

Mindfulness and Meditation: Question and Answer

By: Nicole Reiner, M.A, M.Ed Candidate

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness can be thought of as focusing your mind on what's happening in the present moment, without judging yourself. In other words, it means putting 100% of attention on what you are doing while you're doing it.

It is very common for people to physically be somewhere (such as a job, school, walking, driving), but mentally be somewhere else (thinking about the past, worrying about what needs to be done, daydreaming). Being mindful allows us to become physically and mentally present by fully experiencing what is going on around and inside of us.

The problem with mindfulness is that it's really hard to not get carried away by our thoughts! Sometimes we are so lost in our own thoughts that we forget to pay attention to what's going on around us.

I have an example of when I was NOT mindful- which actually occurred this morning. I made cereal for breakfast, and as soon as I put my spoon in my hand, my mind went everywhere but the present. As I ate, I thought about what I had to do that day, conversations I had to have, work that needed to be accomplished, and so on...Before I knew it, my mind was fast-forwarding to what I had to do that evening. When I eventually looked down at my bowl, I noticed my food was gone. I had eaten my whole bowl of cereal without paying attention!

What are some ways we can practice being mindful?

Anywhere! You can practice grounding your body and mind in the very moment doing anything, such as (mindful) eating, (mindful) working, and even (mindful) dishwashing!

A great way to begin practicing mindfulness is by walking outdoors. Instead of setting a goal for yourself or having a purposeful direction, practice staying in the present moment. As you walk, use your senses to pay attention to what you are seeing, hearing, smelling. *How does the ground feel on your feet? Where does the sun hit your face? What does the wind feel like as it hits your skin? What shape do the clouds make? What sounds can you hear in the distance?* Observe the subtlety of what is going on around you. Even if you've taken the same walk many times, perhaps you'll notice something you haven't noticed before.

Mindfulness and Meditation

Meditation is one way to promote mindfulness. When we meditate, we practice focusing on a single object of attention. A very simple, yet effective meditation method is to direct our attention toward our breath. The breath is often the preferred object because it is free, portable, and always available for as long as we will live.

How to Practice Meditation

Sit on a chair, or cross-legged on the floor. It is important to have an upright, but comfortable posture. You may close your eyes or gaze gently at the floor. Once you feel settled, begin focusing your attention to the sensations of breathing. Notice how your breath feels in your body as you inhale and exhale. When you notice your mind wandering (which WILL inevitably happen- even for advanced meditators!), gently notice the thought, practice letting it go, and redirect your attention to breathing. Paying attention to the breath will help you stay in the present, instead of ruminating about the past or worrying about the future.

Setting aside between 5-10 minutes every day is a great way to start!

I can't stop thinking! Will I be a bad meditator?

The intention of meditation is not to stop thinking, or to only have positive thoughts. Studies have shown that the more we try not to think about something, the more we think about it (*At this moment, I DO NOT want you to think about a polar bear. Can you do it?*)

A goal of meditation is not to change our thoughts and emotions, but to change the *relationship* we have with our thoughts and emotions. We will inevitably experience all sorts of thoughts and feelings throughout our day, but meditation teaches us that we don't have to become too attached to them or automatically react to them. We have the power to control where we put our attention, and we can always redirect our attention to our breath.

Citation:

For more information, please read

Salzberg, Sharon. *Real happiness: the power of meditation: a 28-day program*. New York: Workman Pub., 2011.

