

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is maintaining awareness of the present moment through thoughts, feelings, and sensations. It is experiencing the world in the “here and now,” rather than operating on auto-pilot. It requires acceptance of the present and paying purposeful attention to our thoughts, feelings, and actions without judgment or criticism. In mindfulness, there are not “good” or “bad” feelings or emotions; rather, you acknowledge and accept each feeling and thought as it arises in the moment. Why practice mindfulness? Research has found a number of benefits linked to the practice of mindfulness, including stress reduction, increase of positive emotions/decrease of negative emotions, greater empathy and compassion for others, and greater relationship satisfaction.

How can you be mindful?

1. Engage in activities mindfully: Be present during day to day life, taking time to be in the moment. Pay attention! Stay in the moment and appreciate what you are doing, rather than jumping ahead and thinking about all of the other tasks you still have to complete. Whenever you feel your mind wandering, remind yourself to focus on the present and to fully engage in what you are doing.
2. Focus on others: Many times, during the stress of daily life, it can be easy to focus on ourselves, our own stress, and our own problems. This can make us lose sight of what others are going through and consequently, weaken our ability to feel empathy for others. This might mean we honk at the person who cut us off in traffic, or be extra short with the salesperson who is not helpful. However, remaining in the present and acknowledging what others may be thinking or feeling allows us to see things from their perspective and is a reminder that we are not the only ones feeling stress. By taking on the perspectives of others, we develop empathy for them and can more often see the good in the situation, rather than dwelling on the negative.

3. **Develop self-awareness and observe self-care:** Develop self-awareness of how you are feeling by recognizing in the moment when you are stressed. Use this awareness of your feelings to give yourself what you need at that time, whether it is saying “no” to a party, going on a walk, taking a few deep breaths, or having a hot drink. Give yourself permission to experience thoughts and feelings in the moment without judgment. This enables us to develop self-compassion, and in turn, make wiser decisions that will benefit ourselves and others. Remember, you cannot take care of others if you are not taking care of yourself.
4. **Practice gratitude:** During the busyness of daily life, it’s easy to get lost in what you haven’t done, don’t have, or what went wrong. However, research has shown that a key element of happiness and satisfaction is focusing on the positive and being grateful for what you do have and have accomplished. This requires mindfulness to consider what you have to be thankful for in the present. Take five to ten minutes each day to focus on what went well and what you are thankful for. Not only will this lift your mood, but it may also change your perspective!
5. **Let go of expectations:** Part of mindfulness is accepting the present moment for what it is, without dwelling on what should have or should not have happened. In life, it is easy to get upset or frustrated when things don’t go according to plan. Maybe the shirt you HAD to buy is sold out. Or maybe your boss called an emergency meeting and now you have to cancel dinner plans. Instead of focusing on how things SHOULD be or why they went the way they did, practice mindfulness by remaining in the present and going along with the changes. Focus on what IS rather than what should have been.