

# Fully Present: the Science, Art and Practice of Mindfulness

By Susan Smalley and Diane Winston

## Is Mindfulness for Me?

The idea that mindfulness can have meaning for someone with a demanding job, endless responsibilities, and any one of a variety of religious orientations—including Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, or no religion at all—might seem absurd. After all, even if there were some benefit to the practice, who has the time? Right away we can dispel the notion that mindfulness is time-consuming. In fact, it is time-*enhancing* and can be practiced anywhere, in the blink of an eye. *Mindfulness is the art of observing your physical, emotional, and mental experiences with deliberate, open, and curious attention.* And although it is an “art” that can be cultivated through a daily formal meditation practice (which we talk about throughout the book), you can easily practice it instantaneously by remembering to be aware of your present-moment experience anytime in the course of a day.

To incorporate mindfulness into your life does not require that you change your life in any drastic way—you still attend to your normal array of family, work, social, and leisure time activities—but you can learn to perform all of these activities with a different state of awareness, one that is open, curious, and nonreactive. Mindfulness may at some point lead you to change some behaviors, particularly those that may be harmful to yourself or others, but it is not a self-help methodology per se. In practicing mindfulness, *you are not trying to change who you are, but to become more fully present with your experiences*—with your body, thoughts, and feelings and with their impact on your life. In the process, you are likely to get to know yourself better, learn to relax and detach from stress, and find a way to navigate the intense pressures you may face. Through such increased awareness, you may also become more discerning of your thoughts, feelings, and actions, and that awareness will give you greater opportunity to make a positive change if you wish to do so. Says Charlie, a thirty-eight-year-old dockworker:

I’m convinced mindfulness makes me a better father. It’s not only that I’m able to listen better to my children, but also it’s the fact that I somehow appreciate every moment I have with them, more than I ever have in the past. I don’t take the time with them for granted anymore. I mean, they’re six and eight now, but before I know it they’ll be in college and . . . well, I get to enjoy them now.

## No More Automatic Pilot

Many of us complain that we sometimes miss out on parts of our lives. During my cousin’s college graduation, my mother was so busy photographing him receiving the diploma that she did not actually see him accept it. Her only memory is of fiddling with the camera. So often we are not present in what we are doing. We have no idea of what we may or may not have just done, whether it was driving across town, making dinner, or engaging in some other routine behavior. We tend to remember crises or extra-special events, but much of ordinary life—the daily activities of showering, grocery shopping, getting dressed, and so on—seems to slip by us. We might call this “living life on automatic pilot”: You are functioning, accomplishing life’s tasks, but it is as if no one is at the controls. You are not appreciating or even experiencing much at all; you literally are missing your life. Have you ever gotten into your car, then gotten out of your car and realized you had no idea what happened in between?

Mindfulness is an antidote to the dullness and disconnection of life lived on automatic pilot. By applying mindfulness, you can counteract that spaced-out feeling you may sometimes have in the midst of your day. You can learn to take an ordinary experience, give it your present-moment attention, and experience it as extra-ordinary. (This may happen for you as you try the eating meditation practice at the end of this chapter!) With many moments of your life taking on extraordinary qualities, you are likely to feel more “alive.” Sometimes sights and sounds seem stronger, more varied and textured. Spicing up life with mindfulness can change the way you approach ordinary activities and bring you new enthusiasm and joy.

One of our meditation students told us about how bored she was with walking her dog. When she began to really pay attention, however, it suddenly became an entirely different experience. She felt more connected to her body, her senses came alive, and she saw her neighborhood as if for the first time. She saw details of trees and flowers she had never noticed. The scents seemed stronger and more varied. She relaxed as she felt the sun on her skin. As she connected to her present-moment experience, she felt a greater sense of appreciation and enjoyment in activities that she had been performing with reluctance. She felt that even her dog could sense the change in her.

## From the Past and the Future and into the Present

If you ask people on the street where their minds are most of the time, they will probably think you are really odd, but then they will answer, “My mind is right here.” Is it? Most of us spend a great deal of time lost in thoughts about the past or the future. Many of our thoughts are about things we regret from the past or things we are worried about in the future. We obsess, worry, grieve, imagine the worst happening in the future, and replay situations from the past that caused us pain. Theoretically, it might be wise to replay only pleasant thoughts, but we mostly replay negative thoughts, as if we have broken records in our heads. Most of our thoughts hardly seem to vary. We have been thinking the same (often painful) thoughts day after day! So our minds are often not aware in the present but living in a different time period, either the past or the future.

Mindfulness can take you out of your habitual thinking by bringing you to what is actually happening at the present time. Stop right now, take a breath, and pay close attention to the present. Exactly in this moment, are things, for the most part, okay? The future has not happened, the past is over, and right now, well, it just is. This foundational technique of learning mindfulness—learning to return your mind to the present, no matter what is happening—is tremendously helpful for working with challenging thoughts, emotions, and experiences. You will learn how to do this in subsequent chapters.

Emma, a twenty-three-year-old aspiring actress, struggled constantly with negative thoughts about herself. After a few weeks of the MAPs class, she came into class elated: “I had an audition today, and for the first time ever I didn’t judge myself. Well, I did notice judgment in my mind, but I just stopped and took a breath and decided to be mindful instead of judgmental. I felt my body, noticed my thoughts, and all the judgment just stopped.”

Coming back into the present moment by letting go of thoughts does not require that you eliminate creative ruminations, reflections on the past, or abstract thinking. Mindfulness is more about giving yourself a choice with your thoughts. You can exert some control over them rather than being at their mercy. As you learn to regulate your attention, you also learn when it is useful to focus on the present moment (particularly when working with difficult or negative thinking) and when it is useful to use creative and other functions of mind.

Sunila, who is a forty-four-year-old internist, tells us:

As a physician, it’s important for me to be able to be really present with patients. But I also have so much I’m juggling, thinking through their case, not to mention the other cases I’m working with that day. Often times I’m trying to come up with an out-of-the-box solution. So I’ve learned to train my mind. When I’m with a patient, I listen with full attention. I focus on them fully. Once I leave the room, I allow my attention to wander, to ponder, to think creatively. It’s only since learning mindfulness that I’ve had some facility doing this, and my patients have noticed a difference.

## Less Reactivity

For our purposes here, “reactivity” means responding to stimuli in the world in ways that induce unnecessary stress. For instance, when you are verbally attacked, you may respond automatically, both physically and mentally. When you come into your office and find extra work on your desk, you may get irritated and say or do something you later regret. When your partner has committed to washing the dishes but you come home and find the kitchen a mess, you may react by getting angry or by isolating yourself or by trying to make your partner feel guilty. It may feel as though you have no control over your actions. You are behaving automatically—reactively.

Mindfulness offers another way. By practicing present-time awareness, *even in the midst of a difficult situation*, you can become aware of your impulses (your reactive patterns), stop, perhaps take a breath, and respond skillfully in a way that does not lead to more harm. With such insight into yourself, wise actions are likely to follow, as one meditation student discovered.

Gino, a twenty-eight-year-old graduate student, was running late as he drove on an L.A. freeway, and when someone cut him off, he missed his exit. Immediately, a flash of rage swept through his body. In the past he might have made an angry hand gesture or shouted fruitlessly at the long-departed car. He would have stewed in his anger, with his blood pressure rising, and obsessed about getting back at the other driver. But because he was learning mindfulness, he decided to use this experience as an opportunity to become aware of his reactivity and make a different choice. He took a breath, noticed his body—heart racing, heat in his face, a clenching in his gut—

and thought, *Wow, I'm really angry*. After thinking about what a small thing it had been that triggered such massive anger, he was actually able to laugh about it. As he noticed this, his body began to calm down. In that moment he knew he could respond differently in the situation. He realized that he was still angry, but somehow not so overwhelmed. He even thought, *I might let that guy in the pickup into my lane*. Awareness allowed him to make that choice.

## Mindful Attitude

A classic definition of mindfulness often includes the words “nonjudgmental,” “open,” “accepting,” and “curious” to describe the attitude you can cultivate when being mindful. Mindfulness is an accepting and kind attitude toward yourself and your present-moment experience. So if you are trying to be mindful but have a reaction to your experience—that is, you are aware, but you’re disliking, fearing, or judging your experience—then your mindfulness is colored by these reactions.

For example, if you are mindful of your breath but thinking, *Wow, this is utterly boring*, or *I'm doing this wrong*, then you are aware, but the quality of accepting things as they are is not present for you. To make it slightly more complicated, if you then notice that you are either bored or doubting your effort, but feel curious and open about this experience, even somewhat kind toward yourself for feeling bored or doubting, then your attitude would be accepting!

When you are aware of the present moment in a kind and curious way, accepting it exactly as it is, then you have the direct experience of mindfulness. This is not to say that sometimes judging, aversion, fear, and so forth, will not color your mindfulness, but that this is the ideal you can aspire to through practice—to be as kind as possible to yourself and your experience. This is also not to say that if you are truly mindful you will never have judgmental thoughts. Judgments arise unbidden in our minds, so we don’t need to judge our judgments! Instead, recognize them for what they are: thoughts passing through your mind.

How might this work? Here is what Joan, a fifty-three-year-old musician, has to say:

When I began my meditation practice, I was convinced I was doing it wrong. I couldn’t breathe one breath without a voice telling me that I was breathing wrong! How can you breathe wrong? Anyway, I really worked on practicing kindness with myself, letting myself be okay with each breath, even letting myself be okay with not knowing if I was doing it right. It was like I could bring mindfulness to being unsure. Over time I began to relax, and now I don’t judge my meditation so strongly.

Having a kind and open attitude does not mean that you accept all behaviors as equally appropriate. If you say to yourself, *Oh, I yelled at my partner when he didn’t deserve it, but I was very mindful and kind to myself in the process*, you are misunderstanding this attitude. When you have a truly mindful attitude, you see yourself kindly but *clearly*, with no shadings from your own reactive patterns or ways of deluding yourself. As you become more mindful, you begin to see more clearly the effect of your behaviors on other people. Through a lens of mindfulness, you recognize behaviors that harm, such as abuse, lying, and malicious gossip, as hurtful to yourself and others, and you may choose to diminish or abandon these behaviors.

Over the long term, you may notice a striking effect: Kindness begins to permeate the rest of your life. Unfortunately, many people these days suffer from self-criticism and self-hatred. Learning to develop an accepting attitude through moments of mindfulness helps you develop a kind and compassionate attitude toward yourself and others over the long term. This idea is based on the principle that what you practice you cultivate. So if you spend many moments of your day learning to be open to experiences with kindness, openness, and curiosity, you are likely, over time, to find these attitudes and behaviors becoming a natural and more incorporated part of who you are. As we saw in the science section, this is mindfulness moving from “state” to “trait.”

## Mindfulness Is Simple but Not Easy

One of our students, Jade, age thirty, sums up how difficult it is to be in the present:

I was on vacation in Mexico, and the whole time I was there, despite beautiful sunny weather and an amazing beach, all I could think about was whether or not I should be in Hawaii, or maybe another Central American country. Finally, I said to myself, “If I’m not going to be *here*, why bother to go anywhere at all?”

As obvious and simple as mindfulness can be, and despite its beneficial effects, doing it is another story. It is very *simple* to be mindful. Take a moment right now, stop reading, and feel your nose and body take one breath. You are present with that one breath. You are mindful in this single moment in time. It is simple to be mindful, but *remembering* to be mindful can be very difficult.

Modern society tends to condition us to be anything but mindful. The dominant American culture validates virtually mindless productivity, busyness, speed, and efficiency. The last thing we want to do is just *be* present. We want to *do*, to succeed, to produce. Those of us who are good at the doing seem to fare well in many of our institutions and corporations. Those who are not, well, they tend to fall behind. But this is life in America in the twenty-first century and, to an increasing degree, around the world. We are so focused on doing that we have forgotten all about being, and the toll this takes on our physical, mental, and emotional health is palpable. As the saying goes, we have become “human doings” instead of “human beings.” In the science sections of this book, you will learn that many chronic illnesses (pain, depression, heart disease) may arise when we get the doing and being parts of ourselves out of balance. Mindfulness is a means to rebalance doing and being.

It has become so normal to be incessantly busy that many of us cannot even tolerate the feeling of stopping and slowing down. I know a man who needs to talk on his cell phone or read a book when walking down the street; he cannot face what he perceives as the sheer boredom of no stimulation. Josh, a beginning meditation student, reports that in all his waking hours he never chooses to be in silence. Even when he is relaxing, he turns on the TV or searches the Internet while ambient music pumps away in the background. His first attempts at mindfulness were quite discouraging to him, because the feeling of being alone with himself was so foreign and uncomfortable. He could not see the point of spending five minutes in silence with himself when he had so much to do to run a successful business. He assumed that a time of silence and self-inquiry was a waste of time when he had all those “important” things to do.

Learning mindfulness starts wherever you are. Whether you are busy, distracted, anxious, depressed, jealous, peaceful, or tired, all you need to do is to take a moment to pay attention to yourself. If you can stop, breathe, and notice what is happening in just this moment, then you have tapped into the power of mindfulness. This simple act, unassuming as it is, can lead to significant changes in your well-being and become a real “seat belt” for your mental health.

## **The Practice: Eating Meditation**

*This introductory exercise provides an excellent experiential understanding of mindfulness. We recommend that you try this practice with a grape or any simple fruit.*

Settle back in your meditation posture, close your eyes, and take a breath or two to relax. The grape you have in front of you didn’t magically appear at the supermarket. It actually has a long history. As I describe this, let your mind imagine the history of the grape. Feel free to make other associations on your own.

Some time ago, someone planted a grape seed. That grape seed began to sprout, and it grew into a vine. There was soil, sun, rain and water, and perhaps fertilizer; there were humans who tended to the grape. The vine grew and grew, and ultimately it began to sprout fruit. The fruit ripened until it was ready to be harvested. Then someone came along and cut the vines, whose grapes may have been packaged at that point, wrapped in plastic, loaded on trucks, and driven to supermarkets, where you purchased them.

There are also many secondary connections to reflect on . . . all of the humans involved in this process. There were people who tended, people who harvested, people who drove trucks. And we don’t know the circumstances under which the farm workers lived and worked; perhaps their lives were quite difficult. We do know that each person had a set of parents. And their parents had parents, and *their* parents had parents. And so on. And each person was clothed and fed and ate countless amounts of food. And where did that food come from? Let your mind roam and imagine the answer to this question. The truck, for instance—where did *that* come from? Oil and metal and plastic and glass. How about the roads the truck drove on to cart this grape to market? Who tarred, cemented, and paved those roads? Let your mind consider this. Make one more connection you haven’t yet thought of or I haven’t described.

Now notice what is going on inside yourself. How do you feel? There is no right or wrong answer to this question, which is a really important point with mindfulness. All we do is find out what is true in this moment for us. You

might be feeling some sense of appreciation. Or you might be feeling some sadness, or sleepiness, or anything at all. Just check in with yourself and notice what is happening in this present moment.

Now open your eyes and pick up the grape. Look at it as though you have never seen a grape before—as if you were a little child who has been handed her first grape. You can roll it around in your fingers; you can notice the shape and the color and the way the light on it changes; you can find out whether it has a smell or a sound. See if you can look at the grape with the curiosity and wonder a child brings to a first experience—that is mindfulness.

Now bring the grape up close to your mouth and notice as you do so whether something inside you says, *I want to eat it!* Simply be aware of that impulse. Then close your eyes, open your mouth, and put the grape in. Begin to chew, but slow down the process. Use your awareness to feel and sense and taste; there's so much to explore—flavors, textures, sounds. And there's saliva—your teeth and your tongue know exactly what to do.

You also might notice what is going on in your mind. Maybe you are comparing this grape to one you had last week and thinking, *Oh, it's not as good*, or, *Oh, this one's better than the one I had last week*. Maybe you want another grape immediately. Maybe you are thinking, *Hmmm, this is kind of silly*, or, *This is so interesting!* Truly *anything* could be happening. With mindfulness, we simply notice. We become aware.

When you finish the first grape, eat the second grape with the same quality of attention. When you finish the second grape, notice your whole body present here, and when you are ready, open your eyes.

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