

# What is Mindfulness?

Have you ever noticed that when you are doing quite familiar and repetitive tasks, like driving your car, or vacuuming, that your mind is often miles away thinking about something else? You may be fantasizing about going on a vacation, worrying about some upcoming event, or thinking about any number of other things. In either case you are not focusing on your current experience, and you are not really in touch with the 'here and now.' This way of operating is referred to as **automatic pilot** mode.

**Mindfulness** is the opposite of automatic pilot mode. It is about experiencing the world that is firmly in the 'here and now.' This mode is referred to as the **being** mode. It offers a way of freeing yourself from automatic and unhelpful ways of thinking and responding.

## Benefits of Mindfulness

By learning to be in being mode more often, it is possible to develop a new habit that helps to weaken old, unhelpful and automatic thinking habits. For people with emotional challenges, these old habits can involve being overly pre-occupied with thinking about the future, the past, themselves, or their emotions in a negative way. Mindfulness training in this case does not aim to immediately control, remove, or fix this unpleasant experience. Rather, it aims to develop a skill to place you in a better position to break free of or not 'buy into' these unhelpful habits that are causing distress and preventing positive action.

## Core Features of Mindfulness

### **Observing**

The first major element of mindfulness involves observing your experience in a manner that is more direct and sensual (**sensing mode**), rather than being analytical (**thinking mode**). A natural tendency of the mind is to try and think about something rather than directly experience it. Mindfulness aims to shift your focus of attention away from thinking to simply observing thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations (e.g., touch, sight, sound, smell, taste) with a kind and gentle curiosity.

### **Describing**

This aspect of mindfulness relates to noticing the very fine details of what you are observing. For example, if you are observing something like a tangerine, the aim is to describe what it looks like, its shape, color, and texture. You might place a descriptive name to it, like "orange", "smooth", or "round". The same process also can be applied to emotions (e.g. "heavy", "tense").

### **Participating Fully**

An aim of mindfulness is to allow yourself to consider the whole of your experience, without excluding anything. Try to notice all aspects of whatever task or activity you are doing, and do it with your full care and attention.

### **Being Non-Judgmental**

It is important to adopt an accepting stance towards your experience. A significant reason for prolonged emotional distress relates to attempts to avoid or control your experience. When being more mindful, no attempt is made to evaluate experiences or to say that they are good, bad, right, or wrong, and no attempt is made to immediately control or avoid the experience. Accepting all of your experience is one of the most challenging aspects of mindfulness, and takes time and practice to develop. Bringing a kind and gentle curiosity to your experience is one way of adopting a non-judgmental stance.

### **Focusing on One Thing at a Time**

When observing your own experience, a certain level of effort is required to focus your attention on only one thing at a time, from moment to moment. It is natural for distracting thoughts to emerge while observing, and there is a tendency to follow and chase these thoughts with more thinking. The art of 'being present' is to develop the skill of noticing when you have drifted away from the observing and sensing mode, into thinking mode. When this happens it is not a mistake, but just acknowledge it has happened, and then gently return to observing your experience.

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