

Mindfulness



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Based on theory developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn (Mindfulness) and Marsha Linehan (DBT)

Mindfulness is a term many people have heard of, but have varying understandings of. Usually, we associate it with living in the moment, doing one thing at a time, and visualisation exercises. However it's a lot more detailed than that, and it is something we can all benefit from and apply to all areas of our lives. Apart from slowing down and appreciating positive experiences more, it can also allow us to attend to negative experiences more effectively, and manage difficult emotions and overwhelming thoughts in a new way. Rather than getting caught up in and overwhelmed by our experiences, mindfulness can help us create some distance and objectivity, and respond more thoughtfully and less impulsively.

Overview of what mindfulness is & isn't

To explain what mindfulness is, it's useful to begin with examples of what mindfulness is *not*. We are all pretty familiar with experiences of being non-mindful, such as eating dinner whilst sitting in front of the tv, checking our phones, and talking to the person next to us. Such instances of multi-tasking are common, yet they mean we never get to fully experience any one of those activities properly. We can easily get to the end of our dinners without appreciating the tastes, the sense of fullness, or the satisfaction of eating a good meal. We don't get to absorb ourselves in enjoying what's on television, or paying proper attention to the person next to us and what they have to say, missing the idiosyncrasies of the interaction and leaving both with an interaction less fulfilling than it may have otherwise been.

Another common example of non-mindfulness is the experience we have when driving. Have you ever noticed that you suddenly can't really remember the last few minutes of your journey; of how you knew which lights to stop and go at, or which turns you actually took to get where you are now? This is probably because whilst driving slightly automatically, your mind was elsewhere, thinking about various aspects of your day. Clearly, this is not ideal in performing either task well. It's also not very relaxing if your mind is constantly working and never gets a break. These both serve as good examples of what mindfulness is *not*. That is, doing multiple things at once without giving any one thing your full attention.

When this happens, you don't get to fully enjoy positive experiences. If you take a holiday to a tropical island, and your mind is thinking about all the worries back home, you miss out on so much goodness you can draw from your holiday. You also don't get to deal properly with "negative" experiences (although "negative" is a judgement which in itself is not a mindful thought... we'll get to that). What this means is if you are trying to think through some problems or worries whilst doing a whole lot of other things, you don't do those well either! If you are going to think about problems, give them your full attention. How often do you find that worries or stresses just go around and around your head repeatedly, without ever reaching a proper resolution or outcome? Doing multiple things at once is often inefficient.

Lots of us may find that we currently struggle to do just one thing at a time. For example, if we make time to sit down and relax or watch tv, our mind often tells us that we are being "lazy", "wasting time", or "should" be doing something. We often respond instinctively and impulsively to these thoughts, because they produce a sense of guilt or anxiety, which we don't like, and so our relaxation time is

short-lived. Mindfulness helps us to notice these thoughts pop into our minds, without acting on them. This may sound very unpleasant, but with practice, mindfulness allows you to leave these thoughts to come and go in the back of your minds, and sit with a degree of discomfort. Eventually, you'll find that these thoughts and feelings actually lessen in intensity – when you stop responding to, engaging, and struggling with them.

Breaking the definition down

However, mindfulness is about a lot more than just doing one thing in the moment. According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, a world expert in mindfulness, mindfulness is “Paying attention in a particular way: On purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally”.

That means that in addition to doing one thing at a time, you are dealing with things in the here and now; in the present moment. This is very relevant to a lot of the psychological distress we experience. When we feel low in mood, our mind often dwells on the past, and re-lives negative experiences. When we worry, our mind often focuses on things that may or may not happen in the future. Generally, neither of these things are useful, as we cannot do anything about them. Our engagement with them creates suffering in addition to the natural discomfort of the experience itself. We then get caught in struggles with these experiences, trying to alleviate our distress. Often, we suffer over things that haven't even happened yet or may not ever happen. Or we re-live distress from the past, that we've already lived, without actually changing anything.

The way we respond to our thoughts is really important. It's not the thoughts themselves that are necessarily a problem, but the way we respond to them, and choosing how to respond very purposefully is key. When we worry for example, we often try and stop worrying by trying to resist having the thoughts, or conversely, trying to think about them even more, in order to get rid of them or to solve them. This fuels them more and more, and they snowball. Mindfulness creates a way of responding to these thoughts and emotions differently, whereby we choose what we pay attention to, and notice them as simply being thoughts rather than fact. Mindfulness involves focusing not only on the present moment, and the thoughts coming in and out of our minds, but doing so in a purposeful manner. When we are being mindful, we choose gently but very deliberately where to focus our attention. Think about someone who worries a lot, versus someone who seems fairly relaxed for example. Both of these people have worries come into their minds. The only difference is, the more relaxed person has the ability to say “yep, there's another worry, I'm just going to let it be there and get on with my day”. The person who worries, on the other hand, thinks “oh no, there's another worry, this is going to make me feel really anxious, I better do something about it”. And so the struggle and non-mindful response begins, leading paradoxically to *more* anxiety rather than less.

The other facet of mindfulness in the definition above is being non-judgemental. This means that we learn how to see things as they are, objectively. As humans we tend to add a lot of judgements to things based on our previous experiences. We kind of have to do this, in order to function efficiently in the world. We can't evaluate everything as if it were brand new every time we come across it. If we are confronted with someone threatening, we need to pretty quickly judge them and that situation as dangerous, and react accordingly to keep ourselves safe. We don't have time to stand there and look at the situation fact by fact. However, judgements can also cause plenty of problems for us. We decide how we're going to enjoy a particular food before we even take a bite of it; what we're going to think of a situation before we enter it, or how we're going to feel about a person before we ever interact with them. We do the same with emotions such as anxiety and panic too. The mere presence of a trigger or a tinge of anxiety in our stomachs can be enough to set the spiral off, because we expect it to.

These judgements are all clouded by previous experiences or pre determined ideas that are not necessarily accurate or helpful in the present situation. This can lead to us responding in ways that aren't actually in our best interests, and missing out on potential opportunities. It can also lead to us misinterpreting comments from others, or reacting to situations based on our views and emotions impulsively, when we know that these are often not actually accurate indicators of what's really happening. For example, if someone at work says to you “I don't think you should be the one to lead that project”, you might automatically feel a flash of anger, thinking they don't think you are competent

enough to do it, and react defensively to them. If you're able to stop and notice your reaction, and look at it with interest, then simply observe the situation in front of you, other interpretations may open up. As it turns out, it could be that the person making this comment simply meant that they knew you were really busy on other projects, or that someone else really wanted to have a go at it.

Specific mindfulness skills

There are some particular skills of mindfulness that can be helpful for you to practice. And it's important to understand that mindfulness does take a lot of practice to get really good at. It's a muscle you have to exercise and build, as well as a concept that can feel a little abstract to begin with. Also remember that no-one is mindful absolutely all of the time! But to be able to do it automatically, and use it in particularly challenging situations as needed, you need to start small and use it often, building your understanding of and experience with this. Training your mind and your attention muscle takes work. The skills below are based on ideas commonly covered in mindfulness, but in my experience really nicely formulated by Marsha Linehan, who invented Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) which draws heavily on mindfulness skills as part of the therapy. DBT focuses a lot amongst other things on regulating emotions that are otherwise overwhelming.

Mindfulness components to practice:

- **Simply Observing.**

This involves simply observing an experience itself. I have found one of the best ways to do this for the sake of practice is to engage in a simple physical task, such as running your finger over the skin above your upper lip, and noticing the sensation. Quickly, our minds tend to add words and descriptions to this, such as "smooth", "rough", "tingly", which then takes us past the point of just observing.

One of the reasons for practicing this skill is because it's necessary in order to do anything else, that you first notice and observe something. It's also good to get practice at doing just this, as if you were a baby, where everything is completely brand new to you. As adults, we tend to skip over things quickly, thinking 'yeah I know what that is already'. In doing so we miss connecting with the basic core experiences in the moment.

Observing things is a good skill in helping you notice your responses to situations earlier on, before they get larger or overwhelming. As you become skilled at this, you can observe the processes within yourself – you can simply watch your thoughts float by without doing anything more.

Try to observe just what is fact, without adding anything further to it.

- **Describing – Non-judgementally**

This is the next step on from observing. Here, you can add words to your experience. However, this needs to be done in a completely factual manner. You might simply describe the features of an object in front of you to begin with. A good example might be a glass of orange juice. You would describe it as if you were an alien who had never seen it before and had no adjectives in your language to describe it. So instead of saying "that's a glass of orange juice", you might say that you see a hard, clear object, about twice as tall as it is wide, and circular in shape, which is holding a liquid that is orange in colour. Because when you're describing exactly what you see, you don't make any judgements or assumptions. You don't know for absolute certain that it is orange juice, just because it is an orange liquid for example.

As adults we often develop short hand to describe things. Again, this is something we do need to do to function efficiently in the world. At the same time, it means we jump to a fair amount of conclusions prematurely. Have you ever followed the comments on news stories on social media? People often react with strong emotions, having seen a few key features of an article, without realising a whole lot of the context and details of the story. This can lead to completely misperceiving a situation and responding in a way that is misaligned with reality. The same can happen to ourselves internally; when a worry thought enters our mind, rather than saying "oh, I notice a thought just entered my mind and my stomach tightened a little", we treat it as a foreign invader that poses a national security risk, and attack it in full fight or flight mode,

sending us quickly into a heightened state of anxiety. Thoughts are just thoughts; they are words that come into our mind; they are not necessarily fact. Next time you do something like spill a coffee on your pants, rather than going "oh, what an idiot!!", see if you can describe it more factually. "I've spilled coffee on my pants; that may be hard to remove".

- Participating fully

This involves a full and complete willingness to be in an experience, no matter what it is. It involves accepting that this is the activity you have chosen to engage in, or the experience you happen to find yourself in, and that's just how it is. Although we don't want to be in situations or experience emotions that we don't like, resisting things that are unpleasant are generally not going to make them any easier. Struggling less and fully participating may lead to surprising outcomes.

To gain a sense of what participating fully means in a general way, think of being a small child and running with full gusto into the playground, flinging yourself around the round-about with your hair flying in the wind and not a care in the world what anyone thinks; and not a thought about anything other than how that exact moment feels. Or, as a child or teenager, singing or dancing wildly to music in your room, when you know no-one is watching.

As adults, we often approach things with trepidation, caution, resistance or fatigue, and this not only limits what we get out of it but makes things much harder than they may need to be. We may force ourselves to take a break and have a day off, and then spend the entire day stressing about the fact we are doing this, which defeats the purpose and reinforces your idea that it's a waste of time. Rather, take the much-needed break and jump feet first into relishing the time. You'll get so much more out of it.

- Doing things one at a time

This was covered a lot above – but is important to note again here as a mindfulness skill that is useful to practice regularly. You can try this with any task – just do one thing at a time. Notice your impulses and urges to do something else, and gently remind yourself to stick to the task at hand. You can combine this with any one of the skills above – such as fully participating in whatever the one thing it is you're doing, or noticing (observing) all of the sensations in doing it.

Ideas for practicing mindfulness:

You can take the skills above and apply them to pretty much anything! The key principles are to start simple, with concrete, basic tasks, until you get a good sense for what this involves, then work your way up to applying it to more complicated things like thoughts and emotions. Also, to acknowledge that whilst practicing these skills, your mind WILL continuously wander. That's normal! Your job is to (1) notice this, and (2) *gently* guide it back to the skill /task at hand. You may have to do this dozens and dozens of times!

- Practice mindfulness with daily tasks:

- Brush your teeth or take a shower and observe the experience through your five senses. Gently guide your mind back each time it wanders – this will exercise your attention muscle.
- Go for a walk and notice things around you. See what details you'd ordinarily miss!
- Do one thing at a time – such as just eating dinner and doing nothing else! Observe all the tastes and textures.

- Apply mindfulness to your thoughts:

- Next time you are experiencing a slightly heightened emotion, stop and notice the thoughts coming into your mind. You don't have to do anything except notice them with interest: "Oh, there's a thought telling me that person upset me deliberately".

(Continued below)

- Apply mindfulness to your emotions:
 - Next time you are experiencing a slightly heightened emotion, stop and notice the sensations within your body – has your stomach tightened? Are your shoulders tense? Is your heart beating faster? Is your jaw clenched? Just observe these with interest.

Important notes:

When applying mindfulness to your thoughts and emotions, choose situations where you are experiencing *some* heightened emotion, but not a significant increase in emotion. Don't try to practice these new skills on situations you find very emotionally intense or overwhelming. Don't attempt to apply mindfulness to the experience of panic attacks without clinical guidance – e.g. from your psychologist.

The aim of mindfulness is NOT to make you feel relaxed. It's to obtain an awareness of all the experiences in a moment without adding to them or doing anything with them. You may well not feel relaxed per se at the end of a mindfulness exercise, and that's normal – although relaxation is sometimes a nice side-effect.

This overview is a basic overview only and is by no means comprehensive. The author is *not* an expert in mindfulness, however this is based on her psychological training and experience. If there are inaccuracies when compared with expert sources, please feel free to raise them so they can be addressed.