

Improve Psychological Well-Being Through Mindfulness



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When people adopt “full-catastrophe living,” as Jon Kabat-Zinn calls mindfulness, that shift has serious consequences for physical and mental health. Mindfulness-based programs have demonstrated effectiveness in improving psychological well-being and reducing psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addiction, post-traumatic stress)¹.

Mindfulness is defined as “the awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally”². Therefore, mindfulness skills lead to non-judgmental and non-reactive acceptance of all experience, which promotes positive psychological outcomes.

Some of the main ways that mindfulness works are by promoting attention regulation, body awareness, emotion regulation, and changes in perspective on the idea of a fixed and static self³. Other advantages include controlled exposure to anxiety-provoking thoughts, self-compassion, and acceptance.

Mindful-eating interventions, which promote a healthy and joyful relationship with food and body, have been shown to be effective in reducing psychological distress related to the cognitive, emotional, and reactive patterns of disordered eating⁴. These interventions can also contribute to reducing depression, anxiety, and body-image struggles⁵.



Some practical tools

Suffering is a common term to describe psychological distress, such as anxiety and depression. Suffering is a part of life, and as human beings, we cannot avoid it. However, we can learn to transform suffering into personal growth.

If you suffer from a mental health issue, you can easily get entrapped in an emotional and cognitive loop triggered by specific situations. For example, in anxiety disorders, the mind is mainly focused on the future, ruminating about the most catastrophic and embarrassing possible endings to the challenging situations that we face. In depressive disorders, the mind is mainly focused on past memories and negative self-judgment. In post-traumatic stress disorder, people re-experience the traumatic event (emotionally, physically, and cognitively) as if it is happening right now, even though it is only in their minds.

Mindfulness helps us to become aware that “*our mind lies*”, because not all of what we think and imagine is real, and most importantly it is not happening in this present moment! In other words, seeing things from a different perspective, or seeing things for what they are (a

thought is just a thought, not a fact), allows us to stop identifying so closely with the experience.

Six mindful steps to cope with challenging situations:

- 1. STOP** whatever you are doing or thinking about, and **CONNECT** to the present by making contact with the body.
- 2. OBSERVE** with curiosity your experience (what is going on in your mind, in your emotions, in your body) without getting engaged with it, letting go of any judgment or attachment.
- 3. ACCEPT and EMBRACE** your experience, without changing anything. You can only change your attitude toward what is happening, welcoming whatever is arising.
- 4. BREATHE THROUGH IT and LET IT GO.** Choose a place in the body where it is easy to follow the breath, and use it to pass through the distress. Let the breath flow naturally until you feel that the intensity of the discomfort is gradually decreasing.
- 5. MAKE AN AWARE CHOICE.** Now that you have expanded your awareness, you can make a wise choice about how to respond, instead of reacting on automatic pilot.
- 6. CONGRATULATE** yourself for being able to cope mindfully with a challenging situation.

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Meditation *on the Three Levels of Experience*

- Find a sitting position in a chair or on a cushion in which you feel relaxed, centered, and dignified. Allow your eyes to close if that's comfortable for you. Feel the boundaries and the weight of your body, the sensations of contact with the chair, the ground, or the body itself. Now allow your attention to rest naturally on your breath. The inbreath, the slight pause, the outbreath. Aware of the sensations in your nose, in your chest, or in your abdomen as the breath moves in and out of your body. Noticing that your body knows exactly what to do. Just observing the wave of the breath and the sensations of expansion and contraction any time you inhale and exhale.

- Staying with each breath as it enters and leaves the body. Each time you notice that your mind has wandered off the breath, gently letting go and bringing your attention back to the breath.

- When you feel ready, allowing the breath to fade into the background of your experience and shifting your attention to the sensations in the body. Noticing all the different sensations that may be present right now: sensations of touch, pressure, tingling, pulsing, itching, or whatever it may be. Exploring these sensations with curiosity and openness.

- If you experience particularly intense or uncomfortable sensations, bringing your awareness to these parts of the



body and seeing if you can stay with them, breathing into these areas and exploring with gentleness and curiosity the detailed pattern of sensations. What do these sensations really feel like? Do they change or do they stay the same? Is there a way to experience this discomfort without resisting or fighting it? Noticing any reactions that arise, and meeting whatever is here with kindness.

- Now allowing your attention to move from sensations to the awareness of thoughts. Seeing if you can notice the very next thought that arises in the mind. Then just watching each thought as it appears and passes away. If you notice yourself getting involved or lost in a thought, just observing that and gently and without judgment, letting go, bringing yourself back to the awareness of thinking. If you notice your mind

repeatedly getting lost in thoughts, you can always reconnect with the here and now by bringing your attention back to the breath. Continuing to practice observing thoughts as they arise and pass for a few more moments.

- Gently focusing your awareness from thoughts to any emotions or feelings that might be present. Maybe sadness, frustration, calmness, or joy. Whatever you notice. What is this emotion or feeling? Seeing if you can allow yourself to soften and open to this feeling. What does this emotion feel like? Where is it in the body? Maybe there are specific sensations related to it, such as a tingling or tension somewhere. Or maybe it's just a general sense in the whole body.

- Noticing and acknowledging what's there and letting it be.

- Now for few moments, allow yourself to hold the whole body in awareness: the rhythm of the breath, any other sensations throughout the body, any thoughts and emotions that arise.

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