

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment.

Mindfulness also involves acceptance, meaning that we pay attention to our thoughts and feelings without judging them—without believing, for instance, that there’s a “right” or “wrong” way to think or feel in a given moment. When we practice mindfulness, our thoughts tune into what we’re sensing in the present moment rather than rehashing the past or imagining the future.

Though it has its roots in Buddhist meditation, a secular practice of mindfulness has entered the American mainstream in recent years, in part through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn and his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, which he launched at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. Since that time, thousands of studies have documented the physical and mental health benefits of mindfulness in general and MBSR in particular, inspiring countless programs to adapt the MBSR model for schools, prisons, hospitals, veterans centers, and beyond.

Why Practice Mindfulness?

Studies have shown that practicing mindfulness, even for just a few weeks, can bring a variety of physical, psychological, and social benefits. Here are some of these benefits, which extend across many different settings.

- **Mindfulness is good for our bodies:** A seminal study found that, after just eight weeks of training, practicing mindfulness meditation boosts our immune system’s ability to fight off illness.
- **Mindfulness is good for our minds:** Several studies have found that mindfulness increases positive emotions while reducing negative emotions and stress. Indeed, at least one study suggests it may be as good as antidepressants in fighting depression and preventing relapse.
- **Mindfulness changes our brains:** Research has found that it increases density of gray matter in brain regions linked to learning, memory, emotion regulation, and empathy.
- **Mindfulness helps us focus:** Studies suggest that mindfulness helps us tune out distractions and improves our memory and attention skills.
- **Mindfulness fosters compassion and altruism:** Research suggests mindfulness training makes us more likely to help someone in need and increases activity in neural networks involved in understanding the suffering of others and regulating emotions. Evidence suggests it might boost self-compassion as well.
- **Mindfulness enhances relationships:** Research suggests mindfulness training makes couples more satisfied with their relationship, makes each partner feel more optimistic and relaxed, and makes them feel more accepting of and closer to one another.
- **Mindfulness is good for parents and parents-to-be:** Studies suggest it may reduce pregnancy-related anxiety, stress, and depression in expectant parents. Parents who practice mindfulness report being happier with their parenting skills and their relationship with their kids, and their kids were found to have better social skills.
- **Mindfulness helps schools:** There’s scientific evidence that teaching mindfulness in the classroom reduces behavior problems and aggression among students, and improves their happiness levels

and ability to pay attention. Teachers trained in mindfulness also show lower blood pressure, less negative emotion and symptoms of depression, and greater compassion and empathy.

- Mindfulness helps health care professionals cope with stress, connect with their patients, and improve their general quality of life. It also helps mental health professionals by reducing negative emotions and anxiety, and increasing their positive emotions and feelings of self-compassion.
- Mindfulness helps prisons: Evidence suggests mindfulness reduces anger, hostility, and mood disturbances among prisoners by increasing their awareness of their thoughts and emotions, helping with their rehabilitation and reintegration.
- Mindfulness helps veterans: Studies suggest it can reduce the symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in the aftermath of war.
- Mindfulness fights obesity: Practicing “mindful eating” encourages healthier eating habits, helps people lose weight, and helps them savor the food they do eat.

How to Cultivate Mindfulness?

Jon Kabat-Zinn emphasizes that although mindfulness can be cultivated through formal meditation, that’s not the only way. “It’s not really about sitting in the full lotus, like pretending you’re a statue in a British museum,” he says. “It’s about living your life as if it really mattered, moment by moment by moment by moment.”

Here are a few key components of practicing mindfulness that Kabat-Zinn and others identify:

- Pay close attention to your breathing, especially when you’re feeling intense emotions.
- Notice—really notice—what you’re sensing in a given moment, the sights, sounds, and smells that ordinarily slip by without reaching your conscious awareness.
- Recognize that your thoughts and emotions are fleeting and do not define you, an insight that can free you from negative thought patterns.
- Tune into your body’s physical sensations, from the water hitting your skin in the shower to the way your body rests in your office chair.

To develop these skills in everyday life, you can try these exercises used in Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR program and elsewhere:

- The **body scan**, where you focus your attention along your body, from the toes to the top of your head, trying to be aware and accepting of whatever you sense in these body parts, without controlling or changing those feelings.
- The **raisin exercise**, where you slowly use all of your senses, one after another, to observe a raisin in great detail, from the way it feels in your hand to the way its taste bursts on your tongue. This exercise is intended to help you focus on the present moment, and can be tried with different foods.
- **Loving-kindness meditation**, which involves extending feelings of compassion toward people, starting with yourself then branching out to someone close to you, then to an acquaintance, then to someone giving you a hard time, then finally to all beings everywhere.

For more: Watch [videos of Kabat-Zinn](#) for his take on how to build mindfulness.