



Mindfulness

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### **The program**

Mindfulness practices, such as meditation, have become more mainstream in recent years. This training program introduces how mindfulness practices can be incorporated into one’s routine and help improve overall health.

We will discuss the following key topics related to mindfulness:



**Discuss** how stress affects our health and day-to-day lives.

**Learn** the meaning of being “present” and in the moment.

**Learn** the physical and mental health benefits of mindfulness practices.

### **What is mindfulness?**

### Mindfulness defined

The term mindfulness has a variety of definitions. According to the American Psychological Association:

“Mindfulness is awareness of one’s internal states and surroundings. Mindfulness can help people avoid destructive or automatic habits and responses by learning to observe their thoughts, emotions, and other present-moment experiences without judging or reacting to them.”1

Mindfulness is often confused with meditation. It is like learning to play the piano; we learn scales so that we can play a concerto. Too few scales and we can’t perform that concerto, and equally if we spend all our time just playing scales, we don’t achieve our goal of performing the concerto.2



Stop and notice where your mind is.

* Notice how you’re sitting and bring your attention back to this moment.
* At many times, our minds tend to wander. That is a form of mindlessness.
  + It is the same way as you may have noticed when I asked, “how are you,” our answers tend to be automatic.
* Mindfulness is the opposite of automatic; it is really paying attention to what we’re doing…

### Meditation vs. mindfulness

Though mindfulness and meditation are frequently associated with each other, they are different.

**Mindfulness is a quality; meditation is a practice3**

* Mindfulness is the awareness that one reaches through being present in the moment and paying attention to what is around them.
* Meditation is one of several techniques or tools that people can use to achieve mindfulness. It is also a technique available in other qualities such as calmness or restfulness.
* Mindfulness can be practiced anytime, anywhere, while meditation requires intentional focus.
* Meditation is an intentional practice, where you use focus to increase calmness, concentration, awareness, and emotional balance.

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### **The benefits of mindfulness**

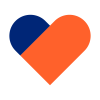
### Benefits of being mindful

There are benefits to mindfulness that cannot easily be measured. They include:

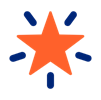
**Reduced stress**



**More time “in the moment”**



**Resiliency**



**Increased creativity**



**Lower burnout**



**Improved mental clarity**

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### The science of mindfulness

Researchers at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center’s Stress Reduction Clinic have spent the past forty years studying how mindfulness can have an impact on our overall health. Through this research, Dr. John Kabat-Zinn developed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which allows people to learn techniques to reduce stress and build their capacity to cope productively in successful situations.4

In addition to stress reduction, mindfulness can have biological improvements for those who practice it including:

* A reduction in anxiety and depression.
* The brain may be protected from declines due to aging after mindful meditation training.
* Immune function improvement may occur.
* Improvement in mental clarity and focus.
* Possible improvements in heart health.
* Sleep and overall mood improvements may occur.

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### Changing your “mind”

One of the big myths of mindfulness is that we empty our head of thoughts. It would be nearly impossible to empty our heads to get rid of thoughts. What we do instead is we use our focus to pull our attention to where we want to place it.

**Mindful**

**Mind full**

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**Enter notes here with ways you can move from mind full to mindful**

### Stress and its effects

Stress is found throughout everyday life. It can arise from the recent past and demands of the near future, for example: an upcoming deadline, a recent auto accident or something that went wrong on a project.

Chronic stress can result from ongoing situations or a trauma, for example: living in a war zone or surviving a natural disaster.

Finding ways to lessen our stress and better handle our stress benefits our physical and mental health. This can often be achieved through mindfulness.

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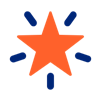
### **How to practice mindfulness**

### Daily techniques



**Meditation**

* + Find a place where you can sit quietly.
  + Find a time and setting that is safe, not when you are driving or attending to a task that requires your full attention.
  + Try to focus on your breath, breathing in/out.
  + Let thoughts pass through your mind without analyzing them as “good/bad” or “positive/negative.”



**Be present**

* Focus your attention on the present moment.
* Be aware of the environment around you: sounds, sights and touch.
* If you find your mind wandering, just quietly remind yourself to come back to the present.

Make time for yourself. You deserve it and you *need it* for your overall mental and physical health. Try any of the following:

* When you’re eating or drinking, slow down and notice the texture, smell and taste of what you are consuming. Take your time.
* During the workday, step away from your desk for a few minutes and just walk around your workspace or take a short walk outside the building, quietly observing those around you and your physical surroundings.
* Listen to music you enjoy while sitting quietly, try to focus on the music without doing anything else while listening.
* Take a minute to pay attention to your breathing. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Notice how you feel as you inhale and exhale. Try to sit for a few minutes one day and maybe a few minutes longer over the course of a few days and see if you feel different over time.
* Engage in rhythmic activity like dancing, running, swimming or another activity you enjoy. As you are moving, stay tuned in to how your body is feeling as you move. Focus on your breath as you move.

**Keep trying.** You may feel awkward at first or have a sense that you’re “not doing right,” but what’s important is that you are trying. Be clear with your intention, what you are trying to accomplish and why it’s important to you.

### 4-7-8 breathing exercise

When you feel stressed out, your body’s sympathetic nervous system takes over. That leads to what is commonly known as your “fight or flight” response. This response helps you when you’re in danger or in a situation that requires acting quickly. Too much stress can become chronic, and it can lead to serious health conditions that include high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, diabetes, depression, and anxiety.

A simple and helpful way to relieve stress is to try the 4-7-8 breathing exercise.

* When done properly, 4-7-8 breathing activates your parasympathetic nervous system. That decreases your heart rate and blood pressure. It can help you build resiliency and overall well-being over the long term.5

To practice 4-7-8 breathing:

* Get into a comfortable position, such as sitting up straight or lying down (when doing this on your own).
* Place the tip of your tongue against the tissue behind your upper front teeth.
* Slowly inhale through your nose to a mental count of 4.
* Hold your breath for a mental count of 7.
* Exhale – making a “whoosh” sound – through your mouth to the mental count of 8.

It is recommended to repeat the exercise for 4 breath cycles, twice a day.

As you learn to relax and control your breath with 4-7-8 breathing, your body will be learning, too. After a while, your body will get used to triggering the exercise when your stress level rises — to help you find calm.

### Slow-down strategies

There are times in life where you may need to call a **time out**. When things start of get out of control, sports teams call a time out in order to calm down, gain composure and think more clearly. Most of us do the reverse: we speed up and race around trying to get more done, often getting distracted and getting less done.

Think of the following suggestions as a toolbox of different methods that can be used to slow down, keep a productive pace and feel centered:

* **Stretch** - Stop to do a few stretches, it may help you feel more comfortable and energized.
* **Listen to your body** - Stop to check in with your body. Are your teeth clenched, your shoulders tight, your breathing shallow? Are you hungry or thirsty? Don’t override the call for help from your body with caffeine or alcohol. They may make you feel better for the moment but overusing them will decrease your ability to cope over time. Find time to stretch, breathe and meditate.
* **Meditate** - This involves a conscious clearing of the mind, silencing all the thoughts and conversations that we carry on with ourselves.
* **Exercise** - Find an activity that you enjoy: walking, running, dancing, swimming, anything that gets you moving. *Consult a healthcare professional before beginning an exercise routine.*
* **Take care of yourself** - Eat right. Get enough sleep. Take care of yourself by taking care of your health so you have the energy you need to enjoy life.
* **Breathe deeply** - Under times of stress we tend to take quick, shallow breaths, increasing the feeling of stress. Slow down and remember to breathe deeply, from your abdomen. Inhale, expand your stomach and fill your lungs completely. Exhale slowly through your mouth, trying to empty your lungs. Relax and repeat three to four times. If you begin to feel dizzy, stop for a minute and rest.
* **Set aside time to relax everyday** - If your meeting ended early, treat yourself to something at a local café, or do nothing.
* **Connect with a friend or loved one** - Spending time with those who emotionally support you makes a difference. Make time to talk to people you care about.

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### Self-talk

On a day-to-day basis, how do you talk to yourself? Are you self-critical, are you a perfectionist? Are you constantly thinking of the next task to do, what happened yesterday, what you need to do tomorrow, or next week? Do you find it difficult to concentrate at times?

The “commentator” in our heads can add to stress through negative self-talk such as:

* I must get this done.
* That was ok.
* I must tell them.
* I forgot to send the agenda.
* This can’t work.
* They haven’t got a clue.
* Why didn’t they listen to me?

Pay attention to how you’re talking to yourself and see if you can “re-write” some of your thoughts with a more positive focus. Instead of “I should have …” or “I should not have …”, focus on what you did do right or what you might try to do differently next time.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **My recent negative self-talk** | **Turn the negative into positive** |
| Enter statement 1 here | Enter positive statement 1 here |
| Enter statement 2 here | Enter positive statement 2 here |
| Enter statement 3 here | Enter positive statement 3 here |
| Enter statement 4 here | Enter positive statement 4 here |
| Enter statement 5 here | Enter positive statement 5 here |

By being more conscious of the present moment and in the present moment through mindfulness, you may become more aware of your negative self-talk and be able to “re-write” negative self-talk while it’s happening, so you can focus on positive self-talk and thoughts.

### Be thankful

We sometimes focus so much on what’s wrong that we don’t consider what is going right. Expressing gratitude forces us to look at the gifts in our lives, increases our appreciation for them and returns perspective to our lives.

Think about a 24-hour period and list three to five things for which you are thankful.

|  |
| --- |
| I am thankful for **click here to finish statement 1** |
| I am thankful for **click here to finish statement 2** |
| I am thankful for **click here to finish statement 3** |
| I am thankful for **click here to finish statement 4** |
| I am thankful for **click here to finish statement 5** |

Sometimes, we focus so much on what’s wrong that we don’t consider what is going right for us. Taking time to express gratitude makes us consider the gifts in our lives, increases our appreciation for them and helps us maintain proper perspective.

### **Employee Assistance Program (EAP)**

* Short term counselling and support for all employees and immediate family members (if eligible).
* Provided at no cost to you by your employer.
* Easily accessible, voluntary, and confidential in accordance with the law – service that can provide support for personal or work-related issues.
* Staffed by experienced professionals.

“This program should not be used for emergency or urgent care, call the local emergency services phone number, or go to the nearest emergency room. This program is not a substitute for a doctor’s or professional’s care. Due to the potential for a conflict of interest, legal consultation will not be provided on issues that may involve legal action against Optum or its affiliates, or any entity through which the caller is receiving these services directly (e.g., employer). This program and its components may not be available in all locations or for all group sizes and is subject to change. Coverage exclusions and limitations may apply.”

### **About professional support**

You may consider seeking professional support if you experience any of the following:

* Sleep problems.
* Performance issues at work.
* Relationship difficulties with family or friends.
* Loss of interest in hobbies you normally enjoy.
* Lack of care about normal everyday work tasks.
* Excessive anxiety or worrying more than normal.
* Feeling overwhelmed or sad for more than two weeks.
* A noticeable change in appetite, eating too little or too much.
* Behavior and coping methods have become harmful to yourself   
  or others, whether that is through aggressive behavior or unhealthy habits, such as drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs.
* Thoughts of harm to self and/or others. \*

Keep in mind some of these conditions may warrant more urgent professional help.

Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) is available to all employees and their covered dependents and may include some free counseling sessions per issue, per year. Please check with your employer or your health plan for details.

*\*If you or someone you know have thoughts about suicide or are in crisis, seek help right away. If you or someone you know is in immediate danger, call 911 — or go to the closest emergency room.*

### **Let’s reflect**

Take some time to answer the questions below using the “**Enter text here**” boxes provided to record your answers.

1. What is one thing that you have learned from this program?

**Enter text here**

1. What is one thing that you would like to research more?

**Enter text here**

1. What is one action that you will take when you find your mind wandering and would like to be more present or mindful?

**Enter text here**

### **References**

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