

MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

Mindfulness: Living Our Lives in the Present and with Purpose

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We have a wonderful brain. It is capable of quickly learning how to carry out tasks, and it becomes so good at task execution, that our body often runs on autopilot while our mind is far away thinking of something else. Paradoxically, living “mindlessly” can also lead to constantly being “in our head,” experiencing automatic overthinking, looping negative thoughts, rumination, brooding, or constantly thinking about the past. This state of not being in touch with the “here and now” can be detrimental to our health.

A helpful skill that can help us live our lives in the present is mindfulness. Mindfulness has been shown to have positive outcomes in the treatment for chronic pain, depression, anxiety, and in stress management programs, and it can help us in our every-day lives, too.

So what is mindfulness?

1. Mindfulness is to be intentionally aware of the present moment. Aware of what our body is doing, what our senses are telling us, what our mind is focused on, and what thoughts are passing through our mind.
2. Mindfulness encourages metacognition, the capacity to notice what we are thinking and the ability to control our thoughts, improving our mood and emotional reactivity, helping us become more in-tune to our emotions, and to have more control over them.
3. Mindfulness boosts our ability to focus and our working memory - the part of our memory system that allows the brain to hold onto information for a short period of time while performing mental operations with that information. This is how we can do mental math, for example.

How can we practice mindfulness?

A simple way to learn to control what happens in our brains is by practicing gentle breathing exercises.

1. First, we practice observing our breath. We observe the feeling of the air, the movement of the chest and abdomen, how the muscles feel as the body expands and contracts with each breath, and how the body reacts to a more regular breathing pace. As we observe, mentally describe these sensations, such as: the air feels cold or warm.
2. When our mind wanders, gently recognize the thought is there, and then gently bring our attention back to our breath. Do this as often as necessary.

3. Mindfulness practice includes being non-judgmental. As we observe and describe a thought or experience, let it be. For example, when we think of an apple, we simply pay attention to the facts, such as: it is a red apple, it is mostly round, it smells sweet. We do not label it as either good or bad. We are especially careful not to label the humans in our lives, which include labeling and having negative thoughts about ourselves. Why? Because subjective labels incite automatic emotions.

4. When we get better at this, we can try practicing mindfulness next time we shower, or eat something, or exercise. Mindful eating is one of my favorite ways to practice this skill, I pretend the food I am eating is something I have never had before. Try it!

Mindfulness is not about controlling our thoughts and emotions until we become numb or ignore life-saving emotions. It is about being fully present in each moment of our lives, which leads to more fulfilling experiences, closer relationships, and a stronger sense of well-being.