

Mindfulness for Depression

Mindfulness is a core skill that is used in many different types of therapy, including Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy. Mindfulness has gotten a lot of attention in recent years, but it is actually a centuries old practice that is now studied and practiced all over the world.

In short, mindfulness is the practice of being present and aware.

When people are depressed or anxious, it is common to have difficulty with concentration or focus. Even when we are not depressed or anxious, it is not uncommon to “zone out” in everyday tasks. How many times have you misplaced your keys or parked your car and forgot where it was?



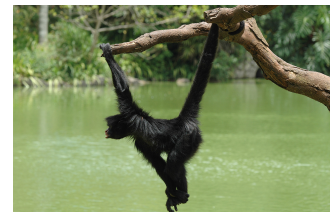
Most of us struggle to maintain a mindful state. When we are not mindful we are often focused on the future or ruminating about something that happened in the past. This makes us less aware of what is going on in the present, which contributes to depression and anxiety. In fact, research has shown that people that tend to be more able to live in the present moment perceive themselves to be happier.

One goal of mindfulness is to describe our experiences *objectively* and *non-judgmentally*, focusing on the variety of things that are happening in the present moment. **It is not an attempt to feel “good” or “relaxed.”** It is a state of being aware of whatever we are experiencing, with an attitude of acceptance.

Another element of mindfulness is developing an awareness of the *changing* nature of all experiences, including emotions and thoughts.

“Monkey Mind”

Does it ever feel like you are at the mercy of your thoughts? Many of us feel like our minds are constantly going from thought-to-thought like a monkey swinging from tree-to-tree.



This is a very common experience! The good news is: when you notice that this is happening you are taking the first step towards being mindful. You can learn to notice your distractions and come back to the present moment. We practice this over, and over, and over again. This is one way to practice mindfulness.

Slow down the mind...

Our Western culture is a fast one: more and more things to do, places to go, things to have, and people to please. We may feel overwhelmed and start to multi-task just to get by. This is a symptom of our culture—it's no one's fault! However, research has shown that multi-tasking and rushing through daily life actually makes us *less* efficient, and definitely less happy.

Mindfulness helps us slow down to experience life as it is. This is important, as tasks are best completed one at a time with care and attention. Also, present-tense awareness is necessary to experience enjoyment, meaning and value. Studies show that when we are more mindful and learn to do things one at a time, we actually tend to be more efficient, productive, and satisfied with life.



Wait! If I slow down, won't I feel worse?!

People often hesitate to move forward with mindfulness because they fear that building their awareness may make them more aware of their emotions and experience them more intensely.

While mindfulness may indeed bring to light some things you are avoiding or painful emotions you would rather not experience, if you practice mindfulness regularly, this will become much easier to manage. It is common for it to feel worse, before it feels better.

Through research and clinical experience, we have found that the long-term benefits of mindfulness outweigh the initial risk of feeling more uncomfortable and actually help people to better cope with future depressive episodes.

Through mindfulness, you will also begin to experience your life in more rich and interesting ways.

“I can’t control my mind!”

We often find that our minds wander. This may seem to be the opposite of what should happen while meditating or trying to complete a task. We go into something expecting to have “control” of our minds.

We know from research that we cannot completely “control” our minds, no matter how hard we try, especially when we are feeling depressed and anxious. Why do you think this is true?

One way to understand this is by understanding the biological purpose of emotions. Emotions and related thoughts are the way the body gets your attention so that you can protect yourself or stay safe. It tries to alert us to the possibility that something is dangerous, either “out there” in the environment or inside our bodies. So if we are paying attention to something that is not “dangerous,” the mind tries to distract us, making it very difficult to “control.” In fact, you may find that the more you try to control it, the more the mind tries to distract you!



Having trouble getting “mindful?”

Try this: pretend your mind is like a movie screen. You are sitting in the movie theater, observing what is projected on the screen, but you are not in control; you just watch and follow what you see.

Try closing your eyes and just notice what images, thoughts, or memories get projected on that screen. They may be related or not—whatever gets projected is fair game! If you start feeling attached to the content of the “movie,” just notice that attachment and then let the movie continue to something else.



“Why should I practice mindfulness?”

Mindfulness techniques are an important part of CBT for the following reasons:

-Trying to “control” the mind is a futile endeavor. In fact, trying to control the mind often makes us feel worse, because we keep failing at it! The first step to any CBT intervention is to stop trying to control the mind through force; only after we do this are we prepared to influence the mind using CBT skills.

-Mindfulness helps us practice observing but not reacting to our emotions. We learn to accept or tolerate these emotions, rather than trying to eradicate them.

-Mindfulness helps to retrain the brain; by experiencing emotions and not trying to fix them, we communicate to the emotional centers in the brain that they are not dangerous.

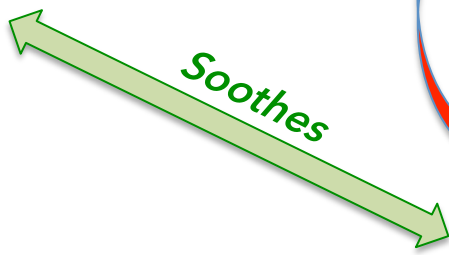
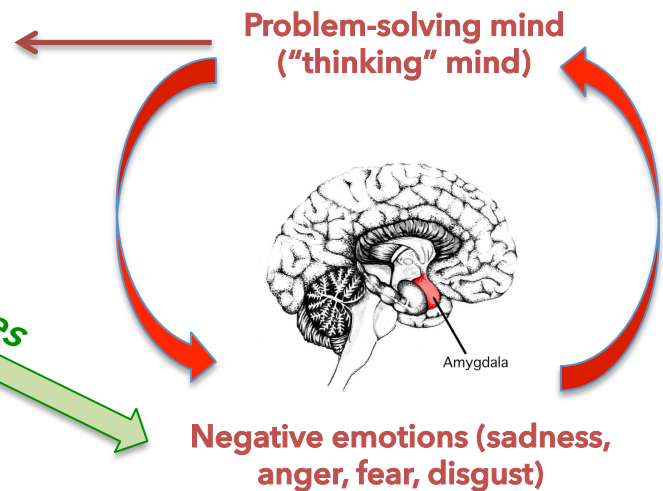
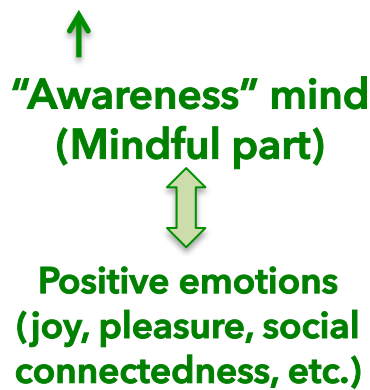
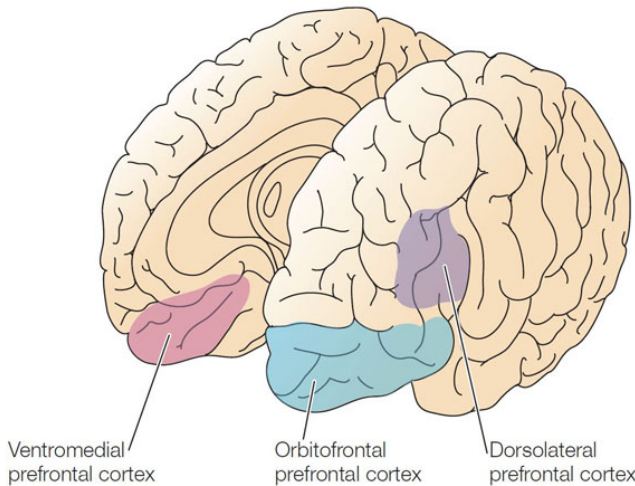
-When we stop and pay attention to the present moment, we listen to our emotional “alarms.” If we give it time and keep from “fueling” the emotions, the body can eventually learn that it does not need this alarm any longer, so it can turn it off.

Mindfulness is a practice that can be helpful in calming the mind by reducing our tendency to try to control it, which often makes our emotions worse. Mindfulness techniques focus on facts and objective information about current experiences, including emotions, thoughts, memories, and sensations. Our aim is to notice these experiences without judgment or any attempt to change them; we simply observe them, like clouds in the sky or the images on a movie screen. Mindfulness techniques are not likely to cure depression all by themselves, but they can be helpful if used with other CBT skills, and can provide a foundation upon which to develop these skills.

Mindfulness and the Brain

Neuroscientists have learned from studying the brain that different parts of the brain have different functions.

There are two different functional parts of our Prefrontal Cortex (our human, rational mind) that serve important, yet separate, functions. One is the “awareness” or “mindful” part of us; the other is the problem solving or “thinking” part.



The **ventromedial prefrontal cortex** (see diagram above) is currently thought to be our “**awareness**” mind. This part of the brain experiences things in the present moment, and is also connected with emotional centers in the limbic system. It is connected to and enables us to experience positive emotions. It also has the function of managing and soothing negative emotions.

When we practice mindfulness, we develop this part of the brain, along with other important parts such as the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC). Doing this can help us feel more positive emotions, as well as manage negative ones.

Sometimes “managing” negative emotions means learning to be more mindful of them and experiencing them more fully. This may seem unpleasant at first, but as this part of the brain grows stronger, it has the ability to soothe these emotions and calm them down.

The **dorsolateral prefrontal cortex** (see above) is our “**problem-solving**” mind, that uses memory to determine what has happened in the past, so that we can plan for the future. This is a very useful, important part of us!

Important to remember about this part of the brain is that it works entirely in the past and future, not the present. It does not have the ability to connect us directly with positive emotions, nor can it soothe negative emotions. It’s function is to take in technical information about the world and help us solve problems, either to protect us or reach important life aims.

Especially when it is particularly strong, the “problem solving” part of our brain often tries (automatically!) to fix our emotions by thinking. Unfortunately, it is not capable of doing so.

In fact, because it continues to focus on information about a negative situation, it can continue to trigger our “**amygdala**” (the emotional center of the brain), igniting strong emotions over and over. This is especially powerful when there is no possible solution to a problem. The problem-solving mind often doesn’t know when to stop trying to change the feeling this way, even if it makes us feel worse. Mindfulness helps reverse this.

Take home point: An important function of the practice of mindfulness is learning how to move away from the “thinking” part of our brain and into the “awareness” part, to strengthen the part of us that can experience positive emotions and soothe negative ones.

Being more nonjudgmental...



Humans are judgmental by nature. Like many other mammals, our brains help us quickly scan our environment and alert us to danger or potential harm. As an evolved species our brains have also developed a sense of what we like and don't like. This can be useful in a variety of situations.

AND...

Judgment, because it typically aims to focus on potentially negative information, can create more suffering in our lives.

With mindfulness, we practice the art of “non-judgment” and “non-reactivity.” This is typically not very easy, especially when the judgment is directed toward ourselves. As you will see in the Mindfulness Exercises ahead, much of mindfulness practice has to do with viewing experiences neutrally, as they are, without judgment.

For example, let's say you are struggling with a big project or assignment. You find yourself overwhelmed and frustrated. Because you are feeling overwhelmed and anxious, you might find judgmental thoughts pop into your head such as: “other people are probably having an easier time with this” or “I'm such an idiot because this is confusing to me.”

What started as one problem is now two problems, the difficult assignment AND feeling terrible about yourself— essentially kicking yourself while you are down.

Being less judgmental starts with just noticing these judgmental thoughts, not trying to push them away, but also not taking their message as ultimate truth. We are careful not to “judge” our “judgmental thoughts.” This can keep us from “fueling the fire” of our emotions by getting caught either battling or agreeing with these thoughts. It also could help us better manage the situation.

Consider: what are some non-judgmental ways to describe the same situation?

TRY THIS EXPERIMENT:

Use a golf counter or other device to keep track of judgmental thoughts. Keep a log each day of how many judgmental thoughts came up. Over time, your judgmental thoughts may go down just by increasing your awareness.

Mindfulness Exercises

Strengthening mindfulness takes practice. On the following pages are exercises to help you start your mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness Exercise #1: Observing and Describing

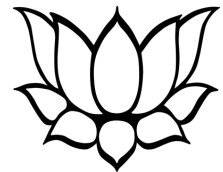
Step 1: "Observe"

Be aware of the tendency to start thinking, and bring yourself into the room. For about 10 seconds, just notice what is going on around you.

Step 2: "Describe"

Now put words to your experience. Focus on simple things, especially what you are experiencing in your senses. Do this for about 5 minutes. Notice how you feel afterward.

Examples: *"The room is cold."*
"My chest feels heavy."
"The coffee is bitter."
"This apple is sweet."
"I'm having judgmental thoughts about this meeting."
"I'm feeling excited."



Mindfulness Exercise #2: "Awareness" Mind and "Thinking" Mind

Take a moment to observe the photo to the right and then try this exercise:

"Awareness" mind: Just describe what you see in completely *objective* terms. Just notice colors, shapes, shades, etc. Write what you see here:



"Thinking" mind: Now notice the memories and thoughts that come up when you look at this picture. Allow your mind to wander as it will, and write down what "pops" into your mind as it comes up. Take 1-2 minutes to do this. Notice and write down how you perceive the difference between the two states of mind.

Mindfulness Exercise #3: Slow Diaphragmatic Breathing

You may have been told in the past to “take a few deep breaths” when you were feeling worried or upset about something. On one hand this is helpful to just slow down and cool off. However, altering the speed of our breath actually can slightly change our body’s emotional responses. **Slow diaphragmatic breathing** is a developed technique that involves slowing down the breath to communicate “safety” to the brain.

While we do not recommend that you use breathing techniques to try to eliminate emotions when you are feeling bad, it can be a way to get through a tough situation and calm the body some so that we can make a good decision about what to do next. Try the following exercise:



“Slow Diaphragmatic Breathing”

1. Sit comfortably in a chair with your feet on the floor. You can lie down if you wish.
2. Fold your hands on your belly.
3. Breathe in slowly and calmly. Fill up the belly with a *normal* breath. Try not to breathe in too heavily. The hands should move up when you breathe in, as if you are filling up a balloon. Avoid lifting the shoulders as you inhale; rather, breathe into the stomach.
4. Breathe out slowly to the count of “5.” Try to slow down the rate of the exhale. After the exhale, hold for 2-3 seconds before inhaling again.
5. Work to continue to slow down the pace of the breath.
6. Practice this for about 10 minutes.
7. This works best if you practice this two times each day for 10 minutes each time. Try to find a regular time to practice this each day.

Slow Diaphragmatic Breathing Tips:

1. The speed of the breath is more important than the depth of the breath. Avoid trying to “catch” your breath by taking really deep breaths.
2. Don’t use breathing exercises to “get rid of” bad emotions; use the breath to help get you through a tough situation, or practice it daily to “train in” a slower, calmer breathing style over time.
3. Practice! It takes time to learn how to calm the body using the breath.



Take home points:

Slow diaphragmatic breathing is one relaxation skill used in CBT. It is best used as a daily practice, like exercise, or as a way to get through a tough situation without leaving or making things worse. For best results, practice slow breathing twice a day for around 10 minutes each time.

Mindfulness Exercise #4: Mindfulness of the breath and “thinking” mind

1. Sit quietly with your feet on the floor, or lie down, and relax your body. Begin with some slow breathing into your belly. Focus your mind on your breath as it flows in and out of your nostrils. Continue to follow your breath to whatever extent you can.
2. As you breathe, notice the tendency of the mind to wander. Instead of trying to focus just on the breath, *just notice what the mind does*. It may wander to a worry, or a memory, or to what you plan to do later today. You may notice sensations in your body, such as a pain or itch. You may hear or smell things. Just notice whatever happens and then gently bring yourself back to your breath. You can remind yourself that you will tend to these other things later, and for now you will just spend time paying attention to your breath and to your mind.
3. Allow the mind to wander as it will, time after time. Avoid the tendency to try hard to focus on something. Simply allow your mind to wander and then bring yourself back to your breath. Notice the tendency of your experience to *change*. Imagine that each thought, sensation, emotion—anything—is like a cloud floating through the sky, soon to be replaced by another one.
4. Continue to practice this for about 10 minutes. Depending on your schedule you can add time to your practice if you want. Practice once or twice a day.
5. Remember that there is no “right” way to do this, other than to just notice whatever comes into your consciousness. It is impossible to “fail” at mindfulness—just let your mind wander!

Mindfulness Exercise #5: Mindfulness to Increase Pleasure

Being mindful of positive experience has a powerful effect on mood and anxiety.

Every time we slow down to really appreciate something that we are doing, we generate positive emotions. Though positive experiences on their own do not change depressed mood in a one-time transaction, the accumulation of positive experiences (because of being present in the moment) can drastically change how we feel over time.

1. Find something simple that you enjoy, such as a pleasant image, smell, sound, taste, or physical feeling.
2. Whatever you choose, spend 2 minutes experiencing it fully. If it is a picture, take in the beauty or interest of the picture, studying its detail. If it is a taste, smell, physical feeling, or sound, spend time experiencing it fully.
3. Notice how you feel emotionally when you spend time in this space.

Mindfulness Exercise #6: Mindfulness of Activities

Listening to music: Pay attention to the words and the sounds of musical instruments. Mindfully notice the emotions that arise as you listen.

Cooking: Pay attention to the steps involved in cooking. Slow down and appreciate the smells, physical textures, and movements as you put together your meal.

Eating: Slow down. Notice the textures, taste, and temperature of your food.

Drinking a beverage: Notice the temperature, taste, and physical appearance. If you are making tea, notice the color of the tea as it steeps into the hot water.

Taking a walk: Notice what it feels like while walking. If you are outside mindfully scan your environment for the sounds and smells of nature. Notice the temperature or any physical sensations.

Mindfulness Tip: When your mind drifts to any thoughts or images of the past or the future (or anything else), just notice it and bring yourself back to the present moment. Most of all, notice your judgments of your mind for wandering! This is normal, and we can practice bringing it back again, and again, and again....

Mindfulness Exercise #7: Mindfulness of Internal Experiences

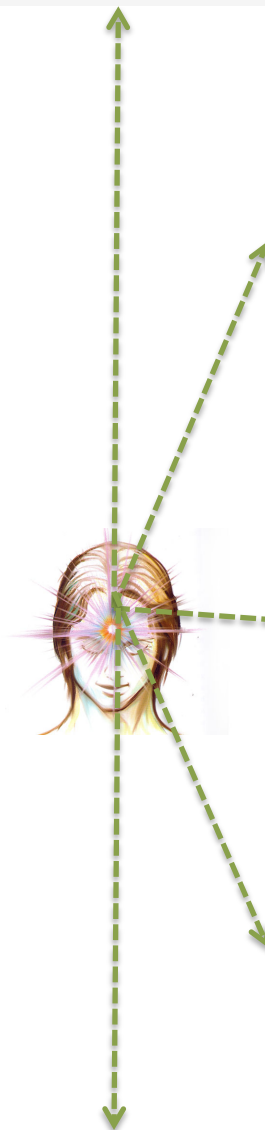
Thoughts: Just notice the activity of your “thinking,” “problem-solving” mind. Notice how it moves from one thought to the next, or spins on one thought for long periods of time. Don’t try to stop it; just notice it, as if you were watching a movie of your thoughts, one being replaced by another, over and over. Be curious and non-judgmental about the thoughts, remembering that they are just thoughts, not truth.

Emotions: Notice and try to label your emotions: “I am sad” or “I am angry.” Notice how the feelings actually have a *physical* component to them. For example, anger could feel like tension in the head and upper body. Sadness could feel like a welling up behind the eyes. Notice these physical feelings for what they are: feelings. Notice the thoughts and ideas attached to these feelings, then bring yourself back to awareness of the physical feelings. Remember that emotions are not truth, but temporary states of feeling that will change if we let them. Notice one feeling leading into the next.

5-sense perceptions: Notice sounds, smells, images, tastes, and the feeling of things. Notice each sense separately, and then focus on one at a time. If a perception is pleasant, savor the moment, experiencing the pleasure while it lasts. If the perceptions are unpleasant, notice the unpleasant perceptions without trying to change them.

Movements: Be aware of your movements. Slow them down and experience the feeling of your muscles as you move. Paying attention to your movements as you walk, Tai Chi, and yoga are ways to practice awareness of movements. As you are making breakfast, slow down and pay attention to each movement as you complete each task, one thing at a time.

Internal Body Sensations: Breathe and pay attention to internal sensations, such as pain, tension, internal movements (digestion, etc.) and other sensations. Notice how the body continues to do the work of keeping you alive. Notice pain and other sensations as signals from your body to you to listen to what it needs. Don’t react to these signals—just hear them and continue to notice as the sensations move from one to another. If one sensation stays for long periods of time, put your focus directly on that sensation, like a laser focused on a target. Breathe and just notice what happens, without expectation or judgment.



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