

Mindful Living

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Do you ever feel like you walk through life without really living it? Do you run around overwhelmed, missing out on what's important? Jack Kornfield, author of *A Path with Heart* and founder of Spirit Rock Meditation Center, said "At the end of life, our questions are very simple: Did I live fully? Did I love well?" These questions can be a call to wake up, and mindfulness is the method by which we can heed the call to live fully and be well.

People generally walk around on automatic pilot. More often than not, we are not really where we are. When we are eating, many of us are reading, working, or worrying about the past or future instead of tasting each bite of our food. Mindfulness is a way to break free from being on autopilot and wake up to the experience of what's really going on around you while it's actually happening.

The "technical" definition of mindfulness is paying attention, in the present moment, without judgment. Everyone already has the ability to be mindful. I remember visiting the Mesa Verde area on my honeymoon with my husband, John. We spent the day hiking with a Native American guide on the Ute Indian reservation. The day was spent looking at fabulous scenery and cliff dwellings, being careful where we stepped (there were drop-offs), and climbing tall ladders. I was aware of the beauty and also of the

fear I felt climbing up and walking along the edges of cliffs. Both the magnificence and the anxiety were present. The awareness of the fear helped me to decide consciously what I needed to do stay safe and enjoy the moment. We were fully where we were. Mindfulness helped us stay focused on our experience so that we got the most out of it.

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“Make the moment vital and worth living. Do not let it slip away unnoticed and unused.” Martha Graham

Most people wonder how being more aware of the moment can help them reduce stress and live more fully and peacefully. Imagine coming home from work after a busy day with lots of household chores ahead of you. Waiting for you is a beloved child who wants you to watch her do something she learned at school. If you are preoccupied with events of the day, you may go through the motions of watching her but feel impatient to get on with things and perhaps even cut off the interaction prematurely because you're "in a hurry". You may miss the darling look on the child's face, or the sweet inflection in her voice that touches your heart. If you can truly focus on the child and not let your mind drift to the rest of your day, you can find more pleasure in this lovely sight and be open your heart to the joy in life. Mindfulness is the conscious development of nonjudgmental awareness that helps you pay attention more fully to what's going on in that meaningful moment.

Our everyday life is full of “ordinary” things that we take for granted, like food, water, shelter, work, and relationships, to name a few. To illustrate, imagine that you have a toothache; it is painful. When it goes away, you appreciate the absence of pain.

However, after awhile you take the “non-toothache” for granted. Being aware of “ordinary” experiences can help us appreciate that our lives are full of abundance even in the age of consumerism and wanting more and more. Mindfulness can help us bring awareness to those things in life that we take for granted and make the otherwise “ordinary” extraordinary.

I’m not trying to be a Pollyanna and say that mindfulness will make life pain-free. Life brings us difficult times. So what about those times? Lots of people say they’d rather focus on something else during stressful times. Go have a smoke, a drink, eat to excess, or stay very busy. These are very temporary diversions that do not resolve the difficulty and often make the situation worse. Mindfulness can help us nurture a calm awareness within a stressful situation and gain insight into how to handle the stress more resourcefully.

QUOTE sidebar

“The first rule is to keep an untroubled spirit. The second is to look things in the face and know them for what they are”. Marcus Aurelius

The skill of bringing calm, nonjudgmental awareness to our experience is developed through mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation is practiced by intentionally focusing one's attention on a single object; the breath. The focus of attention is then broadened to include observation of other aspects of one's present moment, ongoing experience such as sounds, thoughts or feelings. Many people think they cannot meditate because they cannot quiet their minds. Everyone has a wandering mind, and in mindfulness meditation, **activity of the mind is not considered a distraction, but part of the practice.** By applying **nonjudgmental awareness** to the activity of the mind and returning to the breath, we begin to awaken from automatic thinking, experience deep relaxation and self-acceptance, and develop the skill of carefully paying attention. It is a process of growing from the automatic, unconscious reaction to a calm awareness of pro-active choice, change, and responsibility. Commitment to a daily mindfulness practice fosters physical healing and relaxation, and dramatic changes in beliefs, attitudes, habits, and behaviors.

The art of paying attention developed through mindfulness meditation helps us to focus on the present moment while performing daily activities. As in mindfulness meditation, we use the breath as a point of focus when cultivating awareness in daily life. For example, if you notice that you are not present to your experience, you can become mindful by focusing on your breath and then broaden that focus to other aspects of your experience. We use the breath because it is always with us; it connects us to our bodies and is the link between the body, the mind and vast internal resources.

Quote - sidebar

“You must learn to be still in the midst of activity and to be vibrantly alive in repose.

Indira Gandhi

While learning mindfulness meditation, I encourage people to be very gentle and patient with themselves and not to try too hard to relax (which is what most people think meditation is about). Trying too hard will only add pressure. Mindfulness meditation is actually a nonstriving process in which we make time for “being” and “non-doing”. This is difficult to grasp because our culture places so much value on doing more, having more, and getting ahead. So patience and nonjudgmental acceptance of oneself is important so we can begin to know that nothing else needs to happen for this moment to be complete.

It is also important to note that mindfulness is learned through practice and less through study about it. It is only in the practice of mindfulness that we come to understand it. Learning about mindfulness from others is important, but when you actually practice it, you can have that “aha” experience; an understanding of the subtleties of mindfulness at a deep level.

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“Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves” Rainer Maria Rilke

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) classes are based on the belief that **there is more right with you than wrong**, and that we all have vast inner resources that can be mobilized to assist in healing. Class members learn to identify and strengthen what is healthy for them, rather than focusing on their problem or illness. Participants learn mindfulness meditation and its practical applications for coping with stress and enhancing adaptive health behaviors. Most people who take the class report enjoying it and that practicing mindfulness made significant improvement in their lives. Many class participants describe “waking up” and living for the first time.

Mindfulness classes consist of 8 weekly 2 1/2 hour sessions which include instruction, discussion about, and practice of mindfulness meditation and how it can help people cope resourcefully with stress, pain, and the challenges of everyday living. Each class has a specific theme about how to apply mindfulness in every day life. Themes for the classes include:

- discussion of mindfulness and how perceptions affect stress levels
- the mind-body-spirit connection
- how being present in the moment can be powerful and pleasurable
- how we get “stuck” in life and how to get unstuck

- reacting vs. responding to stress -- Type A behavior, anger, suppressed feelings, working with emotions
- communicating mindfully
- how consumption affects our well-being -- eating, violence, addictive habits
- how to keep a mindfulness practice alive.

Benefits of MBSR

Researchers at the Center for Mindfulness at University of Massachusetts Medical Center (UMMC) conducted several research studies to examine the results of using mindfulness. They tested and interviewed class participants before and after the eight-week class and found significant benefits for class members. These benefits included:

- reduction of a variety of physical concerns, including chronic pain
- reduction of anxiety, panic and depression ratings
- increased self-awareness, self-trust and self-acceptance
- adapting to change more fluidly
- having a more relaxed attitude toward life
- improved concentration and creativity

People who participated in a mindfulness class were interviewed by UMMC researchers for up to four years after the class. They reported lasting benefits for

participants and that class participants maintained some aspects of their mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness classes are appropriate for people experiencing chronic pain, health problems, stress related symptoms or emotional concerns. However, it is as much a class for the “well” person who wants to reduce reactivity to stressful situations and to nurture her/his wellbeing. It provides a powerful complement, not an alternative, to medical treatment and psychotherapy.

The MBSR classes offered at Mindful Living are modeled after those developed by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center (UMMC). The Stress Reduction Clinic there has become one of the country's most successful stress reduction facilities. Dr. Kabat-Zinn’s work at the clinic was featured in Bill Moyers' PBS special "Healing and the Mind" and is the subject of the books *Full Catastrophe Living*, and *Wherever You Go, There You Are*. Having completed an Advanced Teacher Development Intensive at UMMC with Dr. Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues helped me to model my classes after those offered at UMMC and to further develop my own mindfulness practice that is essential in teaching.

Practicing mindfulness can help you answer yes to the questions proposed by Jack Kornfield. Yes, to living fully and yes, to loving well.

Stress Reduction Tips - sidebar

- Make ordinary, repetitive occasions such as the telephone ring or a trip to the restroom a reminder to notice your breath and activity of your mind for a few moments.
- Make computer down time into a time to turn inward and ask yourself “Am I awake now?”.
- When you’re in a hurry, ask yourself, “Do I really need to hurry?”
- Experiment with being compassionate and nonjudgmental with yourself when you are reminded of your limitations.

Author Micki Fine is a Certified Mindfulness Teacher and founder of Mindful Living in Houston, Texas. She combines the practice of psychotherapy with teaching Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction to help individuals heal emotionally and physically, transform beliefs to live more fully and peacefully, and deal with stress in creative ways.

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