

## *Everyday Mindfulness for Mental Health*

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We all run on auto-pilot throughout parts of our day. For you it may be during the drive to and from work or as you sit down to lunch and realize you've eaten half your sandwich while your mind was wandering off elsewhere. Times of extended stress can cause our minds to become switched off in order to just get through our day. Changes at home or at work, deployments, a new baby, a family member's health problems or even getting married are just a few common stress factors. When we perceive that we are unable to meet the demands that are upon us we experience distress. In order to cope, many of us avoid thinking about our stress or distract ourselves with T.V., food or other substances. Over time the coping pattern of tuning out becomes habitual and we can begin to feel disconnected from ourselves, our feelings and those around us.

Recently, many psychotherapy approaches have focused on helping clients learn to practise daily mindfulness to reverse these negative habits. Jon Kabat-Zinn is the developer of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course that has helped thousands of people suffering from chronic stress, chronic pain and various mental and physical challenges. He gives this simple definition of what mindfulness is; 'Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally'. Beginners often feel that they are doing it wrong especially when instructed to quiet their mind because when we start paying attention we will find that our mind is very noisy. This is perfectly normal. The great thing about mindfulness is that it can be practiced in very simple everyday ways. You don't have to sit and meditate or live on a mountaintop to become mindful. The key is to practice regularly; think of the mind as a muscle that has to be strengthened. Awareness of the breath is the most common way to begin practicing being in the present because it is always there for us no matter what is going on in our lives.

### **Try this right now:**

Take 5 slow, comfortable breaths

breath 1 direct your attention to noticing the sensations in your face and scalp,

breath 2 notice your neck and shoulders,

breath 3 notice your belly, ribs and chest,

breath 4 notice your legs and arms,

breath 5 allow your awareness to flow from the top of your head down to your toes

Afterwards, ask yourself how you feel? Is anything different? Did you notice any pleasant or unpleasant sensations in your body or your mind? An added benefit of deep breathing is that it

can have a calming effect on our nervous system. At first some people may not find it calming and many people find it difficult to focus and keep their mind from getting distracted. These are all normal responses. The key is to remain non-judgemental of the process and aware of the present moment. When we intentionally choose to focus our attention, over time we realize we have some control of our wandering mind. Our brains actually begin forming new neural networks and mindfulness becomes a habit.

**Try this daily for one week:**

Identify a daily task and choose to do it more mindfully – practice for one week and journal the results. Engage with the present moment by focusing attention on your 5 senses, your thoughts and your feelings. If you notice your mind wandering, don't worry, remember that it is a normal part of the practise and simply bring it back to the present moment.

Choose something easy at first like brushing your teeth, eating an apple or folding laundry. The more you train your mind to pay attention, the more you will be able to choose when, how and what you want to focus on.

Once you get some practice you can use mindfulness to manage a stressful moment like being late, having a difficult conversation or stubbing your toe. Use your breath to take a step back from the situation and notice your thoughts. Recognize any thoughts that are taking you into past regrets or future worries and gently bring yourself back into the present moment. Notice judgement and try to respond with acceptance of this difficult moment. See if you can respond to yourself with compassion and kindness.

When practicing mindfulness we also become aware of the negative thoughts in our minds, some of which may be very judgemental and very unhelpful. Mindfulness based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy can help people to work on challenging these negative thoughts and replacing them with more healthy, balanced thoughts. Physical practices like Yoga, Tai Chi and Qi Gong can also be very effective ways to practice mindfulness.

If you are feeling overwhelmed by stress or struggling with mental health issues it is important to talk to someone about it. Share your concerns with a trusted friend, family member or your doctor. Consider speaking to a trained counsellor. If you want to learn more about mindfulness you can practice the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course online at [www.palousemindfulness.com/selfguidedMBSR.html](http://www.palousemindfulness.com/selfguidedMBSR.html).