

Mindfulness



Introduction

Our bodies and brains communicate with each other through chemical and electric signals. This means that when we think about stressful, frightening or upsetting things, our bodies begin to feel tense, our digestion becomes more difficult, and we have difficulties sleeping. The tension in our bodies then sends signals back to our brains that they are tense, which can increase our level of mental stress. We can break this cycle in the body with exercises like breathing, stretches or progressive muscle relaxation (PMR) or we can break it in the mind using mindfulness, visualization or grounding exercises. This handout will guide you through the principles and practice of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is paying attention, on purpose, to the present moment. This may include paying attention to your surroundings and things outside your body, or paying attention to your internal state, what is happening for you mentally, emotionally and physically. Mindfulness means noticing our thoughts, our feelings, what we hear, see, taste, smell and our body sensations. With practice, mindfulness helps us to be aware of our habitual patterns of thinking, feeling and acting, and to let go of these patterns when they are not healthy for us.

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An important part of mindfulness is noticing your current state and environment without judgment. Labels like “good,” “bad,” “like” or “dislike” are all judgments. When you practice mindfulness, try to move away from these and just pay attention to what is there without adding your assessment of it. Pay attention in a friendly, open and curious way. For example, try to see pain, discomfort or distress as your body or mind communicating with you, without getting stuck on the fact that it is uncomfortable.

Mindfulness is a reflective process that allows us to slow down for a period of time and have clarity on the present moment. It helps us not to focus too much on past events or experiences or overthink or worry too much about what is coming in the future. We can find a healthy, safe moment in the present, which gives our bodies and minds a break from our patterns of stress. This helps us with our emotional management and when we practice it regularly it can reduce feelings of distress and help us improve our focus and concentration.

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Steps

There are many ways to practice mindfulness. We will present seven brief mindfulness exercises that you can try, each with a different focus, to find one which is a good fit for you.





Personal weather report

For this exercise you will pay attention to your internal sensations and feelings, however you will describe them to yourself using words that you would usually use to describe the weather. This helps to remove judgment and allows us to notice these feelings differently.

 1	Sit comfortably, with your body supported by the chair or floor. You may close your eyes or let them lower to a point on the floor.
 2	Take three deep breaths.
 	Now turn your attention inward and notice how you are feeling. Is it bright or dark inside you? Sunny? Cloudy? Stormy? Windy? Still? Is there different weather in different parts of your body? Move your attention through your body to check the weather in each place, making sure that you check your stomach/abdomen, your heart/chest, your throat/neck, and your face/head.
	See if you can find a place in your body where the weather is slightly more pleasant than in other places and stay there for a few minutes.
When you are ready, return your attention to the outside world.	

Mindful seeing

You can do this exercise anywhere, but it is helpful to do it outside in nature.



	Find a place where you can sit or lie back comfortably with something in your environment that is gently moving. For example, this may be clouds in the sky, leaves blowing in the wind, or water moving in a stream.
	Pay attention to the movement, noticing the many different colors, the textures, the speed and the patterns that you see. Notice the light and shadows caused by the movement. Really pay attention: do you notice anything that is different, that maybe you have not noticed before?
	If thoughts come into your mind, release them and come back to focusing on your natural environment. Do this for a minimum of 5 minutes.
	Note: This exercise can also be done as a “noticing walk” where you walk silently through your environment and pay close attention to each thing that you see, from the gravel or pavement on the ground to the colors of the plants or building, to the texture of the clouds in the sky. Slowly move your attention from ground up to sky and back again, repeatedly.

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Mindful listening

For this exercise you can use a bell, an instrument, or a chime app on your phone.

	Find a place where you can sit comfortably and which is relatively quiet. You can have your eyes open or closed, however you feel most comfortable.
	Chime the bell, pluck the instrument or play the sound app. Try to listen carefully to the sound: Notice how it changes, if the tone shifts, if it starts loud and then gets quieter. Listen closely until you can no longer hear the sound. Take a moment and listen to the silence, without the sound in it. Then play the sound again.
X 3	Repeat this a minimum of three times.



Mindful sensation


This exercise focuses on the physical sensations we feel in our bodies.

	Start by bringing your attention to the soles of your feet. How do they feel? Are they in shoes or barefoot? Do they have space to move or are they held tightly? Are they touching the ground? Is the pressure of the ground on your feet even or is it more in one part than another?
	Now slowly move your attention up to your legs. How do they feel? Are they touching the chair or your clothing or can you feel the air on your skin? Do they feel warm or cool? Do they feel painful or comfortable? Are the muscles tight or relaxed?
	Slowly move your attention up through your body, to your hips and lower back, then to your abdomen and stomach, then to your chest and heart, then to your hands, then to your arms, then to your upper back and shoulders, then to your neck and throat, and finally to your face and head. For each part of your body really focus and pay attention to how that part feels, without feeling the need to change it.
	If you have parts of your body that are painful, you can choose to spend more time focusing on parts of your body that feel comfortable; this can help relieve your overall feeling of pain.






Mindful walking

For this exercise you are going to walk slowly: this can be done either inside or outside.






	Start by standing still.
	Then, very deliberately, take a step. As you step, try to pay attention to the sensation in your muscles as you lift your leg. Can you feel them tighten? Are you shifting your weight? Is your posture changing?

	Then put your foot down and really pay attention to the sensation of the sole of your foot on the ground. What part touches the ground first? Where is there the most pressure? How do your legs feel as you put that foot down? How does your weight shift now that both feet are on the ground?
X 5	Repeat this for at least 5 steps.

Mindful eating

	Sit comfortably so that your body feels supported by the chair or by the floor.
	Put a bite-sized piece of food in front of you. Look at the food: What color is it? What is the texture? Notice the smell. What sensations are coming into your body as you look at and smell the food?
	Now pick up the food slowly. If you can hold it in your fingers do this, otherwise use a utensil. What does the food feel like in your hand? What is the temperature? The weight? The texture? Is it smooth or rough? Soft or hard? Wet or dry? Hot or cold? Now bring the food slowly to your lips and put it in your mouth. Do not bite the food yet, take a moment to feel what the food is like on your tongue: the temperature, the texture, the taste.
	Now bite into it slowly; do not swallow yet. What changes? Does the taste change? Does the texture change? Pay attention to how the food changes in your mouth as you chew. Now swallow the food. Feel the food move down your throat as you swallow. Notice what sensations come from your throat and your stomach.
	You can choose to repeat the exercise with another bite of food, or to start at least one meal a day with a mindful bite of food.

Mindful gratitude

	Find a quiet place and sit comfortably so that your body feels supported by a chair or the ground beneath you.
	You may close your eyes or leave them open and let them relax to look down to the floor. Take three deep breaths, paying attention to the feeling of the air coming in through your nose and filling your lungs.
	Now take a moment to notice your heartbeat.
	Now think of one thing in your life that you are grateful for. This could be a big thing or a small thing, it could be a person, a place or an opportunity. Consider all aspects of that thing: what sights, smells, sounds and sensations do you associate with that thing? How does that thing make you feel?
 3 Min	Spend at least three minutes thinking about that thing and focusing on the feeling of gratitude for having that thing in your life.



References & Further Reading

1. Martha Davis, Elizabeth Robbins Eshelman, Matthew McKay. (2008). *The Relaxation and Stress Reduction Workbook*. 6th edition.
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