



A Beacon Health Options website

Mindfulness: The Art of Being Present

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We spend a lot of time thinking about the past: telling stories, regretting our actions, or feeling happy. We also spend time thinking about the future. We plan dinner, study for tests, and worry. Sadly, we often ignore the present.

We sometimes do not pay attention to the details of our lives. We complete tasks without thought. Think about raking leaves or washing dishes. These activities take effort but little thought. Our minds wander. This is called being “on autopilot.” On autopilot, we ignore how we feel physically and emotionally. We do not think about the people or the world around us. We make quick decisions based on past decisions. We ignore negative habits.

Finding the present; how mindfulness can help

Mindfulness is the opposite of autopilot. The word mindful means aware. Mindfulness is an awareness of the present moment. It is paying attention in a particular way:

- On purpose
- Without judgment
- In the present moment

Scientists have shown that mindfulness:

- Reduces stress, anxiety and pain
- Eases depression and other behavioral health challenges
- Helps manage post-traumatic stress disorder
- Aids in substance abuse recovery
- Increases productivity
- Makes people happier and more content

Therapists use methods such as mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT). Mindfulness-based relapse prevention (MBRP) is a method for substance use disorder recovery.

Mindfulness practices are activities or habits that help us stop and notice:

- Our body
- Our thoughts and feelings
- Other people
- Our environment

Meditation

Meditation is the most common mindfulness practice. It has roots in ancient Buddhism but is not religious. *Meditate* means to concentrate or think deeply. This does not conflict with any belief system. Experts say that meditating even five minutes a day helps.

Basic meditation is about being still and trying to quiet the mind. This is not easy. Our minds want to wander. They want to worry or make mental grocery lists. This is natural. When thoughts arise during a meditation, try to simply observe them and let them go without judgment or reaction.

There are many ways to help focus the mind. To start, be comfortable but alert. Some people sit upright. Others lie down. Possible places are: on the floor, on a pillow, in a chair, or on a bed.

Ways to focus or quiet the mind:

- **Breathing exercises**—Notice how your breath comes in and goes out. Let it get slower and deeper. It can help to think, “I am breathing in. I am breathing out.” If your mind wanders, come back to your breath.
- **Body scan**—Notice how your body feels. Start at your head. How does it feel? Can you relax your scalp, face or jaw? Move your attention down your body, noticing and relaxing.
- **Chants, mantras or prayers**—Repeating words or sounds helps with focus. They can be silent or out loud and can come from anywhere. Even the words, “I am breathing in. I am breathing out,” can be a mantra.
- **Guided meditation**—A trained person can talk you through a meditation period. He might include breathing or body scan exercises. Guided meditation can include noticing emotions, counting, and thinking of places or objects. Music is often used.

Moving meditation uses motion to focus the mind. One example is the martial art tai chi. Measured breathing and fluid movements keep the mind on the present. Some people reach a calm, focused state with other activities such as yoga, walking, or leisurely bike riding. Others find crocheting or knitting to be useful tools.

What if I don't want to meditate?

You do not need to meditate to be mindful. Many focusing exercises can be used in your daily life. Any mindfulness practice that helps you slow down and be aware of the present is useful.

Nonmeditation practices can be done regularly, such as in the morning or throughout the day. They include:

- Breathing exercises
- Emotion check
- Body scan
- Mindful eating
- Keeping a journal or diary

For example, Linda was rushed and angry a lot of the time. Now, when she notices she is rushing, she stops and takes a couple of slow breaths. She thinks, “I am moving without thinking. I need to slow down. What is one thing I can do now to stay more centered or focused?” Her next move is calm and efficient because she is mindful of her actions. She feels more in control and less angry.

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