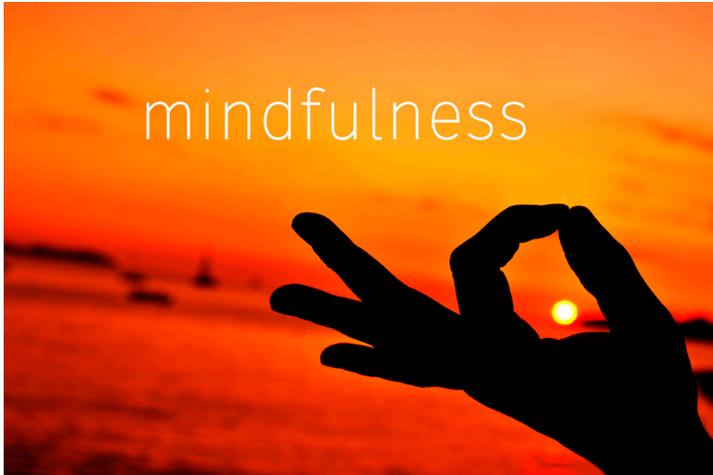


Benefits and Practices of Mindfulness

A Naturopathic Perspective



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Our lives are filled with a lot of “hustle and bustle”: commuting daily or travelling long distances, taking care of ourselves and/or others, keeping a schedule, getting work done, studying, training, raising kids, and trying to chase them down. Then we have the “electric circuit”: a vast electronic internet space with almost unlimited information, social networks, and instant messaging. We scroll through social-media sites and apps scanning for information—often as a distraction or to

soothe boredom. But when was the last time you remember truly being in the moment? When was the last time you were able to quiet all the thoughts racing through your head, quieting your inner voice, ignoring the past and future, and just allowed yourself to enjoy the present moment?

It happens way less often than it should. Many of us are so consumed by events that happened in the past or with what is coming in the future. We plan ahead, we worry about things happening, we try to predict situations. Other times, we might dwell on past experiences or exchanges. Something that happened in the past may still weigh on your mind. And many of these thoughts can keep us in a stress loop. We worry so much about the past and future that we forget to live in the present. I don’t mean “live in the moment” as a means of “seizing the day,” but in controlling our attention. This practice is known as mindfulness.

Mindfulness can be described in several ways, but ultimately is the self-regulation of attention^[1] and accepting the present moment nonjudgmentally.^[2] Originating from a Buddhist contemplative tradition, the intention is to accept the present moment with a curiosity and openness towards all aspects of that moment.^{[3][4]} This includes thoughts, feelings, emotions, and sensations.^[1]



Ordinarily, we can become trapped in a thought vortex spiraling away from us. One thought turns into an emotion; the emotion swells up and our thoughts follow it. In this way, mindfulness is a great way to calm those swells and can help alleviate anxiety. Practicing mindfulness is a means of practicing being in the present moment. With discipline, we train the mind to not think about “what might happen” or about things that have happened in the past that we still worry or stress over.

How often do you feel an emotional response from a past event? How often do you worry about something in the future? The emotions associated with worrying or regrets can lead to anxiety, depression, and chronic stress. Typically, that’s where we find much of our stress: in thinking about things we have to do, things weighing on our minds, deadlines to meet, running into people that we don’t want to see, situations that are uncomfortable. We can’t avoid these things, but we can change how we react to them. Practicing mindfulness can increase resilience to stress and reduce the reactivity to acute stressors.^[4]

In addition to focusing the attention on the present moment, mindfulness encourages a nonjudgmental attitude; letting go of our expectations and allowing what is to be. It’s not necessary to void the mind of the worry, but initially just to recognize that the worry is there. To not judge yourself for those thoughts and emotions, and to then bring your attention back to where you are in the present.

One exercise I often recommend to patients is to perform a self-check-in at least once per day. Remind yourself to check-in. Push a mental pause button on everything around you and ask yourself: “Body, in this moment, what do you need?” The answer to this question could be anything: food; water; a hug; a moment of silence; to have your shoes off; to wash your hands; or to talk to a friend, sibling, or parent. The purpose is to listen to your own body and mind, and find out if you’ve been too busy or stressed to meet your basic needs and to manage that stress. It is self-care in the most basic sense.

Mindfulness, like yoga, truly is a practice. It doesn’t often come naturally, and can take time. Habits are hard to break—but it can be done. Set a timer or alarm, mark it in your day book or calendar, or simply have a reminder; a place, an item, an activity that jogs your memory: “I need to do a check-in!” An example would be for those

who get stressed while driving, especially city-driving. I used to constantly catch myself clenching my jaw while driving. I would reach my destination, and everything from my ears, my cheeks, and my teeth would be aching. I realized I was clenching while driving and needed to stop. I practiced catching myself sooner. At each stoplight or stop sign I'd check-in, and bring my attention to the jaw. If I was clenching, I would consciously relax the muscles of my face and jaw, sometimes letting my mouth gently gape open and hang, and repeat this each time I remembered to. Remembering is part of the practice. Shifting the attention, even for a moment, is the practice. Not beating yourself up or judging yourself for the action (in my case, clenching), is part of the practice.

Being mindful is truly a control over the attention, and thus leads to improved self-regulation, including emotional regulation and self-awareness.^[1] In addition to reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and PTSD,^[4] studies have shown that this cognitive awareness can also reduce pain severity.^{[3][5][6]}

Ways to Practice Mindfulness

- 1. Sit Still and Pay Attention to Your Senses:** Sight, hearing, smell, taste, and bodily sensations. Focus on each of these senses without any judgment.
- 2. Mindful Breathing:** Your breath is always with you and can be used as an anchor. You can control it, change its pace and depth, or let your brain naturally regulate it. Allow yourself normal breathing, and just to pay attention to each breath in and out. Notice any sensations. Feel the belly rise and fall, as air flows in and out through the nose. Put your hand on your belly, and feel the movement of expansion on each inhale and contraction on each exhale. Elongate the exhales to slow down the nervous system. Anxiety can lead to shallow and rapid breathing, but a balance can be regained by practicing control.
- 3. Mindful Walking:** Described as “meditation in motion,” this practice can help with the awareness of bodily sensations while employing the feeling of being “grounded.”^[7] There's something to be said for having your feet literally on the ground. If weather permits, this exercise can be accentuated with barefoot-walking through grass.

The exercise encompasses attention to physical movements, as a form of mindfulness, coupled with the



psychological benefits of physical activity.^[7]

4. **Stretching and Balance Postures (Yoga):**

Similar to mindful-walking, flow and movement of the body with a focused attention promotes an awareness of the body's motions and sensations.^[8] Yoga is an excellent example of this, as each pose and movement incorporates attention on the breath and the body, whereas balance requires constant control and focus. There are many different types of yoga, and those who are new to the practice should start with a beginner's class or an "introduction to yoga" class to avoid injury and to gain further instruction on breathing techniques. Can't afford to join a yoga studio? There are a vast number of videos available, some of which are free online, to make your practice more cost-effective.



- 5. Body-Scan Meditation:** A body scan is a great way to connect to the body and mind. This type of mindfulness practice is best done when lying down, allowing the muscles of the body to be at their most-relaxed state. There are many audio files and apps that can guide you through the process. If you don't want an audio guide, you can practice the scan with your own mind: Start with a few mindful breaths, then bring the attention to your feet and toes. Slowly work one body part at a time, up the legs, to the pelvis and hips, the belly, chest, and back; to the fingertips, up the arms to the shoulders, neck, jaw, face, and head. As your attention moves slowly from one part to the next, focus on any sensations you notice. Locate any tension, and imagine it melting away. End by focusing again on a few closing breaths.
- 6. Mindful Eating:** Most of us eat several times per day, which makes this a great time to practice mindfulness, as you can do it with each meal and snack. Often, we are distracted during meals, whether with television, phones, or work. Mindful eating forces us to slow down and in such can help prevent indigestion, improve weight management (by preventing overeating), and to be more connected with what we put into our bodies. Simply give your food your full attention. Look at it, smell it, hold it in your mouth and enjoy its flavours and textures. Chew slowly, taking your time to enjoy each bite before swallowing.
- 7. Mindful Listening:** How often do you get wrapped-up in your own thoughts during a conversation? Are you ever itching to get something out while someone else is talking? Or perhaps your mind begins to wander, and you've disconnected from

the conversation. Mindful listening requires your full attention on the person you're conversing with. When someone is speaking to you, try to pay attention and not interrupt them until they have completely finished speaking. Notice if your mind starts to wander, be aware of it, and bring your attention back to listening. After the other person has stopped speaking, take a breath before you respond.

- 8. Mindful Emotions:** Create a "Thoughts, Feelings, Actions" chart. Take a moment to pay attention to what emotions you're experiencing. Be descriptive and use an "emotion" word bank (easily found via a Google search) to accurately describe what you're feeling. Next, write out the thoughts that have initiated or aggravated those emotions. What thoughts come to mind? And lastly, write out what actions you took because of those thoughts and emotions: Were they positive or negative? How might you change those actions, and what could you do instead?

The goal is awareness. Be aware of how things affect you, and become a better problem-solver; recognize how to approach situations differently. This type of mindfulness encourages the letting-go of automatic behaviours (panic, hurrying, etc.) and employs a cognitive way to approach difficult emotions or situations.^[7]

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