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Demystifying Mindfulness: Understanding This Valuable Mental Tool

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"Mindfulness" sounds mysterious, mystical, or esoteric. It sounds like a practice requiring years of meditation. Really, it's a simple, yet powerful, mental skill rooted in being aware in the present moment. That's it. At its core, mindfulness means paying attention to the sensory inputs of the present moment — deliberately and with acceptance of whatever goes through the mind. Bringing any focus on past or future back to the present. And letting it all flow through, mostly without latching on to thoughts passing through.

Mindfulness Helps Well-Being. Nearly five decades of research shows this skill reduces stress, improves emotional regulation, lowers reactivity to what happens in life, reduces psychological symptoms, and enhances overall well-being (Galante, Friedrich, et al, 2023; Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011). We even have research showing the use of mindfulness apps reduces negative thinking, defuses anxiety, and improves paying attention (Macrynika, et al, 2024.)

Scientific studies confirm that mindfulness can rewire the brain, strengthening regions involved in attention, emotional regulation, and resilience. By practicing mindfulness, individuals cultivate greater self-awareness and reduce automatic reactions to stress. It seems to improve brain areas for sustained attention and managing pain (Siew and Yu, 2023). Brain imaging studies show consistent effects in a few brain centers and the effect is significant (Fox, et al, 2016).

Mindfulness does not require sitting cross-legged on a cushion for hours. It can be practiced in a few minutes in everyday life— while sitting in a quiet place, but also while eating, walking, or even during a conversation. The key is to engage fully in the moment without distraction or judgment – to be fully present in the Now.

For example, in mindful eating, rather than eating on autopilot, savor each bite, noticing

textures and flavors. Mindful breathing simply involves focusing on the breath, the sensations in the nose, chest, and abdomen, so as to anchor our attention and cultivate calmness.

About Thoughts. One of the most common misconceptions is that mindfulness means eliminating thoughts. Some of the many forms of meditation aim to do that, to empty the mind. Rather, mindfulness teaches us to observe thoughts passing through the mind without becoming entangled in them. Rather than suppressing emotions or striving for a blank mind, mindfulness fosters an accepting and compassionate relationship with one's current inner experiences.

So, Why Do It? Ultimately, mindfulness is an accessible, evidence-based tool that anyone can integrate into daily life. Although it's valuable to have a daily mindfulness practice, you don't actually have to add a mindfulness practice to your busy daily calendar. You can practice it anytime you remember to take a few minutes to do a mindfulness exercise.

It is a practical tool that benefits anyone navigating the stresses of daily life. With all the online and TV content to occupy us and with distractions constant in our lives, and with demands upon us, our days seem to pass like water through our hands. Mindfulness offers a simple yet effective way to pay attention to our experiences. *We can cultivate mental clarity, emotional balance, and overall well-being.*

For the ordinary person, *mindfulness provides a way to manage stress more effectively.* Many people go through life on autopilot. They tend to react to situations without full awareness. This can lead to unnecessary worry, frustration, or emotional exhaustion. Mindfulness helps break this cycle by allowing individuals to pause, observe their thoughts and feelings, and respond with greater intentionality rather than impulsively.

Better Focus. Another key benefit of mindfulness is improved focus and concentration. Whether at work, school, or home, the ability to stay present with a task enhances productivity. It reduces mental fatigue. By training the mind to focus on the present rather than dwelling on past mistakes or future anxieties, mindfulness fosters a sense of control and mental clarity.

That's a key. Not living in the past or future, but in the Now, where we all actually live.

Emotionally, *mindfulness promotes resilience.* By observing thoughts and emotions without immediate judgment, individuals learn to manage difficult feelings more effectively. Since mindfulness encourages better listening, patience, and empathy, it can improve relationships.

It's Simple. Practicing mindfulness is simple and does not require major lifestyle changes. It can be as easy as taking a few deep breaths before responding to a stressful email, fully savoring a meal, or paying attention to the sensation of walking. For instance, when walking, instead of daydreaming, pay attention to the movement of knees in space, the touch of the feet rolling

from heel to toe, the sway of hands and shoulders. These small shifts can lead to profound improvements in emotional well-being and quality of life.

You can just start with the 60-Second Pause. Feeling overwhelmed? Stop for one full minute. Take a deep breath, notice the air moving in and out, and pay attention to how your body feels. Practice taking 2 or 3 times longer to exhale than to inhale. That's it. This tiny act of awareness helps reset your nervous system and break the autopilot cycle of stress.

Or, you can engage in mindfulness practices. A few of our favorites are on our website at <https://www.shorehavenbhi.com/mental-health-programs.php>. Click "Learn to Practice Mindfulness."

Follow Lisa's Story. "I Just Can't Shut My Brain Off." It was 2:37 AM, and Lisa was wide awake. Again. She had done everything she was supposed to—no caffeine after 2 PM, a dark room, white noise machine, valerian and melatonin tablets, even lavender essential oil on her pillow. But none of it could quiet the relentless loop of thoughts running through her head: work deadlines, a text she forgot to answer, whether she should start a new diet, and that embarrassing comment she said in a meeting last week.

Lisa's problem wasn't just insomnia; it was an overactive mind that never seemed to shut off. Like many of us, she was caught in *the trap of constant thinking, worrying, and reacting*, making it impossible to truly rest.

That's when she discovered mindfulness—not as some trendy self-help buzzword, but as a real, practical tool that helped her break free from the cycle of stress and sleepless nights.

She used an exercise to interrupt all the mental mess and to start focusing on every joint in her body starting with her shoulders on a pillow, elbows at her side, wrists with palms up, knuckles, then toes, ankles, knees, hips resting but tilted slightly to open the back, the support of the mattress on her torso and neck, the gentle relaxation of her mouth, forehead. She practiced letting every one of those thoughts – the ones she thought so important that she let them prevent her from sleeping – float out of her mind into bubbles that float away and vanish. She noticed the gentle rise and fall of her chest and the air flowing through her nostrils. After just 10 minutes, she felt more centered, more well-being, some relief.

That's mindfulness. In the morning, she practiced, letting the coffee remain on her tongue a moment before swallowing, just to actually experience it. She stopped eating mindlessly. Where she used to practically inhale breakfast as a means to an end, she took just a few extra minutes actually to experience it. Everything she did that morning, she took more notice of it.

It happened to be a cloudless morning, something she barely noticed before during her drive to work. By late evening, she felt more ready to go to sleep.

For Lisa, practicing mindfulness helped her fall asleep faster, but the benefits didn't stop there. She found herself less reactive at work, more patient with her kids, and able to truly enjoy her lunch instead of gulping it down while checking emails. Mindfulness gave her a sense of calm she didn't even realize she was missing.

Conclusion. Here is a short mindful eating exercise.

Take a bite of something that can, in a sense, melt in your mouth. A piece of bread, a spoonful of ice cream, a couple of grapes. Eat that item quickly. Then take a second mouthful, but concentrate on it being in your mouth before you bite into it. Perhaps swish it around. Notice texture and taste. Bite into it slowly and consciously. Again, give your saliva time to work on it to release more flavor. Taking an entire minute to consume it before swallowing, notice how much more sensory experience you have with this food item than you normally do. All of life is a bit like that. Being mindful, we experience more sensory input than usual. And it feels like an enrichment of our lives.

In summary, mindfulness is not a mystery. We have some favorite mindfulness exercises on our website at <https://www.shorehavenbhi.com/mental-health-programs.php>. Choose Learn to Practice Mindfulness.

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