

1. WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?



“Mindfulness is the aware, balanced acceptance of the present experience. It isn’t more complicated than that. It is opening to or receiving the present moment, pleasant or unpleasant, just as it is, without either clinging to it or rejecting it.” – Sylvia Boorstein

OVERVIEW

In this module, we will cover the following topics:

- Definition of mindfulness
- History of mindfulness
- Benefits of mindfulness
- Kabat-Zinn’s 7 attitudinal foundations of mindfulness
- How to prepare for your first mindfulness session
- Your first exercise: Breathing mindfully

DEFINITION AND ORIGINS OF THE MINDFULNESS CONCEPT

An understanding of how thoughts and feelings influence our behavior has shown us that our worries about the future and past negatively influences our behavior in the present. Mindfulness counters this process by teaching us to focus on the current moment. It was famously described by worldwide mindfulness guru, Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003) as “paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment to moment”.

Although this description is accurate, you probably think it fails the average person test? It is because it is difficult for one word to translate an experience as powerful to help you become more focused and reactive in your behavior. Over the next eight modules we will introduce you to practical exercises that will let you experience the power of being mindful firsthand.

HISTORY OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

Although mindfulness as a concept has been around for thousands of years, its application in Western psychology is relatively recent. The word *sati*, which we translate ‘mindfulness’, means ‘memory’, and was originally used by Brahmins in the sense of memorized Vedic scriptures. To effectively recall large bodies of text, you get into a zone of clarity and presence, free of distractions. This was one of the influences in developing what we today call ‘meditation’.

Hinduism was the start of virtually all Asian contemplative traditions such as Buddhism, Taoism, Japanese Zen, and Tibetan meditation. The Sanskrit word ‘yoga’ applies to a wide range of these contemplative practices designed to unite the individual soul with brahman, which is often translated ‘God’. The Hindu yoga disciplines were practices from about 3,500 years ago.

When the Buddha adopted the Brahmanical usage, *sati* was used for the functions of both memory of texts and presence of mind in meditation. This happened from approximately 535 BCE and centered on seated meditation and mindfulness of breath exercises in a graded and intellectual system to directly perceive the truths of the body, feelings, and consciousness. In the 6th century the Christian contemplative tradition flourished with chants and songs to connect with inner experiences and God.

Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam developed its mindfulness tradition well after its foundation in about 610 CE with the advent of Sufism as the search for a direct connection to the Divine. But the main forms of the current understanding and practice of mindfulness in the Western world seems to derive from the four *satipatthanas*, or establishments of mindfulness. These constitute the ‘right mindfulness’ the seventh factor of the eightfold path. This is the foundation for Buddhist mindfulness meditation practice to attain the eighth factor of the eightfold path.

The eightfold path is described as steps in the way leading to the cessation of human suffering and the achievement of self-awakening. These are the Right view, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. Hereby insight into the true nature of reality is progressively developed and greed, hatred, and delusion is eradicated. Mindfulness, as a non-judgmental whole-body-and-mind awareness of the present moment, is at the heart of ending suffering and promoting healing and understanding. Buddhist practices constitute a discipline or process rather than a spiritual belief system, and it is this approach that Western psychologists have adopted.

Therefore, similar to ancient teaching, ‘modern’ (or secular) mindfulness reminds us of what we are supposed to be doing, allows us to see things as they really are, and to experience the true nature of all phenomena (Mace, 2008). In this instance secular refers to training the mind without involving religious or spiritual elements. Based on the individual preference and intention of the practitioner these can be added of course.

Consequently, there are overlaps in theory and practice between the traditional teachings of mindfulness and those in Western psychology, but there are also important distinctions, which will become clearer in subsequent modules. While it is also used to achieve a higher degree of non-attachment, of non-greed, and of non-illusion; briefly, those that serve to reach a higher level of being, the auto-suggestion inherent therein is utilized to induce relaxation or improve mood and behavior.

Right or wrong, mainstream psychology’s approach to mindfulness relies more on positivism and rationality, while challenging the certainty of knowing (Ie, Ngoumen, & Langer, 2014). There also seems to be a cultural divide between doing and being, with Eastern approaches focusing more on internal attitudes and ways of being as targets of self-development. In contrast, Western approaches emphasizes action as the fuel of transformation and developmental change. Western conceptualizations of mindfulness only emerged around the 1970s, primarily with the work of Ellen Langer. Her work was primarily framed from a social psychological approach rather than Eastern traditions. Such Eastern-derived approaches integrate both psychological and meditative elements and were spearheaded by Jon Kabat-Zinn in the 1990s. In comparison, Kabat-Zinn focused much more on meditation to achieve moment-to-moment awareness. During this course, we utilize both meditative practices and psychological principles of mindfulness to achieve personal growth and healing.

BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS

As we progress through the course, the specific benefits and application of mindfulness principles and practices are discussed in more detail in the areas of psychotherapy to relieve depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, and chronic pain, as an intervention for behavioral problems such as addictions, and to enhance the wellbeing and performance of kids, teens, and in organizational development.

By applying the ‘ABC’ of mindfulness, i.e.

- **A for Awareness**; becoming more aware of what is going on in your mind and body—thoughts, feelings, and behavior
- **B is for just Being** with your experience; avoiding the tendency to respond on auto-pilot and feeling problems by creating a negative story, judging, and hiding from experiencing life
- **C is for Seeing things** and responding more wisely; creating a gap between the experience and our reaction to it to make wiser choices

...we are generally better able to:

- Recognise, slow down or stop automatic and habitual reactions.
- Respond more effectively to complex or difficult situations.
- See situations more clearly
- Become more creative
- Achieve balance and resilience at work and at home

It is important to appreciate that mindfulness is for everyone—people with and without noticeable problems, people in therapy and those who wish to improve their wellbeing, lifestyle, and enhance their performance and experiences, and people of all ages, cultures, standings, and abilities. Mindfulness has moved into a mainstream psychological construct and practice with reported benefits in self-control, objectivity, affect tolerance, enhanced flexibility, equanimity, improved concentration and mental clarity, emotional intelligence, and the ability to relate to others and one’s self with kindness, acceptance, and compassion (Davis & Hayes, 2011). Selected practical examples of mindfulness-based interventions for clients are illustrated in Table 1.1.

Benefits	Practical mindfulness-based interventions to use with yourself or someone else	
Emotion regulation	“Can you stay with what is happening right now?...Can you breathe with what is happening right now?”	“What can you tell me about your experience right now? Notice any changes in your feeling, however subtle.”
Decreased reactivity & improved response flexibility	Slowly scan your entire body starting at your toes. Notice any sensations in your body without trying to change them.	Can you allow and accept this feeling and stay in touch with it without reacting to it? If not, what is happening in your experience that’s reacting to this feeling?
Interpersonal benefits	For couples: “Face each other, look into each other’s eyes and notice what reactions, feelings, and thoughts arise.”	For couples: “Face each other, look into each other’s eyes, and practice sending loving-kindness to one another.”
Intrapersonal benefits	Therapist and client can practice mindfulness meditation together during the therapy session.	Informal daily practice can include: walking and eating meditations, such as mentally saying “lifting...stepping forward...heel touching...toe touching...lifting...” when walking.

Table 1.1: *Examples of Mindfulness-Based Interventions for Clients* (Davis & Hayes, 2011, p. 199)

Another study by Keng, Smoski, and Robins (2011) at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina agreed that development of mindfulness brings about various positive psychological effects, including increased subjective well-being, reduced psychological symptoms and emotional reactivity, and improved behavioral regulation. It is described as a process by which we master and restore ourselves, by which we focus our minds so that we can live fully each minute of life. By facilitating adaptive psychological functioning we are more attuned to ourselves, others, and our environment, and therefore enhance our experiences and wellbeing.

Exercise 1.1

While thinking how mindfulness may benefit you personally, write down four typical improvements that people can expect.

Answers can be found at the end of the module

Now watch this video

All it takes is 10 mindful minutes [9:25]

Andy Puddicombe at TED Talks

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzR62JJCMBQ>



KABAT-ZINN'S 7 ATTITUDINAL FOUNDATIONS OF MINDFULNESS

To cultivate the power of mindfulness requires more than following a set of instructions or a structured recipe of exercises. Learning calls for much more than that. An attitude that opens you to attention and experiences in the present moment is necessary. This is based on an entire new way of looking at the world and yourself that uses a set of attitudes as the major pillars of mindfulness practice. According to international mindfulness guru John Kabat-Zinn, these attitudes are the following:

1. **Non-judging:** The first attitude required in mindfulness is to become an impartial witness to your own experience. This means to notice the stream of your mind that judges everything as good, bad, or neutral, but to let it come and go and just be aware of it.

2. **Patience:** It is to realize that things will unfold in their own time. Pressure and interference rarely helps. It means not to rush through every moment in the hope of better future ones—each present moment is your life. Accept its fullness and rich experience. The future will emerge when you're ready.
3. **Beginner's mind:** Our thinking and beliefs often get in the way of seeing things how they really are. It is an attitude of being willing to see everything as if for the first time; being open to new possibilities in each moment. Try it with everyone—loved ones, enemies, and strangers—and everything else.
4. **Trust:** You need to learn to trust your own feelings and intuition. Take responsibility for your own wellbeing and accept mistakes that you make along the way.
5. **Non-striving:** The goal of meditation is to teach you to experience, pay attention, and be yourself. Remove yourself from striving, yearning, and judging. Instead, focus on carefully seeing and accepting things as they are, moment by moment. As a result, movement toward your goals will come naturally.
6. **Acceptance:** The attitude of seeing things as they really are in the present is all-important to relieve any conflict and tension, and move toward positive change. Accepting yourself is a prerequisite for change. It does not mean that you should abandon your principles and values, cast away your dreams and hopes, or stop trying to free yourself from self-destructive habits and experiences. It is simply a willingness to see things clearly and without reservation. You will have a better indication of what is actually happening and what is the best course of action.
7. **Letting go:** It is another way for accepting things as they are, of letting things go while just observing. By letting go of the things that we cling to—desires, objects, possessions, approval, etc.—we experience what “holding” feels like and the influence it has on our mind and behavior. The opposite, letting go, is incredibly freeing and empowering.

Cultivating the seven attitudes of mindfulness enable us to experience each moment as it really is, both the good and the bad, while accepting it as it is without judgment. Not only is our adaptive functioning and resilience increased, but we experience life fully in the present moment, without getting stuck in the redundancies of the past and future.

Exercise 1.2

Select two of the seven attitudes required to achieve mindfulness that you think you may have the most difficulty with and describe in a few words how you may overcome the challenge with each.

Answers can be found at the end of the module

GETTING READY TO MEDITATE MINDFULLY

We will now lead you right from the basics through the practice of mindfulness exercises, starting with short and easy routines. Even if you have some experience or are a more advanced practitioner already, there is always something to learn, and a return to the basics will often rejuvenate your experience. To begin with, the most important is to find a comfortable position—sitting or lying down—and a suitable location without distractions.

You can sit any way that you prefer—a few common examples are illustrated in Figure 1.1—but be sure to align your body straight and open your chest for easy breathing.

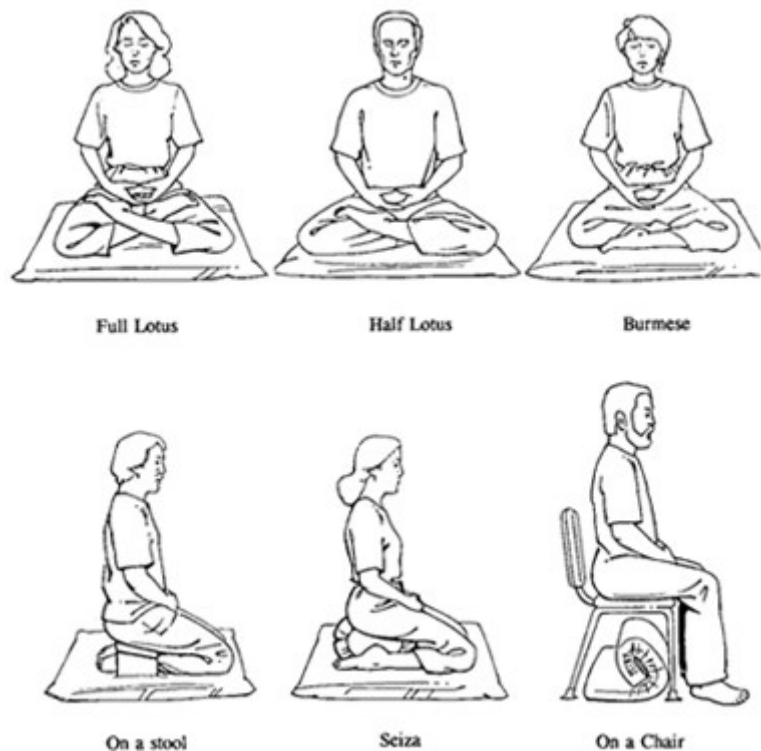


Figure 1: *Some Suggested Seated Positions for Mindfulness Meditation*

If you prefer, you can also assume a lying position, there are some typical positions illustrated in Figure 1.2. Use a cushion or any prop to relieve tension that you may experience, e.g. your back or legs. Become aware of your surroundings for a short

period, 10 seconds or so, before closing your eyes (you may also keep them half-open or closed if you like), and resuming with the exercise.

1. Sit on a mat in either a simple cross-legged position or in any of the more advanced yoga positions, such as half or full lotus, so long as remaining in them is not painful (see Figure 1.1). Keep your buttocks raised, relative to your knees; this helps to distribute your weight more evenly and makes it easier to keep your body in proper alignment. Use as many cushions as you need to achieve maximum comfort and stability. If you prefer, you can also use a lying position (see Figure 2).
2. Make sure that your body is both comfortable and stable and that you can remain comfortable in the position for the duration of the exercise. If you begin to feel any discomfort, take the time to rearrange your position.
3. Make sure your back is naturally straight, taking into account any curvature. You must feel comfortable and stable.
4. Relax your facial muscles, and set mouth, teeth and tongue and eyes in comfortable positions. Release any tension in your jaw and neck without slacking. Eyes may be either closed, half open, or even fully open—whatever feels most conducive for your ability to fully relax your body and mind.
5. Check your posture one last time for any trouble spots. If you experience any sign of pain in your back, knees, or legs, etc. early on you should choose another position.
6. Now catch yourself breathing, becoming more and more fascinated with the breath. Don't breathe in any special way, but just be aware of how the air feels in your nose, its coolness on entering and warmth as it exits.
7. Maintain awareness on breathing in and breathing out; begin to follow the breath more continuously. If it helps your focus you can say "breathing in" and "breathing out" or something similar. Think of your breath as something calm and peaceful that brings relaxation.
8. Now count 11 complete cycles of breath, maintaining continuous awareness of out-breath & in-breath. Repeat the process if you lose count. Don't force yourself to avoid thoughts, just keep at least part of your attention on the breath.
9. Now release your mind from any further chores other than maintaining awareness of the breath. Allow thoughts to come and go, don't hold onto them. Relish any pleasant feeling, but don't cling to it either. Just notice any changes in your breathing and mind. Don't expect radical changes at first. In fact, it is not unusual to feel a little disappointed, disheartened, or even foolish in the beginning. A deeper sense of calm and peace will come when you're ready.
10. You are now ready and prepared to begin your planned exercise. Remember never to stop your meditation suddenly; always develop a renewed sense of your body gradually before reconnecting with your environment.

Don't expect to feel comfortable and focused right from the start. Getting familiar with the mindfulness experience is a process. Be patient and give yourself time to adjust to the new routine and attitude. Aim for it to become an active part of your life.

Expect some difficulties and discomfort at first. You may feel distracted, interference from your thoughts, and that you are not making progress. These are common feelings. Just aim to enjoy the experience of connecting with the present moment.



Figure 1.2: *Some Suggested Lying Positions for Mindfulness Meditation*

Now it's time to do our first mindfulness exercise!

MINDFULNESS EXERCISE: SIMPLE FOCUSED BREATHING

This week we start with a simple and short (6-minute) mindfulness exercise focusing on your breathing. The objective is to free you from worrying thoughts and feelings about the future and past by bringing your attention to the present moment. This will help you relax as you experience the sensations of your body as part of your environment.

Choose a private area without too many distractions where you can feel relaxed. Sit in a comfortable but alert posture. If you prefer, you can also lie down flat on your back; use a cushion or something similar to elevate your knees slightly to relieve any pressure on your back if needed.

Gently close your eyes. Take a couple of deep breaths, and, as you exhale, settle into your body, relaxing any obvious tension or holding. Then, breathing normally, bring your awareness to your body, sensing for a short while how the body presents itself to you. There is no particular way to be; just notice how you are at this moment.

This is a guided exercise; the audio file is available online at <https://goo.gl/6HZCwu>.

When the audio is complete, slowly bring your attention back to your environment, be still for a moment before opening your eyes slowly.

Do not be disappointed or worried if you have trouble relaxing or focusing at first, it is a common experience at first. Focusing on one's present moment experience might sound easy, but you may quickly discover that it is not easy at all! You may find that your mind keeps wandering off, that you are dosing off, or that you experience unwanted thoughts or feelings. You may also get distracted, get bored, or even feel a little silly or embarrassed. These experiences are all normal in the beginning. Just go with the flow and let them pass as they come and go.

We strongly suggest that you keep a mindfulness record by briefly noting the details (e.g. date, exercise, duration, experiences, and problems) of each time that you do a mindfulness activity. Keeping a record will help you see progress and remind you of details that worked better. We ask that you do the exercise at least once before the next session, but 2-3 times are even better

REMINDER

Have you completed the following exercises?

Exercise 1.1

Exercise 1.2

Tick each box when you have completed the exercises. Then you can move on to the next module.

SUMMARY

1. One definition of mindfulness is to pay attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.
2. The practice of mindfulness has its roots in Hindu teachings from 3,500 years ago.
3. Mindfulness concepts became part of more Eastern contemplative practices, starting with Buddhism in about 535 BCE.
4. Mindfulness is part of the Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path that culminates in ending suffering and achieving enlightenment.
5. The eight components of the noble path are the Right view, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.
6. Western psychology eventually incorporated the principles of mindfulness, with the main distinction the focus on doing and results instead of being and the journey.
7. Jon Kabat-Zinn introduced mindfulness meditation as a psychology practice in the 1990s.
8. In the past 20-30 years mindfulness training has proven effective in a wide range of psychological issues and personal enhancement and growth.
9. Some benefits are related to improved emotion regulation, better behavioral control and reactive flexibility, and inter- and intrapersonal gains.
10. The seven attitudes required to achieve a state of mindfulness are non-judging, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go.
11. Beginners of mindfulness meditation should aim to be as comfortable as possible, not expect too much, and let their thoughts and feelings come and go freely.

NEXT STEPS

Well done! You have completed Module 1.

Now continue with Module 2, which discusses the measurement of mindfulness ability and the mind-body connection.

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EXERCISE ANSWERS

EXERCISE 1.1. ANSWERS

While thinking how mindfulness may benefit you personally, write down four typical improvements that people can expect. These are some examples—can you think of others?

- Improved relaxation
- Less worry about the future and past
- Decreased anxiety and depressed feelings
- Better conscious decisions about your behavior
- Improved connectedness with others
- More vivid experiences
- Less urges and cravings
- Increased patience and acceptance
- Clearer thinking ability
- More tolerance for your own and others' mistakes
- Better emotion regulation

EXERCISE 1.2. ANSWERS

Select two of the seven attitudes required to achieve mindfulness that you think you may have the most difficulty with and describe in a few words how you may overcome the challenge with each.

These are some examples of how to cope with difficulties in achieving each of the seven attitudes required to improve mindfulness.

- *Non-judging*: Remember that nothing is absolute, black or white; there are often more sides to a story, and are we really in a position to judge? As long as we continue to strive toward our values, we can recover from our mistakes and move forward.
- *Patience*: It is a virtue to be patient and wait for things to assume their own rhythm. You will be surprised how everything ebbs and flows as it should.
- *Beginner's mind*: Curiosity and an open mind is the cornerstone of a learning experience. Never assume that you have nothing more to learn.
- *Trust*: Trust your feelings and intuition without judging or clinging to them. Accept a connectedness with everything around you; you are a part of its whole.

- *Non-striving*: Focus only on observing things as they are without needy clinging. Forcing things to go your way, or feeling unhappy if they didn't, rarely has good results.
- *Acceptance*: Be open and willing to see things as they really are. Accept that everything is not under your control or responsibility. Be prepared to make the best with what is available to you and that growing and learning is a perpetual process.
- *Letting go*: Holding onto things disempower you. Letting go resumes the natural order, which relieves the stress and burden on you to feel responsible for everything, even those things that you cannot change.