

MINDFUL AWARENESS PRACTICE IN DAILY LIVING

In its most advanced stages, mindful awareness practice evolves into a state of continual present awareness. The practitioner transitions from separate moments of mindful awareness practice to a seamless state of continuous, compassionate attention to the here and now. However, for most of us, including those who practice mindfulness regularly, it is all too easy to “get it and forget it.” Thus, a mindfulness practice that is interwoven into one’s life is important as a reminder to return to a mindful state. It is a means to connect within, connect with others, and connect with the present moment.

To support you in that process, this tool presents helpful hints, four mindful awareness exercises, and a resources list. Note: for an example of a basic seated practice, refer to the [“Mindful Awareness”](#) overview and the [“Practicing Mindful Awareness with Patients: 3-Minute Pauses”](#) tool.

HELPFUL HINTS

ADOPT A “BEGINNER’S MIND”

Try to approach the practice of mindful awareness with curiosity and openness. This will bring about a state of mind often referred to as a “beginner’s mind,” where each moment is met with an inquisitive mind free of preconceived notions and the bias of past experience. In a beginner’s state of mind, we don’t rely on existing routines, expectations, or patterns to carry us mindlessly through an experience we perceive as familiar. Rather we adopt a blank-slate mentality that allows for endless possibilities and constant discovery. This enables us to stay grounded in the ever-unfolding present moment and make compassionate space for what we experience and notice.

PRACTICE FLEXIBILITY

The practices presented here are suggestions for fostering mindful awareness in your experience of daily living. Tailor these exercises to your individual needs. There is no one size fits all for mindful awareness practice. Notice what works and what doesn’t work for you.

ALLOCATE ADEQUATE TIME

Daily practice is the surest way to mastery. Start with 5 minutes per day, and gradually increase your practice time. A reasonable goal is 20-45 minutes per day. Many practices can be part of activities you are already regularly doing, like eating and transportation. There is no ceiling recommendation for practice time, as ultimately your life becomes the

practice. After all, your mind is with you wherever you go, and mindful awareness can be as well.

PRACTICE PATIENCE

Beginners and seasoned practitioners alike experience lapses of attention and difficulty with maintaining present-moment awareness. This is normal and expected: This is part of the practice. When your attention wanders, simply take a deep breath, noting the sensation of the inhalation and the exhalation. Resume practice wherever you left off. There is no need to chastise the wandering mind; wandering is what minds do. Gentle redirection is all that is required.

It's sometimes tempting to give up mindful and meditative practices. Many of us can find ourselves thinking, "My mind just races too much to do that kind of thing" or "I'm not good at that." However, we practice mindful awareness to nurture and grow the skill of sustained and compassionate attention to the present moment. If we already had this skill, we wouldn't need to practice anything. It can be difficult and at times uncomfortable, but with practice gradually the wandering mind will be brought back to the present moment with less and less distraction and resistance. Practice makes presence!

PRACTICES

MINDFUL EATING

Eating has far-reaching health benefits and consequences for individuals, societies, and the planet. The following exercise can help you to bring more awareness to your eating behaviors, while helping you to cultivate present-moment awareness.

1. Find the most comfortable eating position for your body, facing your food.
2. Minimize distractions. Avoid screens (e.g., phone, computer, television), background noise, print materials, and other stimuli.
3. Note your internal state.
 - Do you feel hungry? Thirsty?
 - What is your emotional state—happy, sad, angry, frustrated, anxious, exhausted, energized, or neutral?
4. Regard what is on the table in front of you. Try not to label it as anything specific; rather, ask questions:
 - How does it look? Is the color bright, dull, varied, or uniform?
 - Does it appear hot, warm, or cold?
 - Does it appear dry or moist?
 - Do you detect an aroma from the food? How would you describe this aroma?
5. Take the first bite.

6. Put down whatever is in your hand—the food and/or your utensil. Note the first aspects of your experience with this bite of food, including the following:
 - Temperature. Frozen, cold, cool, warm, hot, or super-hot?
 - Texture. Is it soft, firm, chewy, creamy, brittle, light, or dense?
 - Flavor. Is it mild, bland, sour, sweet, savory, salty, spicy, pungent, or rich?
 - Intensity. Mild, moderate, or extreme?
7. Take the first swallow.
 - Is the food easy or difficult to swallow?
 - How does this food feel passing from the mouth, to the esophagus, to the stomach?
8. Now take the next bite. With each bite, consider your ongoing experience with this food.
 - Continue to note the temperature, texture, flavor, and intensity.
 - How does this food feel in your stomach?
 - How do you feel, looking at the remainder of your portion?
 - At what point do you begin to feel full by this food? At what point do you feel entirely full by this food?
 - At what point do you decide to stop eating this food?
9. After eating, note how you feel.
 - Do you feel hungry, thirsty, satisfied, full, or overly full?
 - What is your emotional state?
 - Notice with kindness and compassion: this isn't about judging or changing our experience in this moment. We are simply bringing awareness to our physical and emotional states in this practice.
10. Close your eating activity with a deep breath before moving on with your day.

Eating with this degree of attention to your experience may initially seem cumbersome or frustrating, and it can bring up challenging emotions linked to food and eating. Be kind to yourself during and after this practice. Honor yourself for eating and feeling differently. With time, you may find you are better able to practice this pause to nourish yourself and body with both food and mindful awareness.

2. BODY SCAN

The body scan practice is a personal internal awareness inventory that can be done in many ways. This exercise invites you to tune in to the experience of various parts of the body. This is an effort to bring full awareness to the status of the body, *not* to change the status of the body. You may benefit from practicing in relative peace and quiet with the eyes closed in the beginning, but ultimately this practice will be useful to you no matter your surroundings or circumstance. This exercise can take five minutes or more than an hour, depending on how you choose to practice and your familiarity with the technique.

1. Find the most comfortable position for your body. The first few times you do this practice, you might try lying on your back with your eyes closed.
2. Take five slow, deep breaths. Feel the rise of the belly as you breathe in, and the fall of the belly as you breathe out. Imagine you draw the breath in through the soles of the feet and release the breath out through the top of the head. Continue to breathe slowly and deeply throughout the exercise.
3. Note the sensations in your body as a whole. What information is your body giving you? What does your body ask you to recognize?
4. Now begin the sequential survey of each body area.
 - Begin with the toes of the left foot. Note the sensations they are sending you. Do you feel cool air, a soft blanket, a scratchy sock, or a confining shoe? Perhaps you don't feel anything. This is okay; simply spend a few moments in the experience of not feeling anything. Once you have fully experienced the status of your left toes, take a deep breath, and let go of the left toes. Let the sensation from this body area fade away.
 - Next move to the sole of the left foot. Note the sensations it is sending you. Note the lack of sensation if that is the case. Once you have fully experienced the status of the sole of the left foot, take a deep breath, and let go of the sole of the foot. Let the sensation from this body area fade away.
 - Continue the noticing of each body area with your full concentration. From the sole of the left foot, transition to:
 - The top of the left foot
 - The ankle
 - Shin
 - Calf
 - Knee
 - Thigh
 - Hip
 - Pelvis
 - The right lower extremity (in the same manner as the left)
 - Return to the pelvis
 - The abdomen(belly)
 - The lower, middle, and upper back
 - Chest
 - Left fingers
 - Left hand, wrist, forearm, upper arm, shoulder
 - The right upper extremity (in the same manner as the left)
 - Neck
 - Face
 - Scalp
 - Crown of the head

- Once you finish with an area, take a deep breath and let that area go. If your concentration lapses, take a deep breath and pick up where you left off.
5. Close the practice by returning to the breath. Take five deep breaths, noting the rise and fall of the abdomen. Imagine inhaling through the soles of the feet and exhaling through the top of the head.

You can shift the timing of the meditation by focusing on more or fewer sections or parts of the body during the scan.

For a voice-guided body scan practice, visit the University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine [digital video library](#) and click “14. Body Scan.”

3. MINDFUL TRANSIT

How do you normally spend your transit time? Typically, we end up lost in thought, unaware of most of the details of how we arrived at our destination. However, if we are paying attention, the physical transition from point A to point B offers a rich opportunity to practice mindful awareness. Whether we are walking, cycling, driving, or using public transportation, our journeys present an enticing diversity of sensory stimuli for mindful practice. Incorporate the following exercise into your daily travels to refresh old travel routes as you practice mindful awareness.

1. Avoid distractions like radio, headphones, screens, print materials, food, and beverages. These divert your attention away from the transit experience.
2. See. Pay attention to visual stimuli. Observe your surroundings with fresh eyes, noting colors, shapes, textures, sizes, and movements of the things you see. Try not to name or judge what you see, rather use this as an opportunity to simply see.
3. Hear. Pay attention to auditory stimuli. Are the sounds around you loud, soft, harsh, continuous, intermittent, high-pitched, or low-pitched? Note the directionality of the sounds you hear.
4. Smell. Breathe casually through your nose and pay attention to any smells you encounter. Now take a deep breath through your nose, and simply observe any smells that you happen to notice.
5. Taste. Is your mouth open or closed? Do you taste anything?
6. Feel. What are your points of physical contact with your surroundings (e.g., hands on the steering wheel, feet on the pedals, backside on the seat, back touching the seat)? What sensations arise at these points of contact? What sensations arise in your body? Are your shoulders relaxed, tense, or neutral? What about your jaw, your neck, and your back? Do any emotions come up?
7. As you travel, continue to attend to what you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel.
8. When you arrive at your destination, carry this attention into the rest of your activities for a richer experience of your day.

4. MINDFUL MOVEMENT

This practice asks you to bring awareness to places in the body where we tend to carry stress, observing how it feels to invite these areas to soften.

1. Find the most comfortable position for your body.
2. Take five slow deep breaths. Feel the rise of the abdomen as you inhale, and the fall of the abdomen as you exhale.
3. Relax and release the jaw.
 - Bring awareness to the left aspect of the jaw. Is this area tense, relaxed, or neutral?
 - You may notice that the upper and lower teeth on the left are clenched together. Separating them brings awareness and relaxation to the jaw.
 - Note the status of the right jaw and separate the teeth.
 - Take a slow, deep breath, and observe how it feels to have the back teeth separated, and the jaw relaxed.
4. Relax and release the neck.
 - Bring awareness to your neck, noting whether the neck feels tense, relaxed, or neutral.
 - Hold your neck in a neutral position, looking straight ahead, with the back of the neck lengthened, and the chin slightly tucked.
 - Turn your head to look over your right shoulder. Take one deep breath before returning to neutral.
 - Repeat, looking to the left.
 - Raise your chin so that intersection of the wall in front of you with the ceiling comes into view. Take one deep breath before returning to neutral.
 - Lower the chin as far toward the chest as possible without straining. Take one deep breath before returning to neutral.
 - Bring the right ear down toward the right shoulder, leaving the shoulder relaxed. Take one deep breath before returning to neutral.
 - Repeat on the left side.
 - Take a slow, deep breath, and observe how it feels to have the neck relaxed.
5. Relax and release the shoulders.
 - Bring awareness to the shoulders, noting whether the shoulders feel tense, relaxed, or neutral.
 - Raise the shoulders toward the ears. Inhale deeply and allow the shoulders to relax down with the exhalation.
 - Roll the shoulders forward three times.
 - Roll the shoulders backward three times
 - Allow the shoulders to come to rest in a relaxed, neutral position.
 - Take a slow, deep breath, and observe how it feels to have the shoulders relaxed.
6. Take five slow, deep breaths. Feel the rise of the abdomen as you inhale, and the fall of the abdomen as you exhale.

7. Maintain your awareness of the jaw, the neck, and the shoulders throughout your daily activities, and repeat this exercise whenever you feel tension building in these areas. This will help keep you tuned in to your moment-to-moment experience, as well as encourage relaxation.

RESOURCES

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- “[Mindful Awareness](https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/self-care/mindful-awareness.asp)”: <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/self-care/mindful-awareness.asp>
- “[Practicing Mindful Awareness with Patients: 3-Minute Pauses](https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/tools/practicing-mindful-awareness-patient.asp)”: <https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTHLIBRARY/tools/practicing-mindful-awareness-patient.asp>

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This Whole Health tool was made possible through a collaborative effort between the University of Wisconsin Integrative Health Program, VA Office of Patient Centered Care and Cultural Transformation, and Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation.