

Does Mindfulness Really Work?

by Tamara Mortimer, M. Ed, RCC, CCC

Many practitioners in healing and mental health are now espousing the value and research-based effectiveness of mindfulness in helping people to **manage stress, reduce anxiety, deal with depression, and be better prepared for life's challenges.**

Mindfulness is a word that most of you have probably heard, but some of you may be wondering: what is mindfulness, exactly?

Mindfulness involves learning how to just BE WITH our experience, without judging it, or trying to change it.

Even if our experience feels highly uncomfortable (no one likes feeling nervous about a job interview, or angry at their spouse, or afraid of heights), if we can learn to observe ourselves, something about our experience will shift.

In the extreme, someone who is dealing with the symptoms of anxiety or panic attack knows that those feelings can be very physically uncomfortable and even scary. But what tends to happen with anxiety is that people begin to be **more afraid of experiencing the feeling of the physical sensations than the original thing they were fearful of**, and get anxious about that, which creates...well, more uncomfortable physical symptoms. Thus, anxiety can become a vicious cycle.

The actual problem in anxiety or panic then becomes AVERSION and AVOIDANCE of certain situations or circumstances because of fear of the physical feelings that arise in those situations or circumstances.

A way to help short-circuit this loop—whether one is feeling full-blown anxiety or just simple stress, fear, or anger—is to learn how to just watch and observe the PHYSICAL SENSATIONS.

Mindfulness involves practicing investigative, non-judgmental self-observation of your physical sensations, and emotions, and thoughts.

For beginners, or for people who are very used to living in their heads, thoughts can be extremely seductive. It can be really challenging not to dive in and follow them, so in my experience **it is best to go back to the simplicity of physical sensation.**

Often the simple act of observing ourselves while under stress can settle the symptoms too, although ultimately in true mindfulness this is not the goal—the goal is to simply accept WHAT IS.

This concept is a fairly radical departure from our mainstream Western approach which has taught us to control or try to eliminate symptoms—often through suppression of feelings, or with a trade-off of one set of symptoms for a bunch of side effects.

In contrast, the mindfulness approach (which is in line with many ancient traditions and their understanding of the mind) involves an attitude of living fully, having an embodied experience, and developing the ability to have **pain without suffering!**

Practicing mindfulness doesn't have to be about only unpleasant sensations either. For example, you can practice being mindful when you are hugging your spouse or your child by just letting yourself experience the physical sensations. This will bring you fully into the present moment, and helps you to better feel whatever is there.

In this moment, right now, you can choose to feel your legs and your buttocks against the chair, feel your breath coming into your body...take a moment to just BE with what is.

You can practice mindfulness in the morning and before bed as part of a meditation practice. **Stopping and practicing BEING--instead of DOING--is ultimately rejuvenating for the body.**

Ultimately, mindfulness helps us develop an open, curious, optimistic attitude towards our life experiences, which helps us to better learn, connect with others, and self-regulate.

We have to first get in touch with the sensations in our bodies in order to become mindful. To help your meditation practice, I have recorded a 9 minute body scan meditation which you will find on the [Articles & Audio](#) page. I hope you find it useful!