

What Is Mindfulness?

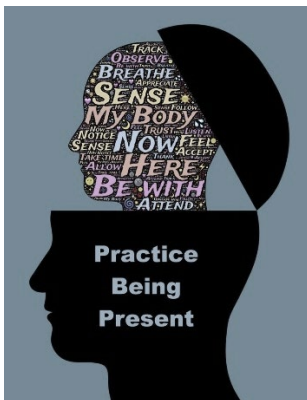
If you pay attention to what your mind is doing, you'll notice two strong tendencies:

1. **The mind focuses on things other than what is happening right now.** Most of the time we're thinking about events that have already happened or that might happen in the future. Thus, our well-being is often affected by things that have little to do with the moment in which we find ourselves.
2. **The mind continually evaluates our reality as good or bad.** It does so based on whether things are working out the way we want them to. We try to cling to circumstances we like and push away those we dislike.

These tendencies are part of what it means to be human. They can also cause us problems and needless suffering. Focusing on the future can lead to worry and anxiety, most often about things that will never happen. Ruminating on events from the past can lead to distress and regret about things that are no longer in our control.

In the process, we miss the once-in-a-lifetime experience that each moment offers. We don't really take in the people around us, the natural beauty of our surroundings, or the sights, sounds, and other sensations that are here right now.

Our constant and automatic effort to judge things as either for us or against us also creates unnecessary pain. We often end up resisting things we don't like, even when such resistance is futile. A perfect example is raging against the weather—no amount of cursing the rain will make it stop, and we'll only frustrate ourselves in the process. The practice of mindfulness offers an antidote to both of these habits.



PRESENCE

Mindfulness is as simple as bringing our awareness to the present. That's it. If you're walking the dog, pay attention to that experience. If you're having lunch, focus on having lunch. If you're arguing with your partner or embracing afterward, be fully in that experience.

Sometimes when we learn what mindfulness is, we say, "I already know that I'm walking the dog. I know I'm having lunch. How is that supposed to be helpful?" But mindfulness is more than knowing that we're doing something. It's about going deeper, intentionally cultivating a connection with our experience. We don't just

walk the dog—we notice the color of the sky, the feel of the ground under our feet, the sounds our dog makes, the periodic pulls on the leash. It's opening our awareness to elements of our experience that we normally miss.

At the same time, a mindful approach doesn't require that we do anything in addition to what we're engaging in. If we're running, we're running. If we're driving, we're driving. People sometimes protest that being mindful in certain situations would be distracting, even dangerous. In fact, the opposite is true—we're safer and less distracted when our attention is fixed on what we're doing.

Simply being present in our lives accomplishes two things at once. First, it allows us to get more out of what's happening, so we don't sleepwalk through our lives. We can discover the richness in our reality, even in the most mundane activities. Second, when we're present, we're not ruminating about the past or fearing the future, which is a big part of why mindfulness practice reduces anxiety and depression.

So much of our unhappiness arises from things that have nothing to do with what's real in this moment. For example, I was walking home from the train one evening and started thinking about my children's health. Before I knew it, I was imagining a tragic scenario in which one of them was gravely sick, and I began to feel anxious and downcast as though it were already happening. When I caught myself and came back to the present, I noticed what was real: the lengthening light, the birds flying, the green grass, and blue sky. My kids were healthy as far as I knew. I didn't have to live in my tragic fantasy. It was hard not to smile with that realization as I headed home to see them.

“The way to experience oneness is to realize that this very moment, this very point in your life, is always the occasion.” —Chögyam Trungpa, Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior



ACCEPTANCE

The second core feature of mindful awareness is acceptance, which means opening to our experience as it unfolds.

After a couple miserable nights, Matt realized he needed a new perspective on his daughter's bedtime. The next night he decided to try a different approach—what if he let the night play out however it was going to? It's not like his resistance made things better: it was making him frustrated toward his baby every night. He resolved to do his best to help her fall asleep, and to release his fierce attachment to controlling exactly when that happened.

The first time his daughter began to cry, Matt took a calming breath before going into her room. Instead of telling himself, "I hate this," or, "This is ridiculous," he thought, "This is what's happening right now." Then he took stock of what that statement actually meant: He was standing by the crib of his baby girl, whom he loved more than words. He was patting her tiny back, which was the size of his hand. He could hear her breathing begin to slow. He realized how in that moment he had no real complaint about anything. He wasn't cold, hungry, thirsty, or in danger. His daughter was healthy. She just wasn't asleep yet. Maybe things were exactly as they ought to be.

Matt's example reveals important corollaries of mindful acceptance. First, it doesn't mean we stop having preferences for how things go. Of course, Matt still wanted his baby to fall asleep quickly and easily and wanted to have more of the evening to himself to unwind. Accepting meant holding those preferences more lightly, and not assuming his daughter was doing something wrong by not being asleep when he wanted her to be.

Accordingly, Matt didn't throw in the towel and stop following the bedtime routine he and his wife had agreed on to transition their baby to falling asleep on her own in her crib. He stuck to his plan, offering predictability and consistency while recognizing that he couldn't control his daughter's sleep.

When we stop fighting against the way things are, we relieve an enormous portion of our stress. Earlier in my career I had a very difficult supervisor, and I often found myself tied up in my thoughts as I tried to make sense of how unreasonable she was. Finally, I reached a point of accepting that she could just be difficult, period. My acceptance didn't change her behavior, but it did free me from acting as if she were doing something surprising. She was simply being true to form.

A crucial part of acceptance is that it lets us respond appropriately to the facts in front of us. My acceptance of my boss's temperament made it clear to me that I needed to find work elsewhere, which underscores the distinction between acceptance and apathy.