What is Mindfulness?


“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and awareness of present-moment reality” (1994, p. 4).

“Mindfulness has to do above all with attention and awareness, which are universal human qualities. But in our society, we tend to take these capacities for granted and don’t think to develop them systematically in the service of self-understanding and wisdom. Meditation is the process by which we go about deepening our attention and awareness, refining them, and putting them to greater practical use in our lives” (1994, p. xvii).

Myths about Mindfulness

- Mindfulness is just relaxing or thinking positive thoughts.
- Mindfulness is a religion.
- Mindfulness is a panacea.
- Mindfulness is a type of therapy.
- Mindfulness is easy.

Mindfulness Builds 3 Basic Skills

My primary teacher Shinzen Young has created a systematic approach to mindfulness practice called “See, Hear, Feel”. This basic mindfulness practice system builds 3 fundamental skills:

- **Concentration power** – the ability to focus on what you consider to be relevant at a given time.
- **Sensory clarity** – the ability to keep track of what you’re actually experiencing in the moment.
- **Equanimity** – the ability to let sensory experiences come and go without push and pull.

Why bother practicing Mindfulness?

Shinzen Young answers this question in his article *What is Mindfulness?*
• We want to be free from physical and emotional suffering. (Note that this is not necessarily the same as being “without” emotional and physical discomfort).
• We want to derive great fulfillment from pleasurable physical and emotional experiences.
• We want to change habitual behaviors that have negative consequences.
• We want to understand deeply who (and eventually what) we really are.
• We want to joyously serve our fellow beings.

**Mindfulness Math**

P x R=S (Pain x Resistance = Suffering)

Part of mindfulness practice involves lessening resistance to the inevitable pain/discomfort in life. We will experience pain/discomfort (either emotional or physical) in our lives that is unavoidable. We can, however, reduce our suffering by systematically leaning to open and experience pain/discomfort with more and more equanimity, thus reducing our suffering.

**How do you get started?**

**Focus on the Breath**

A great way to start your mindfulness practice is to focus on the breath. Jon Kaba-Zinn (2013) writes, “Our breathing is a convenient process to support ongoing awareness in our daily lives. As long as we are alive, our breath is always with us. It is always available no matter what we are doing, feeling or experiencing, no matter where we are. Tuning in to our breathing brings us right into the here and now. It immediately anchors our awareness in the body, in a fundamental, rhythmic, flowing life process” (p. 41).

**Instructions:**

1. While sitting, standing, walking or lying down, bring your attention to your breathing.
2. For at least 10 minutes, focus intently on your nostrils, abdomen or chest.
3. Carefully observe your breath flowing in and out of your body.
4. When your mind wanders away from your breathing, gently bring your attention back to the breath – without judgment.

**Helper Options:**

- You can count your breaths from 1 – 10, and then start over with 1,2,3….
- You can gently say to yourself – “in, out, in, out…” as you follow your breath.
- You can gently say to yourself – “feel out, feel out, feel out” (from the See/Hear/Feel techniques of Shinzen Young).
- You can get fancy and use the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, “Breathing in, I calm my body./Breathing out I smile./Dwelling in the present moment./I know this is a wonderful
Formal and Informal Practice

1. Formal practice: Practice “Focus on Breath” for at least 10 minutes each day. Formal practice consists of sitting, walking, standing or lying down. I encourage you to set a timer and practice in a quiet place, if possible. You may keep your eyes closed, open or half-open with a relaxed, soft focus on the floor in front of you.

2. Informal practice: Find times during your day to take a few moments to focus on the breath (Shinzen Young calls these “micro hits”). For example, practice “focus on Breath” when you are waiting at a stop light, waiting on your computer to boot up, walking to a meeting, standing in line at a store, etc. Or, if you experience a strong emotional response to a situation, take a few moments to just breathe mindfully. What do you notice when you take this time to focus on your breath?

Here’s a quick practice to help you manage stress😊

- **S** = Stop what you’re doing & put things down for a minute.
- **T** = Take a Breath or two to connect with the present moment
- **O** = Observe your experience just as it is— in your body, thoughts, feelings, & urges to action
- **P** = Proceed with or make a Plan for something that will support you in the moment

A few notes about me....

Marla Herron, Ed.D., has studied and practiced mindfulness (also known as Insight Meditation and Vipassana) since the late 1990’s. She has been trained to teach Mindfulness-based Stress Management by the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care & Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. She also teaches Unified Mindfulness – a program created by meditation teacher Shinzen Young. She teaches a variety of mindfulness courses/workshops/retreats in her community, guest lectures on the topic for health care providers and leads the weekly “KU MEDitation” sessions on Tuesdays, from 12:15-12:45 in Spencer Chapel which are open to anyone on campus.

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References


