

Mindfulness

Page 1—Brain exercises to increase focus, reduce stress, and improve relationships



WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness is the skill of training your brain to pay keen attention—in a calm, compassionate, and curious way—to what is currently happening to and around you, so you can focus on the present moment instead of being distracted by disturbing thoughts, regrets over the past, or worries about the future.

Mindfulness helps you become more aware of your thoughts, feelings, and actions—and the effect they have on others—so you can react wisely and peacefully in every situation.

You can train your brain to be mindful by doing a few simple exercises every day to improve your mental focus. Even kids can learn to do them! The most important exercise is the “Breath Awareness”, also called the “Mindful Breathing,” exercise. Each time your mind wanders from what you’re thinking about, gently bring your attention back to the thing you were focusing on.

Mindfulness is developed through a few formal exercises you can do each day, but it can also be practiced informally during the day whenever you want. Take a breath and focus your attention on what is currently happening before you respond to something or someone. Practice each new skill separately at first; then use them all together to become mindful.

BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS

Practicing Mindfulness has been shown to

- Decrease the body’s stress response
- Lower blood pressure
- Reduce anxiety
- Slow down the aging process
- Increase ability to regulate emotions
- Increase feelings of peacefulness, enjoyment, and well-being
- Increase density in the good judgment part of the brain

WHY MINDFULNESS WORKS

When you take deep breaths, the air passes over nitric oxide cells in your nasal passage, which triggers the release of nitric oxide. The nitric oxide relaxes your blood vessels, increasing blood flow to the brain. As you fill your lungs with air, your diaphragm causes your belly to rise, which puts pressure on the vegas nerve, which runs from your brain down your spine. This pressure triggers a release of serotonin, a chemical that helps to calm your body.

1. Breath Awareness Exercise

Each Mindfulness exercise begins with this Breath Awareness exercise. Begin by doing the 5 Ss:

1. Sit up straight. (*Unless you’re doing a body scan.*)
2. Sit still. (*Unless it is a Mindfulness Walking exercise.*)
3. Sit silent.
4. Shut your eyes. (*Unless it is a Mindfulness Walking exercise.*)
5. Shush your brain chatter. (*Take a big, deep breath through your nose, and while you exhale, say “Shhhh. . .” to yourself as you draw an imaginary line from your forehead to your chest.*)

Next, breathe deeply: Focus your attention on the feeling of the air as it enters your nose, fills your lungs, and then exits your nose or mouth. Count five breaths, and then start counting to five again. Continue counting breaths for two minutes. When your attention wanders (and it will), gently bring your attention back to your breathing. Increase the time until you can do it for 10-20 minutes.

2. Advanced Mindful Breathing

While you are doing the Breath Awareness exercise, visualize a quiet inner center in your chest. As you exhale, feel the peace at that quiet spot. Feeling into this center can help you sense your true worth and find comfort in difficult times.

Some people call this area an “inner center of wisdom.” When they have to make a decision, they “feel within” to sense what their intuition, or “gut” feeling, says about the right path to take.

This process may work because the heart and gut are surrounded with millions of neurons that connect with the brain. That’s why your brain can send a feeling of “butterflies” to your stomach if you are nervous, or send a sense of “love” to your chest. Further, your eye sends more messages to your brain than you consciously recognize. These are recorded in your brain and may form a source of intuition that helps you recognize what would be helpful or harmful if you mindfully “feel within.”

Mindfulness

Page 2—Brain exercises to increase focus, reduce stress, and improve relationships



3. Observe & Dismiss Negative Thoughts

Mindfulness includes the ability to mentally stand back, observe your thoughts, and dismiss negative ones without dwelling on them. This includes learning to accept things in the past that you can't change. Once you have made amends and asked for forgiveness, recognize that you can now at least act wisely and kindly to make a better future.

When troubling, negative thoughts arise, take a deep breath and repeat a coping phrase, such as "It is what it is." Use this exercise to label and dismiss negative thoughts that are troubling or limiting:

1. Write down recurring negative thoughts on your "Automatic Negative Thoughts" handout from this lesson. Beside each negative thought, write a more hopeful statement.
2. Sit quietly and begin a Breath Awareness exercise.
3. If a troubling thought or emotion comes to mind, imagine yourself sitting by an open window watching small, puffy white clouds drift by. Then mentally place your troubling thought on a bit of imaginary cloud—and let the cloud drift out of view.
4. Return your focus to your mindful breathing.

4. Think Compassion, Not Criticism

An essential part of Mindfulness is the ability to view yourself and others with a compassionate, kind eye. When we view others with a critical, judgmental eye, we filter reality through our own prejudices, which prevents us from seeing reality. Recognize that all people suffer hardships, and all people deserve compassion. Let it begin with you, knowing that what you give out will return to you multiplied.

1. Decide that you will stop looking at others with a critical eye, and choose to feel compassion instead.
2. Close your eyes and begin a Breath Awareness exercise. As you breathe in, repeat: "May I feel compassion towards myself and others." As you breathe out, repeat: "May my critical eye depart."
3. As you breathe, visualize your body becoming filled with a gentle compassion for humanity, and the negative, critical part leaving your body. Repeat daily.
4. Track your progress. Carry a note card and put a mark each time you think a critical thought. Immediately follow those critical thoughts with the words, "... Just like me." Or, smile and silently say, "I wish you well."

Note: You can feel compassion for yourself while still acknowledging the need for change. Also, compassion never means you tolerate abuse.

5. Mindfully Observe Your Amazing Body

Pretend you are seeing your body as an amazing, biochemical machine for the first time. Focus on its abilities with a childlike awe.

1. Lie down in a quiet, comfortable place, knees slightly bent. Close your eyes and take three deep, mindful breaths.
2. Focus your attention on your body, beginning with the toes of your right foot. Think about each part of that side of your body, moving up to your neck. Then focus attention on the left side of your body, beginning with your toes and moving up to your head.
3. As you focus on each part of your body, tense and relax it, and imagine your breath flowing to that part. Think about the wonderful things each part can do. Then imagine you can see beneath the skin to see how the muscles and bones work together.
4. When your mind wanders, gently refocus on your body.
5. When you reach your head, take a deep, mindful breath, feel a sense of awe and gratitude for your amazing body, and open your eyes.

6. Mindfully Delight Your 5 Senses

Each day for five days, mindfully focus your attention on a different aspect of your senses. Observe each experience with deep gratitude:

1. **TASTE:** Pick up a small piece of food. Notice how it looks and smells before putting it in your mouth. Then put down your fork and chew slowly as you observe and savor the taste and texture.
2. **SMELL:** During a meal, pause and close your eyes and smell the different foods before you eat. If weather permits, sit near a garden to smell the flowers or grass.
3. **TOUCH:** Feel the warmth of the water on your body as you take a bath or shower. Listen to the sound of the water. Feel the texture of the wet bar of soap in your hand. Be fully present and experience the delight of the feeling of the water. Then touch other textures like trees, grass, etc.
4. **HEAR:** At night, sit by an open window for a few minutes, close your eyes, and carefully listen to and try to identify every sound.
5. **SEE:** Take a walk in nature, or even just around your neighborhood. Try to see it with new eyes. Notice every detail about the place and the people. Be thankful for your sight.

Mindfulness

Page 3—Brain exercises to increase focus, reduce stress, and improve relationships



7. Become a Mindful Parent

One goal of Mindfulness is to become a sensitive, nurturing parent. A long-term study showed that children who had nurturing parents who paid sensitive attention to them were much more secure and successful as adults than those who lacked nurturing parents.

1. Cultivate a non-judgmental attitude toward both your children and yourself, while still providing clear standards for behavior.
2. While your child is sleeping, reading, or quietly playing, look at his or her face. Notice with delight the features, the shape of the head, and the color and texture of the hair. Smile with gratitude.
3. Imagine you can see his or her heart. How is it feeling? Does it feel happy or sad or fearful? Imagine you are saying kind or loving things to your child. How does his or her heart react to your words?
4. Recall your last interaction. How did your child's heart feel in the situation? Resolve to use kind, loving, and peaceful words with your child. Do a "loving-kindness meditation" for each child. (See step 12 of these Mindfulness exercises.)
5. Listen with your full attention when your child talks to you. Put away your electronics. Seek to understand their feelings and needs. Be kind and present. Remind yourself to practice Mindfulness when dealing with your children.
6. Notice and name your emotions during difficult interactions. Help your children notice their emotions as well. Example: "It seems like you might be feeling frustrated."
7. When you are annoyed or stressed, take a deep breath and choose the best response by saying to yourself: "Stop. Be calm. Be mindful."
8. Learn and practice each of the seven key skills in the Strengthening Families Program (see handout 10-7).

8. Mindfully Perform Tasks

Training your brain to focus with intense interest on daily activities that you usually do without much thought increases your ability to be aware. This exercise takes no extra time, as you're doing the tasks already.

1. Make a list of the tasks you do daily that you could focus on, like getting dressed, brushing your teeth, washing dishes, working in the garden, walking to school or work, etc.
2. Begin each Mindful Task exercise with three slow, deep breaths. Then Mindfully focus fully on each aspect of the activity. Notice all the little details you usually take for granted. Example: As you brush your teeth, notice how the toothbrush feels in your hand, how the toothpaste tastes, and envision each tooth as you brush it.
3. If any distracting thoughts arise while you are doing the activity, dismiss them from your mind without thinking on them. Stay focused on the activity.
4. End each with a deep, mindful breath.

9. Be Mindful of Interactions with Others

One of the main goals of Mindfulness is to become calmly aware of your thoughts and feelings during interactions with others, and to manage them well so you can listen objectively and speak and act deliberately, compassionately, and effectively. This will help you get along better with others and have a happier life.

The moment you begin to feel a "Fight, Flight, or Freeze" response in a stressful situation, use the acronym "BOLDT" as a reminder to be Mindful:

1. **B=Breathe**—Take a deep, calming breath and engage your quiet center during crisis or conflict.
2. **O=Observe and question your thoughts**—don't assume they are right. (They are often incorrect.)
3. **L=Let go of judgment**. Calmly, curiously, and compassionately ask questions to understand how they feel about the situation.
4. **D=Defuse the situation by validating their concerns**. Say you see their point of view, even if you disagree.
5. **T=Take a break**—If things get hot, thank the person for listening, tell them you need to think about things, and you will get back to them soon.

Mindfulness

Page 4—Brain exercises to increase focus, reduce stress, and improve relationships



10. Mindful Walking Exercise

The first time you do this walking exercise, choose a place where you can enjoy walking quietly. After that, practice the skill of focusing your attention for a few minutes whenever you walk anywhere.

1. While walking mindfully, breathe deeply and focus on each sensation of the movements of your body as you take each step.
2. Notice how your knees and ankles bend and your legs move.
3. Notice the way your foot feels as you pick it up and place it on the ground. Notice the sound it makes as you step on the pavement.
4. Take a deep, cleansing breath and feel delight and be grateful for your body.

11. Overcome Obstacles

1. Take a deep breath and identify the obstacles that keep you from a daily Mindfulness practice.
2. As you breathe, bring each obstacle as a word into your mental focus. Ask yourself: "What can I learn from it?" and "How can I successfully deal with it?" Make a note of your answers to these questions.
3. Visualize the word clearly written across sliding glass doors that open as you approach them.
4. See yourself walking confidently towards those doors. As you approach, the doors part, and you see yourself walking through.
5. Each time you feel blocked by an obstacle, visualize the doors opening and see yourself walking through them.

12. Loving-Kindness Meditation

A loving-kindness meditation involves Mindful Breathing while you focus on a few positive outcomes you desire for yourself and others. As you breathe in and out, use positive thoughts to direct those good things to yourself and others. Those who practice it report increased positive emotions, reduced stress, an increase sense of purpose, and a stronger social support.

1. Sit quietly, eyes closed, back straight, hands open on your lap with palms up, and your mouth in a soft smile.
2. Take several slow, deep breaths through your nose and exhale slowly, focusing all your attention on the sensations of breathing.
3. Then focus your thoughts on a desire to be happy and well. Imagine happiness and vitality coming to you. As you breathe, repeat three phrases like, "May I be healthy and strong." "May I be happy." "May I be peaceful."
4. As you inhale, visualize your body filling with wellness, happiness, and goodness. As you exhale, visualize distress, suffering, and negativity leaving. If your mind wanders, gently bring it back to your breathing.

5. Focus on a person that you feel thankful for and send vitality to him or her. As you exhale, visualize sending this person happiness, vitality, and goodness. If he or she is having difficulty, imagine he or she is becoming well or full of joy.
6. Focus on a neutral person, or someone with whom you are having difficulty.* Send them wellness and goodness.
7. Focus on the suffering in the world. As you exhale, visualize sending happiness and goodness into the world. Say something like, "May all beings be kind and full of goodness."

*If it is hard to offer loving kindness to a difficult person, realize that it benefits you as well, for you become more compassionate and loving.

Think on this quote from Soren Kierkegaard:

"To cheat oneself out of love is the most terrible deception; it is an eternal loss for which there is no reparation, either in time or in eternity."