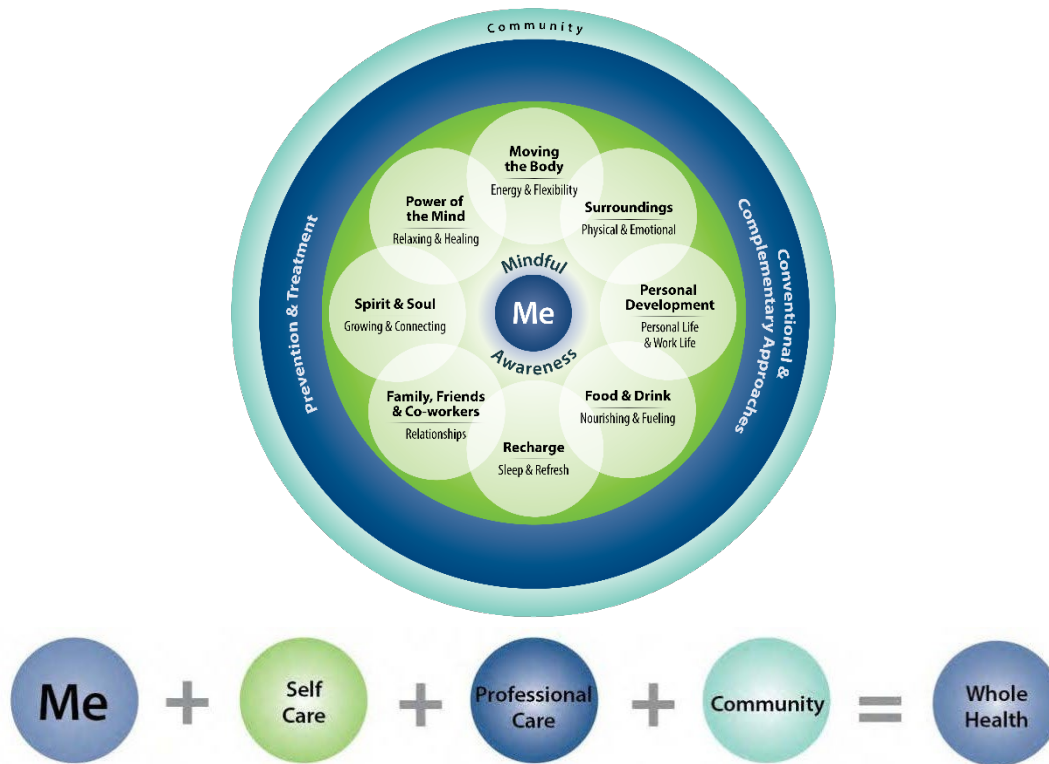


## An Introduction to Mindful Awareness



Whole Health is an approach to health care that empowers and enables YOU to take charge of your health and well-being and live your life to the fullest. It starts with YOU. It is fueled by the power of knowing yourself and what will really work for you in your life. Once you have some ideas about this, your team can help you with the skills, support, and follow up you need to reach your goals.

All resources provided in these handouts are reviewed by VHA clinicians and Veterans. No endorsement of any specific products is intended. Best wishes!

<https://www.va.gov/wholehealth/>

## An Introduction to Mindful Awareness

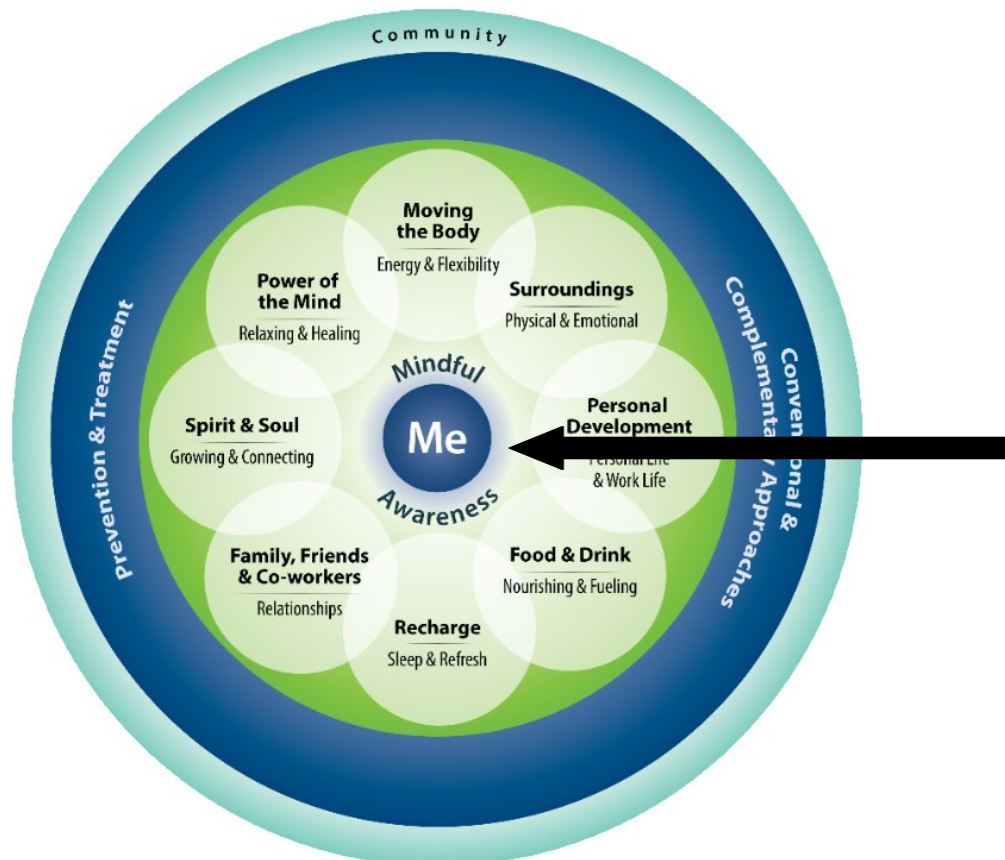
### What is mindful awareness?

Mindful awareness is paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.<sup>1</sup>

Did you ever drive or walk somewhere and later not remember seeing anything along the way? Or did you eat a meal and, before you knew it, your food was gone without really enjoying it? It is easy to go through daily life on autopilot. Perhaps you were mulling over something that has happened in the past. Or maybe you were anticipating or worrying about something that will happen in the future. But what about the present? Are you at times so caught up in the past or future that you are not fully experiencing the present? If so, you are like most people. It is possible to learn a different way to relate to the world, with greater awareness. Mindful awareness can do a lot to help us live healthier, fuller lives.

### Why is mindful awareness important?

Mindful awareness is at the heart of Whole Health. You can see this depicted in the Circle of Health below. Mindful awareness helps you to be aware of thoughts and feelings. Yet you don't focus on them. Instead, mindful awareness helps you focus on the present and what is most important to you.



### **How can I better understand what mindful awareness is?**

You can try the following exercise to get a better sense of mindful awareness.

#### **Breath Awareness Practice**

Sit comfortably with your feet planted firmly on the floor. Explore lengthening your spine, allowing it to stretch out like a string of pearls. Now, for the next two minutes, you are invited to turn all of your awareness to your breathing. Do not change how you breathe. Just pay attention to how it feels to breathe in and breathe out and to the pauses between your breaths.

How easy was it to focus your attention on your breathing for two straight minutes?

Consider taking two additional minutes to repeat the exercise. This time, when your thoughts wander away from your breath, gently return your attention to your breathing. If a judgment arises, simply notice that this is a thought. Then bring your attention back to your breathing. **When your mind wanders, be gentle with yourself.** All of our minds wander. That's what minds do. It's OK. When you notice your mind wandering, simply bring your attention back to your breath.

You have now practiced mindful awareness. Do not be concerned if you had trouble completing the exercise above without distractions or judgments. Mindful awareness grows with practice. Over time and with practice, it can become easier and more natural.

### **How can I learn to be more mindful?**

You can practice mindful awareness on your own as you go about your daily life. Or you can take a class. Taking a class provides several benefits. You commit time to practice. A teacher is available to answer questions that come up as you practice. And you hear what works for others. Veterans may find it meaningful to share experiences with other Veterans in a class setting. Two well-known classes are mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT).

- **Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR).** Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD, developed MBSR in 1979. His goal was to help patients with stress, chronic pain, and illness. MBSR trains people in mindfulness meditation. It helps them use it for the challenges and adventures of everyday life.<sup>2</sup> MBSR is an eight-week program—a total of 31 hours. MBSR includes meditation, mindful movement, group discussion, and practice at home.
- **Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT).** MBCT is an eight-week class designed to prevent relapse in people who have recovered from depression.<sup>3</sup> It involves 31 hours of training. MBCT can show you how your mood and the way you think may help cause depression and trigger relapse. In MBCT you learn to recognize early signs of relapse. You can then turn away from negative moods and thoughts before they become severe.

Many VA medical centers offer mindfulness training. Contact the VA medical center in your area to learn about available classes. Whether you practice mindful awareness on your own or take a class, you may be interested in audio files to help you practice. See the resources at the end of this document for audio files available from the VA.

### **I am an older Veteran. I wonder if I am too old to learn mindful awareness?**

Mindful awareness can be helpful to people of any age. Overall, older adults have been found to be more mindful than younger adults.<sup>4</sup> So, practicing mindful awareness may be more natural for them.<sup>5</sup> In the past few years, some studies have especially focused on MBSR and MBCT for older adults. A review of 15 studies found that most older adults liked the classes and found them helpful.<sup>5</sup> The classes especially helped with anxiety, depression, stress, and dealing with pain.

### **Are there any concerns I should know about if I want to practice mindful awareness?**

In general, mindful awareness is a safe practice. As with any new practice, some people may initially feel uncomfortable. For most people the benefits far outweigh any harm. Some people feel a bit of emotional distress when first starting mindful awareness practice. This can occur as you become more aware of your behaviors, emotions, and thoughts. If you have a mental health challenge such as strong anxiety, a psychotic disorder, or severe posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), it is important to practice under the guidance of a professional.

### **In general, what are the benefits of mindful awareness?**

Mindful awareness can help you live your life more fully, with all its joys and challenges. In general, mindful awareness may

- Improve the quality of your life by helping you experience more moments of your life
- Help you see things as they really are, by observing—but not judging—your experiences.

### **What other studies have been done?**

Studies are being done to learn how helpful mindful awareness is for specific conditions. Many study results are promising. Mindfulness meditation is the form of mindful awareness that is studied most often. Research continues. Some important findings are listed below.

#### Physical Body

- Mindfulness meditation led to longer periods of relaxation.<sup>6</sup>
- Meditation increased activity in the part of the brain linked to positive mood.<sup>7</sup>

#### Immune System

- Mindfulness training strengthened the body's immune system. (These are parts that protect the body and fight disease).<sup>8-10</sup>

### Mental Health

- Mindfulness training reduced mental health symptoms in people with a number of different chronic diseases.<sup>11-13</sup>
- Mindfulness training decreased symptoms for patients with depression and anxiety.<sup>14-16</sup>
- MBCT helped to prevent relapse in people who had major depression.<sup>8,17-19</sup> In one study, MBCT helped 75% of people with a history of major depression to get off and remain off their medication.<sup>19</sup>
- Findings were mixed for PTSD. In one study, the PTSD symptoms of combat Veterans improved following MBCT.<sup>20</sup> MBSR did not reduce PTSD symptoms in some studies, but did in others.<sup>21,22</sup> One of these studies found that MBSR helped Veterans with PTSD function better.<sup>22</sup> Also, their depression symptoms decreased. However, MBSR did not reduce other symptoms of PTSD.<sup>22</sup>

### Chronic Pain

- Findings were mixed for chronic back pain. Some studies showed improvement following MBSR and others did not.<sup>23</sup> One study found that MBSR decreased pain intensity, disability, and medication use.<sup>23</sup> It improved sleep.
- Again, research found mixed results for patients with fibromyalgia.<sup>24,25</sup> One study found large improvement in many fibromyalgia symptoms following MBSR.<sup>24</sup>

### Other Findings

- Mindful awareness assists with the treatment of alcohol and substance misuse.<sup>26</sup>
- MBSR reduced irritable bowel symptoms in a study of Veterans.<sup>27</sup>

### **For you to consider:**

- Do you want to explore mindful awareness further? Is this something you want to work on?
- Is there anything in particular that grabs your attention in this handout?
- Are you interested in taking a MBSR class?
- Have you had clinical depression? If so, are you interested in learning more about MBCT?
- For some ways to practice mindful awareness on your own, see the Whole Health handout "[Mindful Awareness Practice in Daily Living.](#)"

The information in this handout is general. **Please work with your health care team to use the information in the best way possible to promote your health and happiness.**

**For more information:**

ORGANIZATION	RESOURCES	WEBSITE
Veterans Health Administration	A variety of Whole Health handouts on mindful awareness	<a href="https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp">https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/veteran-handouts/index.asp</a>
VA "Whole Health" website	Mindfulness: Embracing the Moment (Describes one Veteran's experience with mindfulness)	<a href="https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/features/Mindfulness Embracing the Moment.asp">https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/features/Mindfulness Embracing the Moment.asp</a>
VA "Whole Health" website "Circle of Health"	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructional videos on mindfulness</li> <li>• Audio files and podcasts on guided meditation</li> </ul>	<a href="https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/circle-of-health/mindfulness-awareness.asp">https://www.va.gov/WHOLEHEALTH/circle-of-health/mindfulness-awareness.asp</a> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Click on "Video Resources"</li> <li>• Click on "Guided Meditation Audio Files"</li> </ul>
VA "The War Related Illness & Injury Study Center's STAR Well-Kit" website	In this video, Veteran Patrick Crehan discusses benefits of mindfulness meditation.	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufbdtF5jbBs&amp;index=8&amp;list=PL3AQ_IVoBEyzic-3QwlrHbtQokOCRCEk4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ufbdtF5jbBs&amp;index=8&amp;list=PL3AQ_IVoBEyzic-3QwlrHbtQokOCRCEk4</a>
VA website	Mindfulness Coach App (Designed to help Veterans, Service-members, and others learn to practice mindfulness.)	<a href="https://mobile.va.gov/app/mindfulness-coach">https://mobile.va.gov/app/mindfulness-coach</a>
VA "Health Services Research & Development" website	Evidence Map of Mindfulness (Written at a level for clinicians)	<a href="http://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/publications/esp/cam_mindfulness-REPORT.pdf">http://www.hsrd.research.va.gov/publications/esp/cam_mindfulness-REPORT.pdf</a>

*This handout was written for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) by Charlene Luchterhand MSSW, Education and Research Coordinator, Integrative Health Program, University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health. It is based in part on an overview for clinicians, Mindful Awareness, written by Adrienne Hampton, MD. The handout was reviewed and edited by Veterans and VHA subject matter experts.*

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