

Using Mindfulness for Growth, Healing, and Change

Throughout history, human beings have sought to discover the causes of suffering and the means to alleviate it. Sooner or later, we all ask the same questions: “Why am I not feeling better?” “What can I do about it?” Inhabiting a physical body inevitably exposes us to pain associated with sickness, old age, and death. We also struggle emotionally when confronted with adverse circumstances, or with benign circumstances that we see as adverse. Even when our lives are relatively easy, we suffer when we don’t get what we want, when we lose what we once had, and when we have to deal with what we do not want. From birth until death, we are relentlessly trying to feel better.

Mindfulness is a deceptively simple way of relating to all experience that can reduce suffering and set the stage for positive personal transformation. It is a core psychological process that can alter how we respond to the unavoidable difficulties in life—not only to everyday existential challenges, but also to severe psychological problems such as suicidal ideation (Linehan, 1993), chronic depression (Segal, Williams & Teasdale, 2002), and psychotic delusions (Bach and Hayes, 2002).

Mindfulness is not new. It’s part of what makes us human—the capacity to be fully conscious and aware. Unfortunately, we are usually only in this state for brief periods of time, and are soon reabsorbed into familiar daydreams and personal narratives. The capacity for sustained moment-to-moment awareness, especially in the midst of emotional turmoil, is a special skill. Fortunately, it is a skill that can be learned. Mindfulness is an elusive, yet central, aspect of the 2500 year-old tradition of Buddhist psychology.

Through mindfulness, we develop “street smarts” to manage the mind (Bhikkhu, 2007). It helps us to recognize when we also need to cultivate other mental qualities—such as alertness, concentration, loving kindness, and effort—to skillfully alleviate suffering. For example, if in meditation we are being self-critical, we may want to add a dose of compassion; if we are feeling lazy, we might want to try to raise the level of energy in the mind or body.

Mindfulness alone is not sufficient to attain happiness, but it provides a solid foundation for the other necessary factors (Rapgay & Brystrisky, 2007). In the classical literature, mindfulness was usually discussed in terms of its *function*, not as a goal in itself. Mindfulness is ultimately part of a project designed to uproot entrenched habits of mind that cause unhappiness, such as the afflictive emotions of anger, envy, or greed, or behaviors that harm ourselves and others.

A stripped-down definition of “therapeutic mindfulness” that we and our colleagues at the Institute for Meditation and Psychotherapy find useful is *awareness, of present experience, with acceptance* (Germer, Siegel, & Fulton, 2005). These three elements can be found in most modern psychological literature on mindfulness. Other related shorthand expressions we might use for therapeutic mindfulness include “affectionate awareness,” “mindful acceptance,” “openhearted presence,” and “mindful compassion.”

To summarize, mindfulness is a practiced habit of increasing one’s awareness of automatic thought patterns that create automatic feelings which initiate specific behaviors, actions, or reactions that may not be based on all the facts of a given situation. Additionally, the practice of mindfulness of automatic patterns can lead to the discovery of unconscious beliefs that motivate the patterns.