

What Exactly *is* Mindfulness?

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mind·ful·ness

/ˈmɪn(d)f(ə)lnəs/

noun

the quality or state of being conscious or aware of something.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, brought awareness to the practice of secular mindfulness to the west in the 1970s and pioneered an 8-week mindfulness-based stress-reduction course at the University of Massachusetts Medical School which has been the subject of hundred of scientific studies, that prove the effectiveness of secular mindfulness practices on brain function, pain reduction, and even more importantly, happiness.

Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness—and more specifically, meditation—as “the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally.” By focusing on the breath, attention is placed on the body and mind, together, as they are in the moment, from moment to moment. In doing so, the results can be nothing short of radical, even seemingly magical as these ostensibly simple practices, reduce physical and emotional pain.

And while the practices are simple, and can be done at any moment of the day, in any place, the mind is an interesting neighborhood to visit—and thus, paying attention, on purpose, in the present, non-judgmentally can be challenging for most of us, and is really a lifetime practice of endeavoring toward that objective.

All that said, it really can be a simple practice. No special cushion needed. No incense. Nothing but yourself and your breath is needed. And if, like so many, you think you can't do it because you have a busy mind and can't quiet your thoughts, you are not alone. Turns out, that's what, in part, makes us human. The point of a mindfulness practice is not to eliminate thoughts. That's simply not possible (unless you're dead!). In fact, the purpose of meditation is not even to reduce thoughts. It's to notice them. To be aware that we're having them, in the moment. Eventually, we become aware of the type and quality of thoughts, emotions, and sensations. We see them coming, and we cultivate a much-needed pause in our everyday lives, which allows us to respond, most often, with integrity, and if the moment warrants it, with compassion, instead of reacting. And the “side” benefits include increased cognitive functions, focus, and perhaps more importantly, increased resilience to all that life throws at us each day.

Resources:

Jon Kabat Zinn, PhD, 2014 Talk: Some Reflections and Guidance on the Cultivation of Mindfulness

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dd6ktr0Ff8Q>

What Is Mindfulness?

<https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/>

Understanding Mindfulness

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/mindfulness>

How Mindfulness Can Ease Anxiety (with suggested practices)

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hack-your-anxiety/201905/how-mindfulness-can-ease-anxiety>