."
- Mindful laundry folding: While folding the laundry, be aware of all your senses, such as the temperature of the clothes, the textures, the smells. Practice gratitude by being grateful for the fact you have clothes and the service that they have provided for you

Outside. When outside, pay attention to:

- The colours around you - yellow leaves, white snow, grey slush, blue sky, dark clouds.
- Scents - grass, air, roses, the french fry truck :-).
- Sounds - birdsong, the rustling of leaves and the wind, traffic, crunchy gravel underfoot.
- Sensations - the warmth of the sun, the wind on your face, your body in motion.

Walking. As you walk, focus on your body try paying attention to:

- The pressure you feel as your feet touch the ground.
- The movement of your muscles
- Your breath
- How the air feels on your skin
- Sounds around you.
- Walk barefoot when possible and notice how it feels to walk on different surfaces (carpet, concrete, grass, mud or sand).

How Mindfulness Can Help You To Be More Productive

Many common productivity 'hacks' are actually based on mindfulness principles of focusing on the present, such as:

- Tame the email monster by... avoiding email. Try to avoid reading emails first thing in the morning. Your mind is the most focused and creative in the morning. This is the best time to focus on your priorities and the most challenging work. When you answer emails first thing, you get distracted by other people's priorities. Aim to give yourself 30 to 60 minutes before trying to catch up on emails. Try to check and respond to email just a few times each day, at set times.

- Manage distractions. Close your door, turn off the radio, and disable notifications. Fewer distractions will allow you to really focus on what you're doing. Do you work in a cubicle environment? Listening to white noise or classical music through headphones may help block out distractions.

- Don't multitask. Studies show that everyone does better on tasks when they can focus on one task and complete it. Even people who think they are good at multitasking are actually more efficient when they focus on one thing at a time.

How To Be Mindful: Formal Mindfulness

Formal mindfulness deliberately takes time to focus attention on something specific, like the breath, sound, or body sensations. You can practice for 30 seconds to 45 minutes or more. When your mind wanders (and it will), gently bring your attention back to the breath. When starting, you may find it helpful to follow guided mindfulness exercises available online. We've included links to some of these in the resource section.

Here are some ways to practice formal mindfulness:

Awareness of the breath

1. Sit down in a comfortable position.
2. Bring your awareness to your breath. Notice how your chest and belly move with each breath, how your nostrils feel as the air moves in and out. When your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to the breath.
3. Do this for a few minutes.

Mindfulness Pause - a 30-second break for calming down

1. Take a slow deep breath, expanding your belly and chest. Focus on how the breath feels in your nostrils, chest and belly.
2. Hold your breath for a moment.
3. Exhale slowly. Focus on how your body feels as you let go of the breath.
4. Reconnect with whatever you are doing

"This one a long time have I watched. All his life has he looked away... to the future, to the horizon. Never his mind on where he was. Hmm? What he was doing. Hmph. Adventure. Heh! Excitement. Heh! A Jedi craves not these

things."
-- Jedi Master Yoda, wishing that Luke Skywalker was more mindful

For More Information

Websites

- American Mindfulness Research Association – an online database for mindfulness research publications
  www.goamra.org
- BC Association for Living Mindfully – a non-profit society dedicated to education, research and advocacy around the benefits of mindfulness
  www.bcalm.ca
- Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society (MBSR training)
  www.umassmed.edu/cfm
- Centre for Clinical Interventions – resources for consumers and mental health practitioners
  www.cci.health.wa.gov.au
- Mindfulness for Teens – online guided meditations and resources
  www.mindfulnessforteens.com
- UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center – online resources and free guided meditations
  www.marc.ucla.edu

Books

- Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment—and Your Life. Author: Jon Kabat-Zinn
- Parenting from the Inside Out: How a Deeper Self-Understanding Can Help You Raise Children Who Thrive. Authors: Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell
- Mindfulness: An Eight-Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World. Authors: Mark Williams and Danny Penman
- The Mindful Brain. Author: Daniel Siegel
- Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and Their Parents). Authors: Eline Snel, Jon Kabat-Zinn and Myla Kabat-Zinn
- The Mindful Child: How to Help Your Kid Manage Stress and Become Happier, Kinder, and More Compassionate. Author: Susan Greenland
- The Stress Reduction Workbook for Teens: Mindfulness Skills to Help You Deal with Stress. Author: Gina Beigel

Apps for Mindfulness

- Headspace App
- Calm.com website and app, which has meditations to relax, focus and sleep better
- Stop, Breathe & Think: Meditation and Mindfulness App
- The Mindfulness Training App

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Disclaimer

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