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5 Keys to Mindfulness

Strategies for living mindfully

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Mindfulness is a powerful tool that cultivates emotional awareness and enriches our ability to cope with difficult experiences. Decades of research support the use of mindfulness skills to reduce worry, stress, emotional reactivity, and rumination while improving working memory, focus, mental flexibility, and overall experience of well-being. Mindfulness practice also has been found to have long-term benefits including increased relationship satisfaction as well as numerous health benefits including improved immune functioning, executive brain function and reduction of psychological distress.

The five “keys” to mindfulness provide a guide to getting the most out of your mindfulness practice. Note that this guide is non-exhaustive. Mindfulness practice for the purpose of coping with intense or persistent anxiety or depression is most effective when used in conjunction with a qualified mental health provider or physician.

KEYS TO LIVING MINDFULLY

1	Recognize and observe
2	Exercise acceptance and non-judgment
3	Notice one thing at a time
4	Describe the present
5	Make the most of all five senses

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When we face our experiences with acceptance and non-judgment we create an opportunity to feel openly and allow that feeling to pass.



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1• Recognize and Observe

The first step to living mindfully is to recognize what you are feeling. The mind automatically tends to jump to thoughts and focus on using reason to work through difficult experiences. Understanding the what, why, when, where, and how of a situation is important and is only half of the puzzle. Deeper understanding requires that we also recognize the emotional side of our experience.

Recognize and observe your experience by mentally naming the specific emotions you are feeling. Name the temperature and other physical sensations you feel in your body, skin and muscles. As you do this, be sure to approach your experience with gentle curiosity. Do your best to separate thoughts from feelings by asking yourself, “Is this something that I think or am feeling?”

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2• Exercise Acceptance & Non-judgment

Perhaps the most vital tool for mindfulness practice is to exercise acceptance of your experience without judgment or self-criticism. Let yourself experience what you are experiencing and acknowledge that your experience is genuine, valid, and legitimate.

When we do not accept what we are experiencing we tend to get wrapped up in the tireless effort of trying to change what we are feeling. We often attempt to escape or avoid what we are feeling or even work to cover up what we are feeling with something else. When we judge ourselves for what we are feeling it becomes easy to get lost in an emotional spiral where things seem to feel more and more intense without end.

Treat yourself with kindness regardless of what is happening. When we face our experiences with acceptance and non-judgment we create an opportunity to feel openly and allow that feeling to pass. Non-acceptance and judgment perpetuate suffering and keep us tied up in an internal battle that cannot be won.

3• Describe the Present

It is natural for the mind to wander. While practicing mindfulness do your best to stay focused on what you are experiencing in the present moment. When you catch your mind drifting to past experiences, anticipating the future, or running through a list of all the things you have to do simply notice, remind yourself of your intention to remain focused in the present and guide yourself non-judgmentally back to your practice. It is perfectly ok to say to yourself, "Hey, mind. I've caught you wandering again. Those other things can be addressed later and for now I want to come back to focusing on the present moment."

4• Notice One Thing at a Time

By default the mind automatically tries to multitask and jump from one thing to the next. This is especially true when we feel stressed, worried or anxious. Research demonstrates that while we *feel* like we are accomplishing more when deal with multiple tasks at

once we are actually *significantly* less efficient when we multitask than when we focus on one thing at a time. The same is true for mindfulness practice.

Even when we are feeling a lot, mindfulness works best when we focus on one thing at time. Try your best to hone in on what you are experiencing one feeling and one step at a time.

5• Make the Most of All Five Senses

At the core of mindful living is the ability is to recognize what you are feeling with all five senses. Add depth to your mindfulness practice by incorporating a scented candle, lotion with microbeads, soothing music, warm bath, or peaceful outdoor space. Make a point to pay specific attention to each sense, one at a time. Name each color, object, plant, or animal that you see. Describe what you smell with each breath. Notice the sounds that are obvious and the sounds that are less obvious such as distant, subtle or barely audible hums. Draw your attention to the sensations of touch, temperature, or pressure against your skin throughout your whole body. Try spending a full minute savoring the flavor of a single chocolate or meltable treat.

• Helpful hits

Living mindfully is to recognize what you are experiencing in the present moment without self-criticism or judgment. Apply these helpful hints to enhance your mindfulness practice:

- Thoughts are just thoughts. They come and go. We have little control over what we think and feel automatically and our automatic thoughts and feelings do not reflect who we are or the people we aim to be.
- Emotions and physical sensations are often important clues for what we need to feel nurtured, to heal, and grow.
- Use your breath as an anchor. If you find yourself easily distracted or pulled into worry thoughts turn your attention to your breath. Notice the temperature of the air as it enters and is released from your nostrils and lungs. Feel your body slowly and gently expand and contract with each breath.
- Mindfulness takes courage because facing and accepting what we feel takes courage.
- Just like most practices, mindfulness is most effective when practiced regularly. To start, try setting aside 5-10 minutes at least three times weekly.
- For best results practice early in the day or at the earliest signs of stress.

