

Mindfulness Training

Mindfulness is a mental state of being aware of what is happening around you and within you in the present moment, such as your thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment (Gallo, 2016; Gunaratana, 2011; Kabat-Zinn, 2013). It can be practiced by simply paying attention during daily activities. Meditation, on the other hand, is a more structured practice. It usually involves sitting quietly for some time and focusing on something, like a particular object, thought, feeling, or activity. It can also involve observing thinking and feeling to train attention. Thus, mindfulness can be a component of meditation to help achieve a state of awareness. While mindfulness and meditation are related, they are distinct practices and part of developing your noticing ability.

Mindfulness is a component of the meditation exercises you'll practice to achieve awareness. You do not achieve awareness by talking about it. You need to experience it directly.

Concentration, relaxation, and patience are the tools for awareness (Gunaratana, 2011), but they are not the goal.

In the exercises, you'll focus your attention on breathing. It requires minimal effort from your mind. Breathing is something you can experience directly without a need for thought. It is a present-moment process. That is, breathing always occurs in the here and now. Paying attention fully to your breath can pull you out of being caught up in remembering the past or imagining the future and into the here and now.

Besides breathing, the exercises may also involve focusing on a particular object, thought, feeling, or another activity.

Now, maybe you're thinking, why concentrate on anything? After all, we're trying to develop an awareness of whatever happens around us or within us. Why not just sit down and be aware of whatever comes up?

Concentration is the tool for constantly focusing one's attention on one point. Without a fixed point, we might get lost in the constant waves of thoughts and feelings because our minds inevitably and repeatedly wander away to all sorts of things.

Breathing, for example, can serve as the point from which the mind wanders and returns. Breathing is the point at which to observe changes and interruptions that go on all the time as a normal part of thinking. After all, how would we know that our minds wandered away if we didn't have some point to return to?

Now, let's dive into the actual mental training. How do you practice?

When to Sit

Schedule a specific and regular time, make it fit your daily life, and keep to it. You may do it early in the morning or late in the evening.

How Often to Sit

Once a day is a good start. If you want to practice more, like in the morning and at night, that's okay too. Don't burn yourself out, though. Let your practice increase gradually and steadily.

How Long to Sit

The guided practice exercises available vary in time and are less than 20 minutes long, which most beginners may start doing. As you increase your practice, you may gradually extend your sitting.

To sit for longer than 20 minutes or at any time, you may listen to the non-guided exercise that provides basic instructions to follow and set a timer to signal the end of practice. A watch or phone can help time your session. Another option is to memorize the basic instructions beforehand and then just sit.

As a rule of thumb, determine the time before you sit, make it comfortable for that moment, and stick to it. Be realistic.

As your interest and practice grow, you may spend more time practicing. Experienced practitioners might sit more than once daily for more than one hour. They enjoy it and still get things done in their daily lives. Sitting becomes natural.

In the long run, there is no ideal length of time to sit. Practice as long and as often as you want.

How to Sit

A few positions or postures can help you pay attention to what your mind does and speed up your progress toward awareness. These postures are practice aids, so don't confuse them with sitting in a specific position to practice.

What you sit on is also important. You will need a chair, preferably one with no arms, a straight back, a level seat, or a cushion or bench, depending on the posture you decide to use. Whatever you choose, you'll want to sit on something that's not too soft or hard. Sitting on something too soft might put you to sleep, and too hard might cause you pain.

Where to Sit

Set up the environment where you sit to be as quiet as possible. Hearing music or talking might be distracting to beginners.

Sit where you feel comfortable and in the same place every time to associate this spot with deep concentration and relaxation, which can help you quickly increase your awareness.

To sum up, sit where it feels most helpful to your practice.

How to Concentrate

Using breathing as the activity of attention, focus on the spot inside your nose where you feel the physical sensation of air passing in and out of your nostrils as you breathe through your nose. It might be just inside the tip of your nose or somewhere else. The exact spot varies among people.

When breathing, make no effort to regulate or emphasize how you breathe. This is not breath training. Just allow breathing to unfold naturally at its own pace as if you were asleep.

Progress in training involves momentary concentration because everything we experience eventually changes. For example, the print in a book fades, your body gets older, a sound hits your ears, and then silence. A thought pops up in your head, and half a second later, it's gone because another thought shows up, and then that one is gone, too, and so on. So, when you notice your mind wandering away, bring it back to your breathing or whatever you're focusing on. If it wanders away 100 times, bring it back 100 times. Each time your mind wanders is an opportunity to build your mental muscle to return to the present and pay attention.

Once you gain the ability to concentrate, you may go on to focus your attention on other things happening in the present moment. It could be the expanding and contracting of your belly as you breathe or the rising and falling of any thought or feeling.

How to Pay Attention

Pay attention with openness, allowing everything that arises; curiosity, questioning the helpfulness of everything; flexibility, observing without clinging to anything; compassion, being kind to yourself; and patience, letting everything unfold naturally (Gunaratana, 2011; Harris, 2009).

Now that we've briefly covered how to practice, is mindfulness training helpful? Scientific evidence shows that mindfulness-based practices reduce anxiety, depression, chronic pain, stress-related problems, substance use, high blood pressure, and other medical issues (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Moreover, they improve well-being, emotion regulation, and more.

Evidence also shows that brain activity associated with mindfulness-based techniques might be beneficial (Chiesa et al., 2011). For example, they might offer protection against cognitive decline with age and improve mental abilities.

In a nutshell, mindfulness training is effective. It has become a frequently studied topic that continues to show a wide range of benefits.

References

- Chiesa, A., Calati, R., & Serretti, A. (2011). Does mindfulness training improve cognitive abilities? A systematic review of neuropsychological findings. *Clinical Psychology Review, 31*, 449-464.
- Gallo, F. J. (2016). *A practitioner's guide to using the acceptance and commitment therapy matrix model*. Frank J. Gallo.
- Gallo, F. J. (2017). *Bouncing back from trauma: The essential step-by-step guide for police readiness*. North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Gunaratana, B. (2011). *Mindfulness in plain English*. Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications.
- Harris, R. (2009). *ACT made simple*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.

Disclaimer

The content in this handout is strictly educational in nature. We are NOT providing psychological services or medical advice or establishing a relationship of any kind, including doctor-patient or teacher-student. Please see our [Company Policies](#) for more information.