

What Is Mindfulness?

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The opening to chapter five guided you in a simple breathing exercise that offered a glimpse of tension in your body. It states:

Before reading further, notice how tense your shoulders are. If the tightness isn't immediately apparent, take one long, deep breath, and as you exhale, allow the tops of your shoulders to drop and your arms to go limp. Did you feel the difference? Repeat a couple more times. It's surprising how much deeper you will fall into rest each time your breath is released. Next, notice your face. Chances are your forehead is

slightly scrunched, your teeth are clinched, or your eyes are squinted.

Relax the muscles in your face, as if they're melting or drooping toward the floor.

This exercise is handy for setting up a discussion on relaxation. It also works well to introduce the topic of this chapter, what is referred to as *mindfulness meditation*.

What is Mindfulness Meditation?

To answer this, let's separate the phrase in two: "mindfulness" and "meditation." Mindfulness

can be defined as purposely and nonjudgmentally paying attention to the present moment. Put another way, being mindful is living in the here-and-now. It is being attentive and aware of exactly what is happening. In the relaxation exercise listed above, you experienced mindfulness when you snapped out of your thoughts, and instead focused your attention on your shoulders. For a split second—before judging the tension, before recalling an injury, before resisting discomfort—you experienced pure, unadulterated mindfulness.

Numerous methods of meditation have been practiced over the course of human history, and many are still used today to achieve any number of purposes. Some are used for spiritual or religious devotion. Some are aimed at improving concentration. Some are simply for relaxation, and others attempt to create altered states of consciousness. Methods of mindfulness meditation, however, have a different purpose—to foster present moment awareness. Mindfulness meditation is any meditation practice that promotes mindfulness (awareness and attentiveness of the here-and-now). If it helps, think of mindfulness as a byproduct of meditation, and meditation as a way to generate mindfulness in all areas of your life.

What's the Opposite of Mindfulness?

As a human being, you experience two states of consciousness. You just learned a little bit about one. It's the focus of this chapter—*mindfulness*. You encountered this state when you focused your awareness on your body during the relaxation exercise. You were aware of yourself. You were attentive to the felt sensations in your body. You brought balance as you connected your mind with your body, if only for a brief moment.

Unfortunately, mindfulness is not the typical human experience. If you're like most, you only pay close attention to your body and your surroundings during unusually beautiful or traumatic events.

Instead, you spend the majority of your time in a state of *mindlessness*—the opposite of mindfulness. This term is not used in regard to stupidity or dimwittedness. Rather, it means existing solely in your head, being led by the current of your thoughts, believing whatever your thoughts tell you, and maneuvering through life on autopilot. It is the state that prevented you from noticing the tension in your shoulders. Mind/essness is a distracting condition that inhibits you from paying attention to reality as it unfolds. Instead, you fixate on thoughts that project a mere image of reality that is usually distorted or fictional.

It's impossible to be present in your day-to-day when your mind/ess mind is constantly somewhere else. It's like trying to watch a movie while babysitting a dozen children. You catch only bits and pieces of the story between changing diapers, breaking up squabbles, mending scraped knees, and answering bothersome question after bothersome question. With so many distractions, you miss crucial plot and character information. In order

to make sense of what you're watching, you recall memories of the bits you did catch, predict what you think may have unfolded, and fantasize about different endings you would both love and hate to see. This sounds frustrating, and a terrible way to watch television, but it's exactly how your thoughts sidetrack the majority of your waking life, and you don't even know it.

Three types of thoughts contribute to mind/lessness: (1) memories of the past, (2) predictions about the future, and (3) fantasies. Let's take a look at how these thoughts interweave in your mind, and act as smoke and mirrors to distract you from living mindfully:

Memories of the past. Memories are essential. Without them, you would not be able to make decisions, or interpret information about your environment. Though they have a purpose, memories can lead to a mind/less state if they repeat excessively, and distort over time.

Feedback loops. If you've ever been to a concert, you've certainly heard the annoying, ear-pi

ercing sound of a microphone that's turned up too loud. It squeals and screeches, while you in the crowd grumble and glare back to the sound

booth for someone to fix the shrill before your hearing is damaged. This noisy occurrence is the microphone picking up the sound of itself, not just once, but countless times. It continues until it's overloaded by its own source, resulting in the ear-splitting racket known as "feedback." In much the same way, condemning voices, hurtful words, and visions of traumatic instances from your past repeat over and over in your mind, fighting for your attention. They grow louder and louder until you can no longer hear yourself think. Memories can be deafening.

Memories of your childhood. Your counselor may ask to delve into your childhood. There's a reason for this. A great number of theorists agree that childhood years are the most important to development. Much of the person you are was forged in the years leading up to adulthood. Now that you're older, all you have left of your younger years are memories—some good, some bad. Although, the bad are usually the most aggressive, demanding to be recalled much more often and more vividly than memories of good times. In fact, if you take a moment to write down your five strongest childhood memories, don't be surprised if some are related to death, abuse, or a broken home.

There's a problem with carrying such hurtful memories into adulthood. When you were a child, you viewed pain from a childish perspective. Now that you're an adult, you have a greater understanding of how the world works. Things that cause emotional pain to a child may be little trouble for a grownup. In this light, it may be safe to assume that many of your painful childhood memories are misinterpretations of things you simply weren't capable of understanding at the time. Even still, you've carried these troubling recollections into adulthood, and attempted to rationalize them by dwelling in the past. Inability to let go of a troubled childhood is common for most people, and has lead to a society of grownups who are little more than children emotionally trapped in adult bodies, attempting to solve adult problems from childish perspectives.

Tall tales. People love tall tales. Everyone has heard an example of a hunting story of the “one that got away.” Each time told, the animal grows larger, and the storyteller adds more points to its antlers. The brain is prone to embellish thoughts in an effort to retain memories. If instances are made larger than life, they’re easier to remember. This ensures that important events are successfully placed in long-term store, but does little to ensure the integrity of the story. It goes to show that what you recall as true may be a distortion of the truth, or a flat out lie.

Predictions about the future. The future has not yet happened. Many seem to overlook this fact. People spend enormous amounts of time, energy, and money betting on the future as the sole solution to their problems. This is a recipe for disaster considering that any number of unforeseen events could throw a wrench in even the most thought-out plans. You may believe in destiny. You may not. Either way you have to admit that the outcome of life is unpredictable and sometimes can seem ruthless. People spend their lives accumulating riches beyond measure only to lose it all for one reason or another. Life can strip more than just belongings or titles. Friends and family are also vulnerable to its uncertainty. Anything physical (possessions and

relationships) or emotional (dignity and courage) can be lost in an instant regardless of the amount of planning and safeguarding. *Chances are you have*

recently experienced a similar loss or discouragement that has led you to counseling and/or this book.

With such uncertainty, the future is no place to hang your hat—because it might not be there when the present catches up. This isn't to say you don't need to look ahead in life. You have to believe better days are ahead. Just be careful with your expectations. After all, you're dissatisfied with your current situation because things didn't work out the way you once planned or assumed they would. Let that be a lesson to you. The future can be a great source of disappointment if you arrive at your destination, not finding what you were looking for. It's good to set goals for yourself as you progress through counseling, although you should allow some breathing room for the future to develop. Don't be surprised if you grow in new and exciting ways you never would have anticipated before.

Fantasies. Another problem of mind/less thinking deals with frequently fantasizing about things that are contrary to your own circumstances.

Countless times a day you imagine yourself, other people, and other things in different situations. Sometimes you'll watch mental movies of yourself on great adventures. You might imagine yourself as a superhero, astronaut, rock star, Olympic athlete, or just somebody else. Often times, you fantasize about something you want, which leads to desire for things you don't have. We all think of things that are depressing, exciting, scary, disgusting, etc. The list goes on and on.

These musings are helpful if your intent is handling yourself better if a similar situation occurs. Even still, this is a slippery slope, especially if you linger on hurtful instances. You're liable to get stuck in a past moment fantasizing about how you would return pain on the person who wronged you, or imagining yourself in your villain's shoes, assuming to know the intent of the person's actions or words. This type of thinking is of no help to your healing. It will only lead to mental feedback loops and warped memories of painful instances.

How Do I Practice Formal Mindfulness Meditation?

At this point you may still feel a bit confused about what mindfulness meditation is. You've read our definitions of "mindfulness" and "meditation,"

but it's still not sinking in. To be frank, it won't until you try it. Meditation is one of those things that can't be accurately explained with words on a page. It's like riding a bicycle. You can instruct someone who has never ridden how to keep his balance, but that information is of no use on it's own. It must be experienced. It takes time and commitment. Mistakes have to be made. You have to develop a feel for it. This is why people say they “practice” meditation. It's an ongoing experience.

Several meditative techniques are categorized as mindfulness practices. Common methods include the body scan, sitting meditation, lovingkindness meditation, walking meditation, mountain meditation, and yoga. In this chapter we will review the body scan from chapter 5, and discuss the most common method of mindfulness meditation: sitting meditation.

Descriptions of multiple mindfulness meditations are beyond the scope of this book. This chapter is merely intended to get you started. A recommended reading list is provided at the end of the chapter if you're interested in furthering your knowledge about any of the aforementioned methods.

The Body Scan Meditation. The body scan is a technique geared toward establishing a connection with the body. It's a wonderful method for new meditators because it cultivates extended concentration and heightened awareness—both important qualities for mindfulness meditation. Here is how you practice the body scan:

Lie flat on your back or sit up straight in a chair. Your eyes can be opened or closed, which ever seems more appropriate. Allow your arms and legs to fall loosely.

Focus on your breathing at the point of your nostrils, or the rising and falling of your abdomen for a couple minutes.

Turn your full attention to the toes on your left foot. Notice any sensations. These could include sensations formed by contact with your socks or blanket if you are covered up. Feel your toes touching each other. This may create a tingling sensation. If you feel pain or numbness, don't resist the feeling. Simply observe it just as it is.

As you inhale, imagine your breath traveling from your nose, all the way down to your toes, and then imagine the air flowing back up

and out the nose with each exhale. Maintain your focus on your toes in this way for a couple minutes.

If your mind wanders, and you lose concentration on the body, that's perfectly fine. Noticing that you were not aware brings instant awareness. All you have to do is bring your attention back to the particular body part and resume concentration. If you lose focus 100 times, gently bring your attention back to the body 100 times.

Next, move on to the rest of the foot, and offer it the same undivided attention.

Continue this routine of concentration and breathing into each body part. A typical pattern is: (1) left toes, (2) left foot, (3) left ankle, (4) left calf, (5) left shin, (6) left knee, (7) left thigh, (8) right toes, (9) right foot, (10) right ankle, (11) right calf, (12) right shin, (13) right knee, (14) right thigh, (15) hips and buttocks, (16) abdomen, (17) chest, (18) back, (19) left arm, (20) left hand, (21) left fingers, (22) right arm, (23) right hand, (24) right fingers, (25) neck, shoulders, throat, (26) top of head, and (27) face. See Fig. 6.1.

Once awareness has been brought to your face, draw your attention to your nostrils, and focus on the sensations of breathing.

After a few moments, direct your attention to your body as a whole, and all the sensations that may be occurring.

When you're ready, you may conclude by opening your eyes slowly and expanding your awareness to the room around you.

A fifteen-minute guided body scan meditation is available at counselingclient.com. It is recommended that you use an audio recording if you are new to the practice.

Sitting Meditation. Often referred to as “breath meditation,” or simply “sitting,” *sitting*

meditation is the heart of formal meditation. It can be done in a chair or on the floor. Sitting on the floor is often preferred due to its reassuring feeling of being “grounded.” It’s not what you sit on, however, that counts. It’s all about your sincerity to practice.

Posture is important. Your back, neck, and head should be straight, aligned vertically in a position that embodies dignity. Your shoulders and

arms should be relaxed, and your hands should be in a comfortable, supported position, perhaps on your knees or in your lap. See Fig. 6.2.

Unlike the body scan, which moves attention through the body, the primary object of focus is always your breath. You're now ready to begin:

Sit comfortably in your chair, or on your cushion. Experiment with your posture until your spine and head feel aligned, and you feel a sense of dignity. If you're on the floor, try choosing a cushion that lifts you 4-6 inches off the ground. This helps align the spine more effortlessly, and ease back pain.

Begin breathing normally. Don't alter your breath in anyway. As you breathe, notice where the strongest sensations occur, and make that point your primary object of focus. It may be at the tip of your nostrils, your chest, or your abdomen.

Observe the breath as it flows in and out. Give full attention to each inhalation, and the slight pause that occurs at the peak of each in breath. Next, direct your full attention to each exhalation, as well as

the pause that occurs just before your next breath. Repeat this pattern, considering each breath a new beginning.

If you notice that your mind has wandered, gently bring your attention back to the breath, as you take notice of what you were thinking about. Do this each time your mind wanders. Don't be discouraged if it happens a lot. It's perfectly normal.

A fifteen-minute guided sitting meditation is available at counselingclient.com. It is recommended that you use an audio recording if you are new to the practice.

What Are Some Common Distractions I Should Expect to Face During Meditation?

Here we discuss five physical and mental diversions you may experience while practicing any formal meditation. These are important not only for meditation, but also for your daily life, as any of these distractions can be experienced at any time, during any activity.

Aversion. Just as with life, you will encounter things you dislike during meditation, things you want to avoid, reject, or repress. The most common aversion is physical pain, while

others include uncomfortable emotions and even itching.

Mindfulness isn't limited only to optimal health and comfort.

Remember, the purpose of meditation is to develop mindfulness, to focus intently on the present moment—whatever that may be.

The present will often be painful. If so, temporarily make pain your object of focus. Direct your attention to how it feels, rather than what your thoughts say it should feel like. Aversion to pain is often more painful than pain itself. Instead of resisting physical pain, uncomfortable emotions, or a stinging itch, try to resist your habitual desire to make discomfort go away. Discomfort is a physical and mental state, and all physical and mental states are worthy of investigation.

Get to know discomfort better. Develop a new relationship with it.

Does it move around? Does it burn, or is it a dull ache? Does it pulse? Does it sting?

Perhaps you feel anxious. How does anxiety affect you physically?

Does it increase your heart rate and blood pressure? Where does it settle? In your chest? Your shoulders? Your jaw? Simply observe the

discomfort as it peaks and then fades. Eventually, it may even disappear. When it does, return your attention to your original object of focus.

Desire. It's typical to experience deep relaxation, euphoric sensations, and pleasurable thoughts while meditating. These gratifying states, however, should not be sought. Many people experience a pleasing state during meditation, and then try to achieve the same feeling next time around. This leads to mind/less thinking about memories of past meditations and fantasies about achieving a desired state. The purpose of meditation is not to feel warm fuzzy feelings. The purpose is to foster mindfulness of the present—even if you wish it different. Desire is a mental state, and all mental states are worthy of investigation. When you notice that desire has disrupted mindful attention, simply focus on the state. Notice its strength. Eventually, it will fade and disappear, at which point you can return to your original object of focus.

Drowsiness. Sleepiness is a significant issue for meditators. It's an occupational hazard. Just sitting still with closed eyes is enough to make most people nod off. This can greatly affect the concentration needed to remain mindful, and you may find yourself struggling to resist the feeling. The purpose of meditation is to promote awareness of the present moment. Sometimes the here-and-now is sleepy, and that's fine. Drowsiness is a physical state, and all physical states are worthy of investigation. Instead of resisting, take some time to get to know drowsiness. Often times, you will snap out of drowsiness by applying wakeful concentration to it. If, however, you find that you are fighting to stay awake, don't be afraid to sit or stand up, and don't meditate lying down if you're sleepy.

Restlessness. This is the most common distraction you will face as a meditator. Time and time again, thoughts will come to mind: "I'm ready to get up. I have things to do. How much time is left? Should I peek at the clock? I can't remember if I paid the power bill." Some days you will sit confidently with a tranquil mind, and some days

you will sit with a restless, unsettled mind that wants to be anywhere but where you are. Restlessness, however, is merely a mental state, and all mental states are worthy of investigation. Make it your temporary object of focus. How strong is it? Where does it set up shop in your body? Look for ways to encounter agitation. Watch it rise and fall. Eventually it will fade into the background, and you can return your attention to your original object of focus.

Doubt. At some point, you will be faced with thoughts such as, “What am I doing sitting here? Can this really help me?” These kinds of thoughts can quickly spread to, “Is there hope for me? Am I wasting time and money on counseling? Will I always be unhappy?” The mind is used to being in control, and it will do what it can to keep you from deviating from the habitual, mind/less life you typically live. Feelings of doubt are just a diversion your mind uses to keep you stuck in your head, and out of the present. When facing doubt, temporarily make it your object of focus. Doubt is a mental state, and all mental states are worthy of investigation. See it form,

rise, and fall. Once it's gone, return your focus to your original object of focus.

When My Mind Races During Meditation, May I Use Thoughts as My Object of Focus?

Calming your mind is no easy task. Some forms of meditation attempt to stop the mind from thinking. This is impossible, and not the purpose of mindfulness meditation. The purpose, always, is to be mindful of what is occurring in the moment, no matter what that may be. Let's say your mind is running amuck, and you can't seem to attend to your breath for longer than a couple seconds. In this case, thinking is what is occurring in the present moment. Therefore, make thoughts your temporary object of focus, and return to the breath once the mind calms. If you can't beat them, join them.

Thoughts are like children. They're capable of nasty things when left unattended. If a child craves attention, he'll scream, whine, throw tantrums—anything to be acknowledged. It's easy to be frustrated by such an annoyance, but it's not wise to lose control or leave him unattended. The louder you scream, the louder he screams back. Likewise, avoiding him only leads to more frustration, as he strives harder to get your attention. Peace

will soon return, however, if you just let him show you his toy, do his cartwheel, or tell you whatever he needed to get off his chest.

The same can be said for your thoughts. Instead of exhausting yourself trying to silence your mind or keeping your thoughts at bay, turn your attention to what your thoughts are trying to tell you. You may be surprised at how quickly they will calm. If you doubt this, close your eyes right now, and wait for your next thought to appear . . .

Did you notice how bashful your thoughts became all of a sudden? Chances are it took a while for a thought to finally appear.

Both of the formal practices discussed in this chapter require you to focus on a specific body part, or breathing. You may experience extended moments of mental stillness, but this tranquility is always short lived. Thoughts will eventually come pouring back into your mind, and your attention will be swept away. Soon you will become aware that you were lost in thought, and you return your attention to your object of focus. When this happens repeatedly, it's easy to get frustrated. Don't be. This is a crucial part of practicing.

As you bring your attention back to your object of focus, take a moment to acknowledge what you were thinking about. This will quickly reveal patterns in your way of thinking. You may realize, “Wow. I had no idea I thought about _____ so much.” Or, “Wow. I had no idea my thoughts were so negative and fearful.” Thoughts are not your enemy in meditation. Your goal is to mindfully attend to your object, but when mindfulness is lost, use the distraction to learn more about your way of thinking.

How Can I Develop Mindfulness Outside of Meditation?

Meditation is a wonderful practice, but its benefits will fade unless you commit to cultivating mindfulness into your day-to-day. To do this, you must snap out of mind/less thinking as often as possible, and live more intentionally in the moment. This can be done anytime, anywhere, by connecting with the here-and-now as intentionally as you do during meditation, and holding the focus. Physical and

environmental awareness can be strengthened outside of meditation any number of ways. Here is a list of recommendations to get you started:

Get dressed with your eyes closed.

Use your opposite hand when using a TV remote, dialing a phone, or brushing your teeth.

If you wear contacts or glasses, remove them when you are at home for the night and going about your nightly routine. Allow the decline of your sense of sight to enhance the others.

Prepare and cook your own food instead of eating out or picking up meals. There's a lot of beauty in a pot or pan of cooking food—thousands of bubbles from boiling liquids; vibrant colors of vegetables; steam rising up, almost dancing; warmth radiating from the stove.

Opt out of using your dishwasher a couple nights a week. Instead, wash your dirty dishes by hand. Focus closely on the warmth of the water, the suds on your skin, and the sweet smell of the soap.

A shower is a blast to the senses and a great way to clear your head. Next time you take a shower, give yourself over to the warmth of the water, the sound of the water spraying and gurgling down the drain, and the sweet smell of shampoo, conditioner, soap, shaving cream, and whatever else you may use.

Eat something you enjoy. Don't work while you eat. Don't read. Turn off your phone, computer, or TV. As you eat, slow down, mute your mind, and relax your body. Give your undivided attention to the movements of your arm slowly lifting the fork to your mouth, and your jaw opening and closing as you chew. Direct your attention to the taste, and savor each bite and the flavor it brings.

Do yoga. Yoga is an excellent exercise that is also great for body awareness.

Pick one thing you do everyday, something mundane that you take for granted like opening doors, sitting down, or shaking hands.

Designate such an insignificant action to trigger mindfulness.

Example: every time you open a door, give yourself completely to that moment. How does it feel to wrap your hand around the doorknob and twist? When you swing it open, do you feel a faint gust of air blow past you? When you close it, feel the vibrations in your hand as the door connects with the frame. Offer this kind of attention to whatever you choose. (By the way, you don't have to

act weird while doing this. You don't have to move in slow motion or anything. If you choose to designate opening doors for mindfulness, open and close them just as you normally would. The point is to focus on your body during the action, not to draw unnecessary attention to yourself.)

Go for a walk outside. Nature offers unlimited stimulants to direct your attention.

When you're speaking with someone, focus more on what he or she is saying and the sound of the person's voice rather than just daydreaming mindlessly until it's your turn to talk. Think before you respond. Offer kind, mindful dialogue.

Stop what you're doing right now and listen to the sounds happening around you. Do you hear a computer humming, kids playing in the distance, a television in the next room, or even the sound of silence?

Maybe you have a mind that prefers time traveling to the future. Or, perhaps you prefer keeping

an eye on what's behind you. If you're always looking down the road, or the way you came, for a solution to your current condition, a priority check may be in order. This is not to say there's anything wrong with looking ahead, or where you came from. After all, you're in counseling because you're dissatisfied with what you've already experienced, and you hope to become a stronger, healthier person. Just don't forget that what you do in the moment, the steps you are taking right now, determine your hope for the future. As you progress through counseling, try focusing more on taking each step, and less on the goals you've set, or the ones you've broken. Many clients are so fixed on what's ahead and behind that they don't realize their feet are sinking in the mire that is their current lives. Always remember, healing has less to do with beginnings and destinations. It's about the journey.

If you are interested in reading more about mindfulness, you may find the following books helpful:

Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind
to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness, by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Mindfulness in Plain English, by Bhante Henepola Gunaratana

Get Some Headspace: How Mindfulness Can Change Your Life in
Ten Minutes a Day, by Andy Puddicombe.

**The Counselor Column for Chapter 6: “What is Mindfulness?” by Mark
Carpenter, LPC**

As a clinical mental health counselor, I’m thoroughly impressed with the wealth of research that has been published about mindfulness. Time and time again, studies have reinforced the therapeutic value of mindfulness meditation—an ancient practice that has been used by millions of people for thousands of years. Simply put: it works.

Problems of life and mental disorders distort how you see the world. Mindfulness can realign your perspective back to the richness of the present moment rather than being misled by the wounds of the past and fears of the future. It’s amazing to me that most clients don’t realize they are lost in their thoughts. They blindly follow the scripts and lies of their minds. I love to empower clients by simply stating, “You can choose how to respond to

thoughts. You don't have to believe everything your mind tells you." For many, this is a life changing moment.

The best advice I can give to you, the reader, the client, is to practice on a regular basis. The benefits of mindfulness meditation can only be found from doing it. It's difficult to develop a routine. In fact, this is the most difficult part for many. I advise you pick a time and place, and practice as routinely as possible. And above all, remember: all you have is the present.

The Client Column for Chapter 6: "What is Mindfulness?" by Tyler Orr, NCC

In one particular session, my wife and I were at each other's throats. I was accusing her. She was accusing me. It was ugly. My counselor looked to me and asked, "What is she doing to hurt you *right now*?" I looked at her as I contemplated his question, and tried to come up with a way to accuse her. I remember her expression, beautiful and glaring with anticipation. I could find no fault in her in the moment. All my complaining was rooted in something that had happened days, weeks, months, and even years ago. "Nothing," I replied. He then made a statement that has radically influenced my frame of mind: "The only thing you can count on as true and perfect is the present moment." I don't think any sentence has impacted me more.

This simple realization changed my life. I never considered how unaware I had lived until that point. My mind/less thinking had nearly destroyed my marriage. I left that session with burning thoughts that have continually stoked my desire to live more in the moment, and less in the past, future, or fantasies. Mindfulness meditation has brought serenity to my life, and taught me more about myself than anything else.