



Mindfulness Matters: Can Living in the Moment Improve Your Health?

At some point in your life, someone probably told you: “Enjoy every moment. Life is short.” Maybe you’ve smiled and rolled your eyes at this well-intentioned relative or co-worker. But the fact is, there’s something to it. Trying to enjoy each moment may be good for your health.

The idea is called mindfulness. This ancient practice is about being completely aware of what’s happening in the present — of all that’s going on inside and all that’s happening around you. It means not living your life on “autopilot.” Instead, you experience life as it unfolds moment to moment, good and bad, and without judgment or preconceived notions.

“Many of us go through our lives without really being present in the moment,” says Dr. Margaret Chesney of the University of California, San Francisco, who studies how mindfulness affects health. “What is valuable about mindfulness is that it is accessible and can be helpful to so many people.”

Studies suggest that mindfulness practices may help people manage stress, cope better with serious illness and reduce anxiety and depression. Many people who practice mindfulness report an increased ability to relax, a greater enthusiasm for life and improved self-esteem.

One National Institutes of Health (NIH)-supported study found a link between mindfulness meditation and measurable changes in the brain regions involved in memory, learning and emotion. Another NIH-funded researcher reported that mindfulness practices may reduce anxiety and hostility among urban youth and lead to reduced stress, fewer fights and better relationships.

A major benefit of mindfulness is that it encourages you to pay attention to your thoughts, your actions and your body. For example, studies have shown that mindfulness can help people achieve and maintain a healthy weight. “It is so common for people to watch TV and eat snack food out of the box without really attending to how much they are eating,” says Chesney. “With mindful eating, you eat when you’re hungry, focus on each bite, enjoy your food more and stop when you’re full.”

Finding time for mindfulness in our culture, however, can be a challenge. We tend to place great value on how much we can do at once and how fast. Still, being more mindful is within anyone’s reach.

You can practice mindfulness throughout the day, even while answering e-mails, sitting in traffic or waiting in line. All you have to do is become more aware — of your breath, of your feet on the ground, of your fingers typing, of the people and voices around you.

Chesney notes that as people start to learn how to be more mindful, it’s common and normal to realize how much your mind races and focuses on the past and future. You can just notice those thoughts and then return to the present moment. It is these little, regular steps that add up and start to create a more mindful, healthy life.





Relaxing Ways to De-Stress

During times of stress and uncertainty, it can be a challenge for many to remain calm and collected. With the news, social media and even personal circles serving as a constant reminder for what's going on in the world, it may seem like there is no way to escape the negativity.

“But you can easily avoid adding to the turbulence,” says Mike George, meditation teacher and author of *1,001 Ways to Relax*. “In fact, you can become one of those people for whom the world has a great need: those who can stay calm in a crisis, cool in the midst of chaos and focused on the positive when everyone around you is inclined to reinforce the negative. If you can stay relaxed and calm, it helps others do the same.”

Having spent 20 years researching stress and teaching meditation and stress management techniques, George is uniquely suited to suggest the following ways to avoid and deal with the stresses in your life.

Slow it down

- **Forget yesterday's mistakes.** Today is a new day. Your mind has been refreshed by sleep, and there's no need to believe that yesterday's misjudgments or misfortunes will repeat themselves.
- **Decide to be happy today, no matter what happens or who does what.** It's within your power to make this choice. “Happiness is the true condition of the self-aware, and its source lies within ourselves,” says George. “To decide to be happy is a positive, self-fulfilling action.”
- **Create a personal affirmation and declare it 20 times to yourself each morning.** “Affirmations are simple, positive ‘I am...’ statements, such as ‘I am at peace,’ ‘I am a tower of strength,’ that build self-esteem and a strong sense of self,” says George. “They counter the negative messages we often give ourselves by reminding us of our intrinsic value.”
- **Don't just do something, sit there!** Contrary to the usual phrase, this is sometimes the best approach when emotions are running high, your problems seem overwhelming or your internal compass isn't giving you a clear direction to follow. Simply take a few moments to sit in stillness, gathering your strength. Give your mind and body permission to relax.

- **Unravel a problem.** Most problems have many strands tangled together, often in complicated ways. If it seems impossible to unravel the knot, make a start by trying to name each of the different strands. Draw them on paper, with a word or two alongside each separate line to label it. You may find that identifying the pieces of the problem in this way leads to a breakthrough in working out a solution.
- **Think of reasons why you can do something, rather than why you can't — all it takes is a shift in attitude.** Once you've broken the negative logic of your thinking, you create space in which positive approaches can appear.
- **Act “as if.”** Your mind is very suggestible. If you act as if you're calm, happy and free of stress, eventually you'll find it becomes a reality.
- **Really listen to people.** By paying close attention to others, you stay in balance with them. Actively listen to what other people are saying.
- **Bring an open mind to new people, places and experiences.** “Your way is only one of many ways,” says George. “Open-minded people tend to find more to enjoy and less to be disappointed or stressed by.”

