



What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness has become something of a buzzword recently, but the term describes a simple concept. Mindfulness is the state of being fully present and calmly aware of the thoughts, emotions, and sensations you experience from one moment to the next. The goal is to do this curiously and without judgment or attachment to any particular feelings or outcomes.

We all have the potential to be mindful, but certain techniques can help us intentionally activate our inner mindful selves.

Top 4 reasons to practice mindfulness

Studies have shown that becoming more mindful is a simple but powerful way to improve your sense of well-being and sharpen your cognitive abilities. Some specific benefits include:

- **Lowered anxiety:** Dedicated mindfulness practices can help significantly decrease feelings of anxiety, leading to improved psychological and overall health ([Carmody & Baer, 2007](#)).

- **Reduced stress:** Even a brief mindfulness practice can similarly be an effective intervention to lower psychological stress, which in turn can improve general health. This is especially important if you are recovering from an acute health event, such as a stroke or traumatic brain injury ([Creswell et al., 2014](#)).
- **Decreased pain and fatigue:** Mindfulness practices have been effective in studies at reducing pain and improving mood in survivors of traumatic brain injury ([McMillan et al., 2002](#)). Furthermore, survivors of stroke and traumatic brain injury who took a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course reported experiencing decreased mental fatigue ([Johansson et al., 2012](#)).
- **Improved cognition and communication:** Mindfulness practice has also been linked to a longer attention span, which can enhance your ability to perform demanding cognitive tasks and to communicate clearly ([Jha et al., 2007](#)). Studies have even shown that consistently meditating might physically alter areas of the brain related to cognitive and sensory processing ([Lazar et al., 2005](#)).

How can I practice mindfulness?

One of the best aspects of practicing mindfulness is that it is something anyone can do without special training or equipment. All you need is the desire and willingness to be more fully in touch with the present.

Consider starting here to tap into your inner mindful state:

- **Find a quiet moment:** Pick a time when you have a few minutes to yourself and will not be rushed or interrupted.

- **Commit to practicing for a certain amount of time:** It could be a set number of minutes that you track via a timer, or it could simply be for the full duration of a specific activity through to its natural end.
- **Start slowly:** You might find a mindfulness practice tiring at first, due to the concentration required. It is important to take breaks and go slowly at first, starting with one to two minutes a day and working up.
- **Choose your mindfulness exercise:** You might try to mindfully taste a sour lemon candy, paying attention to how the wrapper sounds and noting the sensations in your body as the candy melts on your tongue. Or you might decide to mindfully perform a mundane daily activity like washing the dishes, noticing the sound of running water, and the slippery texture of the soap.

Whatever you decide to do, try to do it *mindfully*. That means that you should try to focus with intention and curiosity on every part of your experience, including what you smell, hear, feel, or think during the practice. Try to avoid fixating on a particular outcome, such as finishing the whole candy or washing all the dishes. Instead, let each moment take you to the next.

- **Acknowledge disruptions without judgment or attachment:** If you find yourself getting distracted by something external, such as a loud noise, or internal, such as a thought that elicits strong emotion, acknowledge the interruption without judgment of yourself or others. Then, detach yourself from the distraction, gently turning your mind back to the exercise. You might visualize an overwhelming thought or emotion as a leaf floating along a stream, moving toward you and then away again.

- **Be patient with yourself:** Remember that, as with anything else, the process of becoming more mindful is a gradual one. You might experience impatience, boredom, or frustration as you begin practicing this skill.

Additional supports:

If it feels intimidating to begin a mindfulness practice completely on your own, you might consider the following resources:

- **Seek social support:** Friends, family, or mental health professionals can be a valuable source of encouragement if you choose to share your mindfulness journey with them. They might remind you to do a daily practice or check-in to ask how you are feeling afterward.
- **App-based guided meditations:** There are a variety of apps for the iOS and Android operating systems that offer guided mindfulness meditations. Popular apps available for free include [Insight Timer](#), [UCLA Mindful](#), and [Smiling Mind](#).
- **Join a local meditation group:** Usually, an instructor will lead the group through a live guided meditation. These groups can be a great way to build community into your practice.
- **Enroll in a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course:** MBSR courses lead students through an intensive, 8-week mindfulness curriculum. They usually involve a substantial time and monetary commitment. Many clinical studies on the benefits of mindfulness have been based on MBSR programs ([A.K. and S.K., 2011](#)).

Over time, entering a state of mindfulness will become a more seamless part of your everyday experience. You might continue practicing specific mindfulness techniques or doing daily meditation, or your practice might evolve to integrate more fully with your daily activities. Either way, hopefully, it will not take long before you start

to notice the benefits of mindfulness practice on your mental and physical health as you progress in your recovery from a stroke or traumatic brain injury.

References and Further Resources

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