

What is Mindfulness?

As you read these words, what is passing through your mind? Do you feel your body making contact with the chair in which you sit? To where is your attention going? Is it fully here, on this page, or is it also on your hunger or the air's temperature?

Mindfulness is a basic awareness that's available to everyone at any moment.

Mindfulness is about being aware of your mind in this moment, with a gentle acceptance of wherever that is.² If we are 1) aware of, 2) present with, and 3) accept this moment, then we are being mindful.

1) *Awareness* is the monitoring of one's interiority (e.g., feeling, thought, sensation) and exteriority (e.g., environment, tasks, others, relationship). *Attention* is the focusing of awareness, providing increased sensitivity to a specific scope of experience. One can be aware of something without it being the focus of attention.¹ When attention is extremely sensitive to something, where we tune out other phenomena, our awareness is like a laser. When we relax our attention to include as much of our awareness as possible, our attention is like a lamp, casting light in all directions. Lamp-like attention is the basis of mindfulness.

When our attention is relaxed noticing, we will become increasingly present, because our awareness is a limited resource. When the majority of our awareness is directed toward noticing many things instead of one, our attention has context; we feel less caught up in what feels like a major issue. When our awareness is directed toward this moment (i.e., sensations in the body, emotions, thoughts, external situation), less awareness is left to ruminate, worry, or project ourselves into the past or future.

- 2) *Presence* is attention to what is happening moment-by-moment. It could be described as a clear, rooted feeling of noticing *what is* in this moment. With it, the world can be approached with patience, friendliness, trust, and *nonattachment*—allowing things be as they are, free of striving for certainty and expectation. If we are mindless to qualities of this moment (i.e., not attending or engaging), we omit important information—from our external situation and within ourselves. When we mindfully attend to this moment, we will increase the possibility of noticing phenomena (e.g., empathizing with others, more useful ways of approaching a current situation, sensations, thoughts, feelings), we would have missed if we were less mindful. Therefore, we could say that being as present as possible will yield insight, self-understanding, and solutions that wouldn't arise in any other manner.
- 3) *Acceptance* is the intention of taking a receptive, nonjudgemental stance towards experience. *Nonacceptance* involves resistance, inaccessibility, avoidance, criticism, and rigidity. With acceptance, we acknowledge experience without attempting to alter or turn away from it. We may notice discomfort in the experience: “This doesn't feel good!” However, with acceptance we don't act to control, diminish, or remove the thought or feeling. Through acceptance, we become aware that resistance actually adds to our suffering. Buddhist teacher Shinzen Young offered this equation: $Suffering = Pain \times Resistance$. Acceptance is not resignation.³ Resignation means not fighting or resisting, but acceptance looks more like opening up to than giving up on life's possibilities.

1. Brown, K., & Ryan, R. (2003). The benefits of being present: Mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(4), 822-848.
2. Germer, C. K. (2005). Mindfulness: What is it? What does it matter?. In C. K. Germer, R. D. Siegel, & P. D. Fulton (Eds.) *Mindfulness and psychotherapy*. New York, NY: The Guilford Press.
3. Wilson, K. G., DuFrene, T. (2008). *Mindfulness for two: An acceptance and commitment therapy approach to mindfulness in psychotherapy*. Oakland, CA: Harbringer.