



Making Sense of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the quality of being fully present and fully engaged. It's focusing on the present rather than dwelling on the past or anticipating the future. It's being free from distractions. It's being aware of our thoughts and feelings without getting caught up in them, so we aren't being overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us. It's having the ability to be attentive to the present moment with objectivity and curiosity, but without judgment. It encompasses awareness and acceptance. Awareness being the ability to focus on our inner processes and experiences. Acceptance being the ability to observe and accept rather than judge or avoid our thoughts and feelings.

Mindfulness is a great tool to avoid self-criticism and self-deprecation while dealing with difficult emotions. We learn to interrupt the negative assumptions and catastrophic predictions running through our minds. It allows us to stay in the moment rather than going to some point in the uncertain and scary future where our anxiety wants to take us. Other benefits include increased empathy, compassion, happiness, and optimism, improved sleep, greater focus and concentration, reduced anxiety and stress, and improved immune functioning.

We lead such busy and often stressful lives that our surroundings exist only as a backdrop and background noise. A simple and effective way to slow down and live in the moment is to be a conscious observer of our senses. We experience life through our senses. It is our "window to the world" in many ways. Unlike our thoughts and worries, our senses only know the present moment. Thus, using all five of our senses enables us to focus on our environment and keeps us grounded in the moment. This helps to put a stop to any racing thoughts and irrational worries. When thoughts/worries do arise, we simply take note of them, then redirect our attention back to one (or more) of our senses.

Begin this mindfulness exercise by taking a deep breath from your diaphragm. Hold it for a few seconds, then slowly exhale from your mouth. Pause, then repeat this deep breathing 2-3 times. Just breathe slowly and deeply throughout the rest of the exercise. Spend at least one minute with each of the senses. Don't classify your observations as positive or negative, just take note of them.



After taking a few deep breaths, start to tune in to what you **hear** around you. You will first be aware of the loudest and most intrusive noises, but as you continue to listen you will slowly begin to hear the more subtle sounds.

Now focus on what you can **smell**. Notice the different scents around you as well as personal products such as shampoo, perfume, hand soap, and so on. Become aware of scents you may normally filter out, pleasant or unpleasant. Humans have over 400 smelling receptors and are able to smell over 1 trillion scents. However, if you think you have a poor sense of smell, light a candle or have something with a distinctive odor near you (that can be anything from onions in your food to bottled lotion) before beginning the exercise.

Take note now of what you **see** around you. Notice not just the objects or surroundings themselves, but the varying colors, shapes, and light. Notice any movement that you see. Challenge yourself to note things you don't normally see or look for.

Now focus on what you can **taste**. This part of the exercise may be easier if you have some hard candy, bits of food, or chewing gum in your mouth, take sips of a drink, or brush your teeth prior to beginning the exercise. Notice the flavor and intensity, whether it is sweet, sour, spicy or bitter. You can also focus on just the sensations in your mouth, like how your tongue feels when you run it over the roof of your mouth.

Lastly focus on what you **feel**. This could be with your hands such as the texture of your clothing, the cold or hot of a cup you are holding, the fur of the dog or cat you are petting, and so on. It can also be the pressure of the chair you are sitting in or the air moving across your skin. It can be from walking barefoot through the grass, sand, water or carpet.

As simple as all this may sound, most of us have been doing just the opposite most of our lives. We do a variety of things to distract, soothe, ignore, self-medicate, and disconnect ourselves to stay *out* of the present moment. Focusing on our senses helps to reconnect with the world around us as well as the world inside of us in a calming and peaceful way.

“Refuge to the man is the mind, refuge to the mind is mindfulness.” -Buddha

