

Coming Back to this Moment: A Taste of Mindfulness

By Dr. Richard Sears



Despite all the advantages of technology, we are too often living in a mentally created world. In our busy lives, our thinking minds are filled with ruminations about the past, or worries about the future. More and more, people are rediscovering the value of ancient practices like mindfulness, which helps us to tune into what is happening right now, in this very moment. Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment.”

You can directly experience mindfulness, even right now. As you are reading this, pay attention to your physical body. Most people only notice what they are feeling physically at certain moments, like when they are in pain, or when they are experiencing a particularly pleasurable sensation. Except for those practicing such things as dance, yoga, or martial arts, most of us tend to ignore the continuous signals our bodies send us. So right now, see if you can sense a specific part of your body, such as the right toe. Do you notice any sensations of pain, any tingling, any warmth, any moisture, any numbness? Is your foot making contact with a sock, shoe, or the floor? Notice if you are making any judgments or thoughts about what you are experiencing, and bring your awareness back to noticing just what is there, as best you can. You can shift this type of attention to any point in your body or do a quick scan of the entire body to see what you notice. Eventually, you can learn to hold an awareness of your entire body at the same time, rather than looking at it piece by piece.

Next, see if you can shift your awareness to any type of feelings or emotions that are present. Are you feeling a little happy, do you feel a sense of stress, feel any sadness, any sense of boredom, any excitement, or are you not noticing any particular emotion? Many people only notice their feelings when they are strong, not realizing that emotions come and go continuously throughout any given day, any given hour, any given moment. One way of preventing problems is to notice emotions as they rise and fall, rather than pushing down negative feelings until they become overwhelming.

Lastly, even right now in this moment, can you notice your own thoughts? Often we identify ourselves with our thoughts, so this may be more subtle and difficult to observe, but can you detect what thoughts are present in your mind? (If you have the thought that you are not thinking right now, that itself is a thought.) As you gain practice in this, you will begin to notice that you rarely have complete thoughts. Most people do not talk to themselves in complete dialogues. Thoughts come and go in bits and pieces, sometimes in images and impressions. However, all of these thoughts have an impact on your feelings, and even on your physical body, which may show up as a tendency to hold tension in certain areas.

By paying attention moment to moment, we break through the automatic pilot that we so often live in. By noticing our sensations, feelings, and thoughts, we allow ourselves more space to work wisely with them. While mindfulness is simple, it can also be quite subtle, and not necessarily easy. It takes practice to be able to sustain this type of attention, and to engage it even in difficult situations. However, it also allows us to be more fully present to enjoy the beauty in each moment as well.

5 tips for reducing stress using the mindfulness approach

1. Take a breath.

Too often, we rush from one thing to another, and barely take time to breathe. Intentionally breathing deeply for a few moments disrupts the usual pattern of stress, and refreshes our bodies.

2. Come to your senses.

If you are stuck in your head, worrying and thinking too much, bring yourself back into the physical world for a moment. Feel the physical sensations in your body, smell the air, gaze out the window, listen to some music, taste a cup of tea.

3. Step back.

If you get caught up in what you are doing, mentally pull back to gain a wider perspective on the situation. What is the “big picture?”

4. Watch out for judgments.

We frequently compare ourselves to some imagined ideal, which often creates unnecessary stress. Are you being unreasonably harsh on yourself, or creating a standard that is too high?

5. Re-evaluate your priorities.

From time-to-time, ask yourself, “Is what I am doing really all that important?” You may be surprised to discover how often the answer is “no.” Take some time to consider what is really most important in your life, and muster the courage to disengage from things that take away from your priorities.



Richard Sears, PsyD, PhD, MBA, ABPP, is a board-certified clinical psychologist based in Cincinnati, Ohio. He is author of several books on mindfulness, including *Mindfulness: Living through Challenges and Enriching Your Life in This Moment*. His website is www.psych-insights.com