

Mindfulness



What is a Mindfulness Practice?

In its original form, mindfulness was a practice offered by the Buddha that offered people a path from suffering to peace, from misunderstanding and misperception to clear seeing and clear understanding of the nature of the human mind, how we suffer, and a clear path to liberation from our suffering. Articulated fully it is a path that includes ethical teachings and specific practices for cultivating a wise mind and an open heart even in the face of violence and oppression.

Having been brought to the west this teaching of mindful awareness has caught secular attention for its very practical aspects:

- Building one's capacity to pause before acting
- Building one's ability to observe oneself

These skills lead to the possibility of responding rather than reacting, instead of simply doing what is automatic.

Why Practice Mindfulness?

With any new practice, we encourage an investigation into why start. After all, we will invest precious time and resources to something that sounds good, but will it actually make a difference? There are many scientific and anecdotal benefits to a regular mindfulness practice.

Benefits of Mindfulness

- We see that we are not our thoughts. The thoughts happen and we can notice which ones we wish to believe and which ones we can let go of.
- We can create a gentle loving attitude towards ourselves especially through times of transitions.
- We can soften our harsh judgments with self and others and invite a softening of our critical tone; this small opening allows us to see our own and each person's humanity more clearly.
- We develop a calm serenity in the face of unfortunate circumstances, like when "bad things happen to good people"—wallet being stolen, freak car accidents, health crisis, etc.

- We find an easier stance with difficult emotions and body sensations, such as grief and pain.
- We develop a willingness to be transparent and address conflicts more readily.
- New neural pathways get built in the brain that allow us to access a calm and centered presence.

"Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."

– Jon Kabot Zinn



The Brain Science of Mindfulness

There is a growing body of evidence, with approximately 30 to 40 peer-review papers published each month demonstrating the connection to mindfulness practices to the health and wellbeing of the practitioner. The field of neuroscience especially provides convincing data using brain scans to compare what happens when someone is stressed to when they are focusing on one thing with a steady breath and steady mind.

When people are stressed, the part of the brain responsible for the “fight or flight” response—the amygdala—goes into a primitive survival mode. In this high-alert state, instead of being able to cope with more activity, the brain actually starts shutting down. It develops tunnel vision, unable to think around a problem, only able to fixate on it agitatedly. Productivity, creativity,

innovation, emotional intelligence when dealing with others and flexibility of thinking all plummet (Baldwin M et al, 2010; Arnsten, 2009).

Several studies confirm that mindfulness can act as an effective antidote to stress, calming the body down into a more productive state, with one even showing a reduction in the size of grey matter in the amygdala (Hölzel et al, 2010). Another study shows that mindfulness meditation can lower the level of the stress hormone cortisol (Tang et al, 2008).¹

When we can rest in a calm, centered place, we can think strategically, manage well and create a work climate that fosters creativity, productivity and well being for all.

Getting Started

As with any habit you want to set the conditions for success. Imagine as one teacher described to us that you had an intention to brush your teeth every day but had no brush, no sink, and no basic training in how to brush. What is the likelihood that you will succeed at integrating the practice into your life? Also many people feel they are doing it wrong or not realizing the benefits quickly enough. One teacher of ours recently said “if you are engaging in the practice, you are doing it right.”

A container for Practice

Set up a space that is the space you will use to meditate. It might be a specific chair you find comfortable or a more traditional set up with a cushion on the floor. You might wish to decorate this area in some, although that is in no way necessary. Just having a designated space for sitting quietly is enough. Then pick a time of day to practice if you can. It’s good for the body to have the consistency.

Having a regular time means one less thing to decide each time you sit.

An intention for Practice

Take a moment to recall why you are practicing: to gain self-awareness, to calm your nervous system, to build your capacity to focus in the face of the barrage of incoming information. Whatever the reason, bring it to mind as you begin your practice.

Posture for Practice

Basic posture for meditation has a few key ingredients; the body ought to be alert, open and receptive. So you want to have an upright position where you feel alert but also some sense of relaxation. If you have too much physical pain in your posture it will make focus extra challenging. The gaze is either downcast or with eyes closed. You can mediate sitting on the floor or in a chair, standing, walking or laying down, we encourage you to try all four postures to see what works best for you.

The Basic Practice

Sit in your posture. Set your intention for practice. Then choose a focal point at either your nostrils, heart



or abdomen and begin to allow the attention to rest in that area of the body. With curiosity and interest we begin to notice breathing in. Breathing out. Each time the mind wanders off—and IT WILL WANDER—you call your attention back, with kindness, with awareness, with simplicity back to each breath. You may only be able to count one or two breaths before the mind wanders off. That is fine. Just notice and return as you can. Keep inviting yourself back to the here and now each time you notice you have left. This practice is about returning over and over again, coming home when we leave even if it's uncomfortable or unpleasant.

We encourage you to begin simply and by linking a new mindfulness practice to another established habit such as brushing teeth, eating a meal, getting in the car or on the train for work. Commit to pausing and paying attention to three full inhalations and exhalations of your breath. There is no need to breathe in a particular way, just pay attention to your breath. Once you build this breath practice up to several times a day, you may want to try sitting or standing for five minutes each day. We recommend you work up to meditating twice a day in two 10-minute increments.

Additional Resources

There is so much to say about practice. More than we can do in this context. So please enjoy these additional resources as well as personal conversations with us at [Seven Stones](#) for a deeper understanding of both the mechanics and benefits of practice for you and for your leadership.

[Mindfulness In Plain English](#)

By Ven. Henepola Gunaratana

Harvard Business Review Article: [Mindfulness in the Age of Complexity](#)

Real Happiness at Work—Sharon Salzberg

How to Meditate: A Practical Guide to Making Friends with Your Mind—Pema Chödrön

[Insight Timer](#)—join the Seven Stones Community

¹ Source: *Personnel Today*, [Mindfulness: helping employees to deal with stress](#), September 3, 2012.

ABOUT SEVEN STONES

Seven Stones is a leadership journeys company founded by Gina LaRoche and Jennifer Cohen in 2009. Our learning programs, coaching practice, organizational consulting engagements and groundbreaking thought leadership work are all designed to help bring about a world that is loving, courageous and just. We pursue this vision primarily by shifting the paradigm from one of scarcity to one of Sustainable Abundance® in the individuals, organizations and communities with whom we work.

