

Mindfulness: A Valuable Tool for Your Recovery Toolbox

by Rita Milios

What is Mindfulness?

The concept of *mindfulness* was popularized in 1979 as a stress reduction technique by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PH.D., a professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Kabat-Zinn developed mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) techniques as a way to teach patients how to better cope with stress, pain, and illness by changing their perceptions about moment-to-moment thoughts and feelings and by gaining greater control of where and how they focus their attention or awareness. For instance, patients were taught to acknowledge and accept all thoughts and feelings, but to avoid *judging* them.

Since Kabat-Zinn's initial work with mindfulness, which is based on Buddhist teachings and meditation practice, mindfulness techniques and mindfulness meditation have been incorporated into many mental health and recovery programs. Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention (MBRP) integrates mindfulness practices with standard relapse prevention strategies, including cognitive-behavioral therapy that teaches ways to cope with distressing thoughts and feelings and challenge self-defeating beliefs. Mindfulness-Based Therapeutic Community (MBTC) treatment includes the inclusion of mindfulness meditation and mindfulness techniques into the regular practices of residential treatment facilities.

What Does Mindfulness Do?

Pema Chödrön, a Buddhist priest and a leading teacher of mindfulness, says that with regular practice of mindfulness, one can achieve:

- **Mental Steadfastness:** If not sidetracked by dysfunctional mental habits, such as tuning out or using substances to escape emotions, the mind develops a greater capacity to hold itself steady over time.
- **Mental Clarity:** By calming the mind, greater honesty and less self-deception can be developed. Simply observing the mind's process and watching thoughts pass through leads to greater self-awareness. Emotional patterns and insights into their origin and reality or non-reality can be discerned.
- **Experiencing Emotions without Feeling the Need to Run Away:** By remaining open and curious about whatever arises in the mind, and neither pushing thoughts away nor becoming

overly absorbed with turbulent emotions, the need for negative evaluation is eliminated, and anxiety is reduced.

- **Attention to the Present Moment:** By choosing to focus on moment-to-moment experience, such as following the breath, a deeper appreciation of mind and body develops, such as the appreciation of one's own beating heart.

How Mindfulness can Help with Addiction

Mindfulness research during the past decade has concluded that mindfulness practices can change the brain, in both physical and psychological ways. Functional MRI studies, where brain activity can be monitored in real time, show that the capacity to pay attention and to process information is enhanced, while the “fight or flight” response is diminished. In fact, the amygdala, the brain structure responsible for the fight or flight stress reaction, actually shrinks with regular mindfulness practice. Regular mindfulness practice was also found to desensitize the negative impact of substance-using thoughts that contribute to cravings. With reduced cravings, addicts are able to be more accepting of themselves and their situation and to act with greater awareness, which often leads to making healthier choices. All these factors play a positive role in helping addicts avoid relapse.

One study of a mindfulness-based recovery program found that a mindfulness program was more effective than a traditional relapse prevention program in decreasing substance use and heavy drinking in a one-year follow-up. (*Substance Use & Misuse*, 4/2014).

Practicing Mindfulness

Mindfulness is both a mental discipline and an attitudinal perspective. It requires expanded awareness and genuine curiosity about one's self. It also requires self-compassion and a willingness to allow previously automatic, subconscious beliefs to emerge into conscious awareness, so that unhealthy judgments can be released.

To start using mindfulness, it is often good to practice *noticing* in a more mindful way. The exercise below is an example of a simple technique that helps you learn to notice more closely and to hold your mind *present* in the current moment, rather than allowing it to veer off into judgment, worry, or other self-imposed conceptions.

This simple exercise takes just a few moments. But with regular practice, it will train your mind to become more mindful and perceptive of *actual*, rather than perceived reality.

- Every once in a while throughout your day, simply check in with your mind and body. Focus only on yourself and what you notice in the current moment. Do you feel tension anywhere in your body? Are you tired, hungry, or otherwise out of balance? Is your mind racing ahead with thoughts, or are you calmly and objectively cataloguing the present moment? There is no right or wrong answer, no right or wrong way to be in the present moment. Whatever you are experiencing, simply notice it. Then close your eyes, take in a slow deep breath and slowly exhale. Return to your normal activity.

Over time, through this simple practice of noticing, you will gradually find that your body becomes more relaxed and your mind more present to the reality of the moment, rather than being distracted by internal thoughts or judgments.

A *walking mindfulness meditation* is another way to increase your awareness and hold your attention on the reality of the present moment.

- Start by focusing on one sense at a time as you slowly walk in a pleasant environment. For instance, starting with your sense of sight, notice everything you *see* as you walk at a measured, comfortable pace. Really *focus* on the objects that catch your attention. Look at them with the curiosity and interest that you might imagine a young child might have as they see each object for the first time.

After a bit, focus solely on what you *hear*. Listen intently for subtle sounds around you, such as the whistle of the wind, the rustle of leaves, or the sound of a siren in the distance. Then move on to your other senses, one at a time, and really notice what information they bring to your awareness.

Once you have grasped the idea of mindfulness, you can easily move on to practice *mindfulness meditation*, where you simply quiet yourself and notice what's going on inside your mind. An easy way to do this is to simply notice your breathing.

- Put your full awareness on each breath, as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. Notice how it feels for your lungs to expand on inhalation and your diaphragm to recoil on exhalation. Maintain an intentional focus on following and “watching” your breath. When your mind wanders, or thoughts intrude (as they will), do not be concerned. This is natural. Simply return your focus to the breath and resume your deliberate noticing of it.

Over time, using this simple practice, you will train your brain to achieve more calmness and greater awareness. Insights will then have an opportunity to “pop” into conscious awareness. If you then notice these without judging them, you will be on your way to gaining the awareness you need to free yourself from self-defeating assumptions and negative beliefs.

Adding mindfulness to your toolbox of recovery resources will be a positive strategy that will help you during your recovery and beyond.