



## Mindfulness and the Treatment of Traumatic Stress

Mindfulness is a way of thinking and focusing that can help you become more aware of your present experiences. There are some things you might do every day without even thinking about them, like brushing your teeth in the morning. Mindfulness involves paying attention to the feelings and sensations of these experiences.

While researchers have not yet studied the effects of mindfulness practice in helping trauma survivors diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), research has shown mindfulness to be helpful with other anxiety problems. It has also been shown to help with symptoms of PTSD, such as avoidance and hyperarousal. If you have gone through trauma, you may want to learn what mindfulness is and how it might be helpful to you.

Mindfulness practice has two key parts:

- Paying attention to and being aware of the present moment
- Accepting or being willing to experience your thoughts and feelings without judging them

For example, focusing on the inhale and exhale of your breathing is one way to concentrate on the present moment. Mindfulness involves allowing your thoughts and feelings to pass without either clinging to them or pushing them away. You just let them take their natural course. While practicing mindfulness, you may become distracted by your thoughts and that is okay. The process is about being willing to notice where your thoughts take you, and then bringing your attention back to the present.

How can mindfulness help reduce trauma reactions? Mindfulness might increase your ability to cope with difficult emotions, such as anxiety and depression. Practicing mindfulness can help you to be more focused and aware of the present moment while also being more willing to experience the difficult emotions that sometimes come up after trauma. For example, mindfulness practice might help you notice your thoughts and feelings more and be able to just let them go, without labeling them as “good” or “bad” and without acting on them by avoiding or behaving impulsively.

Mindfulness is a practice and a continual process. Although it may be hard to do at first, regular mindfulness practice can help you notice your thoughts and learn to take a step back from them. Mindfulness practice can also help you develop more compassion toward yourself and others. You may be less likely

to sit in judgment of your thoughts, feelings and actions. You may become less critical of yourself. Using mindfulness can help you become more aware and gentle in response to your trauma reactions. This is an important step in recovery.

Cognitive Processing Therapy (CPT) and Prolonged Exposure Therapy (PE) have been shown to be the most effective treatments for PTSD. In both treatments, you are asked to write or talk about trauma with the guidance of your therapist. Mindfulness can prepare you for these treatments by giving you skills and confidence that you can handle your feelings. As you learn to be mindful, you learn to observe what is happening in your body and your mind. You can learn to be more willing to cope with difficult thoughts and feelings in a healthy way. This will help you keep going when you are asked to think and talk about your trauma in treatment. In this way, you may get even more out of the PTSD treatment.

There are several types of therapy that use mindfulness practices. These therapies have been used to treat problems that often affect people with PTSD, such as anxiety, depression, and substance use. The therapies may target specific problems such as:

- Difficult feelings and stress in daily living
- The stress of physical health problems, such as chronic pain
- Negative thinking patterns that can lead to repeated episodes of depression
- Trouble working toward your goals in life
- Urges to use drugs or alcohol

### Summing it up

Mindfulness practices may be of benefit to trauma survivors. Research findings show that mindfulness can help with problems and symptoms often experienced by survivors. Mindfulness could be used by itself or together with standard treatments proven effective for PTSD. Learn more about specific PTSD treatments that work.





## Binge Drinking Dangers for Young People

For millions of young adults in this country, the weekend will pass in an alcoholic blur. For one or two of these otherwise healthy kids, the next drinking binge could end in death.

“Sadly, binge drinking continues to hold a fatal attraction for many college students and even some in high school,” says Sandra Hoover, Ph.D., M.P.H., deputy director of A Matter of Degree: Reducing HighRisk Drinking Among College Students, a project administered by the American Medical Association (AMA) in Chicago.

Bingeing means drinking to get drunk — the point at which the drinker is risking health or behavioral problems as a consequence of drinking. For men, that means having five or more drinks in quick succession. Women have a lower tolerance for alcohol, so their binge is defined as four or more drinks in a row.

Though overall alcohol use among young people has decreased in recent years, the number of binge drinkers remains high. One AMA study found that 20 percent of 18- to 30-year-olds are binge drinkers. Among those who binge, 19 percent said they binge “frequently,” and seven percent binge every time they drink alcohol.

Binge drinkers are most likely found on college campuses, where many students consider a big game or fraternity party an excuse to drink all weekend.

“College freshmen are at the biggest risk for binge drinking,” Dr. Hoover says. “They’re away from home for the first time, and they have lots of freedom. They decide that means freedom to get drunk.”

### Bad Habit

By the time they’re college seniors, most students moderate their drinking. But by then, many already have been hurt by their bouts of heavy drinking.

Besides the risk of death from overdose, bingeing involves other dangerous or negative consequences, including:

- **Accidents.** Alcohol impairs sensory perceptions, judgment and reaction time. Of young people who drink, 20 percent say they sometimes drive drunk.

- **Date rape.** Alcohol is a factor in up to two-thirds of sexual assaults on students.
- **Unprotected sex.** Heavy drinkers are at greater risk for AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. They also have a greater chance of pregnancy.
- **Alcoholism.** Some college students who abuse alcohol will become alcoholics. Chronic alcohol use can damage the liver and heart and increase the risk of some cancers.
- **Poor school performance.** Students who drink the most have the worst grades, according to one study at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale.

### Teach Your Children

Dr. Hoover advises educating young people about the risks of binge drinking and other substance abuse. Here are other ways you can help your youngster avoid binge drinking:

- **Make your attitudes clear.** Discuss your expectations for your child’s college lifestyle and academic performance.
- **Show interest.** Ask about grades, classes, friendships and other healthy aspects of campus life. Let your child know these things are important.
- **Check your own behavior.** Are you unconsciously promoting the idea that drinking to excess is OK?
- **Work with the youngster’s college.** Encourage initiatives such as substance-free dorms and social events. Ask the administration to encourage bar owners not to offer happy hours and other promotions.
- **Don’t give up.** “What parents say and do really can make a difference,” Dr. Hoover says. “The earlier you start your prevention efforts, the better.”

