

Mindfulness Instructions

Mindfulness can be defined as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Mindfulness means adopting a new posture toward what you experience, whether inside of you or outside of you. Rather than pushing away thoughts and feelings on the one hand, or getting absorbed in them on the other, you are invited to merely observe them with curiosity and compassion. And rather than looking at the world through a filter of evaluation and interpretation, you are asked to simply make note of that filter and gently watch as events continuously unfold.

What to Do

These audio tracks can be used to support the development of an ongoing mindfulness practice, whether by practitioners, clients, or students. Each track is designed to build on the track(s) preceding it, so that by working through all of the tracks individually, or by listening to multiple tracks in succession, listeners can begin to build the skills of mindfulness and acceptance. The audio tracks are also accompanied by scripts, so that practitioners and instructors can use them to lead others in mindfulness practice if necessary.

To practice, start by finding a quiet place where you will not be disturbed and turn off your phone. Next, adopt a posture which facilitates being awake and alert. It is often recommended that you sit comfortably in a straight backed chair, leaving your arms and legs uncrossed and your feet flat on the floor—your arms can rest in your lap or on your legs. If you have experience with meditation and have a meditation cushion, feel free to sit on that. Next, simply follow the instructions on the audio track.

Audio Tracks

Introduction to Mindfulness

This is a brief introductory mindfulness exercise which provides basic instruction and invites you to notice your breathing, the physical sensations in your body, and other experiences. As you do this exercise, or any other mindfulness exercise for that matter, it is likely your mind will drift off. When you notice yourself drifting off, simply bring yourself back to focusing on whatever the audio track is asking you to focus on. You may have to bring yourself back many times. Doing so does not mean you are doing it wrong. Our minds constantly pull us out of the present. With mindfulness, we are merely practicing noticing what’s going on from moment to moment, and, as such, we can also notice that we have left the present and gently bring ourselves back.

You may also notice yourself feeling relaxed. This is a pleasant byproduct of mindfulness, but it is not what we are going after. And you may encounter experiences—thoughts, feelings, physical sensations—that you don't like. If this happens, see if you can simply observe them without trying to change them.

Breath Counting

In this exercise, you are asked to count your breaths as a way of anchoring your awareness in the present. To do this, simply count your breaths from 1–10, saying each number silently to yourself as you exhale. In other words, observe your inhalation and then say the relevant number to yourself as you breathe out. When you get to 10, return to 1. If you get distracted and forget where you are, return to the last number you remember and continue from there. This exercise is not about counting correctly or “getting it right.” It's about practicing turning your attention to what's going on in the moment—in this case, the movement of your breath.

Observe and Describe

Observing and describing are basic mindfulness skills taught in dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) and other mindfulness-based interventions. Observing is a skill inherent in all of these exercises, but describing is something additional. When you describe mindfully, you are invited to use words which are free from evaluation. Therefore, upon seeing a chair, you might say “I see a brown chair” instead of “I see an ugly chair.” Or upon feeling anxious, you might say “my heart is beating faster” instead of “I'm going crazy.” This language is different from the evaluating, predicting, and problem solving in which our minds usually engage. A good rule of thumb is to choose words that 99 out of 100 people having the same experience would use. It is just the facts, nothing more.

The Observing Self

This exercise is an adaptation of an acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) exercise designed to help you make contact with a sense of self which is stable and continuous. This self is different from the unending stream of thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations you experience throughout your life. It is also different from the roles you inhabit or the narratives you carry about “who you are” and “what you are like.” This sense of self, called “the observer” or “the observing self,” is not a self which is more true or real than any other sense of self. It is simply a perspective you can take to gain a sense of sturdiness in the face of whatever shows up inside of you. “The Observing Self” is not strictly a mindfulness exercise: though it incorporates an awareness of present moment experience, it also requires that you visualize thoughts and feelings you have and roles you inhabit.

Mindfulness of Thinking

This exercise asks you to become mindful of the parade of thoughts, images, and memories that your mind produces from moment to moment. Notice that from this perspective you are not your thoughts. Your thoughts are merely experiences you have—neither true nor false, right nor wrong. They are a stream of commentary and conversation you can step outside of and observe whenever doing so is useful for you. In this space, where thoughts are just thoughts, you are less beholden to the habits of your mind and the stories you tell about yourself.

Acceptance of Emotions

This exercise, like “The Observing Self,” incorporates visualization in addition to mindfulness. It invites you to willingly encounter an uncomfortable emotion and relate to it in a variety of ways: observe it curiously, imagine breathing in and out of it, make space for it, and so on. It is best to practice when you are experiencing something you would otherwise want to control or suppress: anger, anxiety, sadness, etc. When you practice moving toward—instead of away from—an emotion you would usually reject, the emotion begins to have less power over you. Remember: accepting an emotion does not mean resigning yourself to the circumstances which give rise to that emotion, especially if those circumstances are changeable. However, being willing to have what is already there inside of you, something that is simply an echo of your history in the present, can assist you in taking more effective action in your life.

References:

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994). *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York: Hyperion. “Acceptance of Emotions” is taken from *ACT Made Simple* (Harris, 2009) and is used with kind permission from the author. “The Observing Self” is adapted from “The Observer” in *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: An Experiential Approach to Behavior Change* (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), “The Observer” in *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy for the Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder & Trauma Related Problems* (Walser & Westrup, 2007), and “The Continuous You” in *ACT Made Simple* (Harris, 2009).