

## *MAKE MINDFULNESS A PLEASURE, NOT A CHORE*

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The practice of mindfulness seems to be popping up everywhere, nowadays. People who are mindful, we're told, are less stressed, more relaxed, more focused and efficient, less anxious and depressed. Mindfulness can also be a meditative practice to get in touch with a deeper self.

What is mindfulness? One common definition (from Jon Kabat-Zinn) is that it is paying attention to the here-and-now, on purpose, without judgment. Surprisingly, paying attention to the here-and-now is not an easy thing to do for most of us. Our minds wander. We space out. So mindfulness is also often described by practices and trainings that cultivate our ability to concentrate, focus attention, and steady the mind. In a typical exercise, we are instructed to consciously direct our attention to something that will focus us on the here-and-now and to be aware of our awareness. If our minds wander, we notice this and simply return to the present moment.

In one common exercise, I'm instructed to relax, then to pay attention to my breathing without trying to control my breath in any way. What do I notice during the inbreath? the coolness of air in my nostrils and throat? my chest or abdomen expanding? what else? I pay similar attention to the outbreath. In another common exercise, I count "one" with each inbreath and "one" with each outbreath. When my attention wanders—I find myself thinking that I need to gas up my car—I simply notice this and return my attention to my breathing. My thoughts aren't judged or repressed—my thoughts about gas, and then about how I'm doing the exercise wrong because I'm thinking about gas, are simply noticed as they float through my mind.

Exercises like these are important and useful to developing mindfulness. But keeping up exercises on a regular basis, making them a habit, can be challenging. Sometimes mindfulness can seem to be a chore: "I've got to brush my teeth, take my vitamins, and do my mindfulness exercises." Sometimes achieving a mindful state seems daunting or frustrating: It's hard to concentrate on just-one-thing for more than a few minutes. It's hard to stay in the here-and-now. Sometimes I can really obsess about my inability to stop obsessing, and get really judgmental about my difficulty being nonjudgmental.

## *BE MINDFUL ABOUT MINDFULNESS*

Mindfulness exercises, it's true, leave me feeling more relaxed. When mindfulness also seems like a chore or a duty, or confusing, or frustrating, or even unpleasant, I like to take a step back to pay attention to how I think about and how I experience it. That is, to be mindful about mindfulness.

When I want to build up a muscle, I exercise; over time I develop more strength and flexibility. Then, when the muscle is stronger, I can use it to do all kinds of things, some of which I had no idea existed before. My muscles are stronger; with stronger muscles I can learn to play tennis; playing tennis further strengthens my muscles. Similarly, focusing on just-one-thing like the breath is not an end in itself; I'm strengthening my ability to stay in the present without being distracted, avoiding, mind-wandering, stuck in habitual mindsets. Then, I can apply this awareness in many ways. What do I notice when I slow down and pay attention? As this ability slowly grows, I notice more details. I notice new or different parts of experience, like sensations, emotions, thoughts, that I previously overlooked. The overall quality of my experience can deepen, my field of awareness can expand.

I'm deepening and changing my experience of attention itself. Perhaps "awareness" is a better word than attention. The words "concentration" and "focus" in mindfulness practices don't mean narrowing our attention, blocking out everything other than the object of attention, cognitive control of experience. It isn't an effortful, take-charge striving. I'm not barking orders to myself to focus on my breath. "Concentration," means that I'm slowly developing the ability to hold my awareness steady in the here-and-now. As I relax into this receptive but clear attention, I find that my awareness is broadening rather than constricting. I'm not spacing out, I have a keen experience, but it's a relaxed, receptive awareness. I'm still thinking, but thinking is part of a broader field of experience. Passive attention, which is active in its own way. Being, not doing. It's a shift in my center of awareness or state of mind. As I slow down and take the time to notice myself, my experience of myself as a centered person who has awareness and my experience of how I connect with the world around me deepens.

### *MAKING MINDFULNESS A PLEASURE, NOT A CHORE*

The heart of mindfulness is relaxed awareness of the here-and-now, slowing down, taking the time to notice more and notice more deeply, allowing experience to spontaneously arise, being not doing. As new experiences arise, they can be further explored or simply enjoyed. In addition to practices like sitting meditation, there are many other ways to cultivate this.

Some formal mindfulness practices ask you to focus on something that attracts your attention. Ron Kurtz, for example, instead of using language like "concentrate," suggests choosing something you are curious about and taking the time to explore it in more detail. In one common mindfulness exercise, for example, you are asked to hold a raisin between two fingers. Notice: What is its color, its texture? What does it smell like? What else do you notice? Then, put it in your mouth. Don't chew. As it sits in your mouth, how does it change? Do you start salivating? Finally, chew it without swallowing. What is the taste?

How does the taste and texture change when you chew? Finally, swallow the raisin.

Not crazy about raisins? Choose a food that you love, and do the exercise.

Or, if you're relaxing your body, notice what part of your body your attention is drawn to, and linger there. What does that part feel like—tense or relaxed? heavy or light? How does the feeling change as you pay attention to it?

Or get curious about your mind as it is working now. Noticing the internal chatter in your mind can be as much mindfulness as noticing your breath. Or notice your reactions to your interactions with another person.

Mindfulness to what attracts your curiosity or interest or that you enjoy can be cultivated without a formal exercise. Perhaps it's a walk in the woods—slow down and notice the bark on the trees, the smells. Perhaps it's the architecture of the houses in your neighborhood.

Paying attention to something that interests us can help to capture our attention in the here-and-now. But anything can be the focus of mindfulness. Boring or unpleasant tasks, like washing the dishes, are less unpleasant, and even interesting and enjoyable, if we're, in the words of Thich Nhat Hanh washing the dishes to wash the dishes, instead of wondering when we'll ever be done with this unpleasant task.

*STOP. SLOW DOWN. NOTICE. NOTICE SOME MORE.*

What makes something a mindfulness exercise is your conscious intention to stay present in the here-and-now. You can make mindfulness a mini-vacation, a decision to take a brief, perhaps 10 or 20-minute, break from whatever is worrying you. Or you can build a time-out for a pleasurable activity into your daily schedule. Or perhaps you practice mindfulness waiting on line in the grocery. Teachers like Thich Nhat Hanh suggest that everyday practices remind us that mindfulness is part of everyday life.

### *IN SUM*

Mindfulness is a relaxed state conducive to health, well-being, and insight. It's an ongoing process; there's no end point at which you've achieved total mindfulness. Formal practices can deepen our work, providing guidance from a teacher and group support. However, there are many ways to make mindfulness a pleasurable part of ourselves and our daily routine, which is after all an end we're seeking.

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