

Spirit of Mindfulness

When reviewing research about emotional health and well being, it can be very difficult to say that we are 100% sure about *anything*. Psychological study is one of probability: instead of telling us what causes what, it tells us what we can do to improve our odds of feeling better. However, two areas of study come close to being definitive: if we all meditated and exercised regularly, we'd be physically and emotionally healthier. Period...case closed!

In my Life Coaching practice, I teach mindfulness skills, because they are the easiest and most practical way to weave meditative practices into a busy, modern lifestyle. I'm fairly sure that the effect of mindfulness practice is not as powerful as meditation when it comes to boosting health, but mindfulness helps to reduce daily stress significantly, and it is well established as assisting emotional well being—research has shown effectiveness for depression, anxiety, borderline personality disorder, trauma PTSD, attention deficit disorder, substance abuse, and more.

Given the research, you'd think that most people would try to meditate but might settle on a mindfulness practice. However, some people find that even the less demanding practice of mindfulness is not to their liking—most often, people become frustrated that they cannot master the technique quickly enough, or they give up before they see it as being useful.

When working with people who choose not to practice mindfulness, I emphasize something that I call the *spirit of mindfulness*. In my opinion, the spirit of mindfulness is actually more important than establishing a consistent mindfulness practice.

Let's take a look at what I mean by the spirit of mindfulness....

If you are going about your day in the spirit of mindfulness, nothing is a higher priority than focusing on what's going on in the present moment and fully participating with it. On the surface, this sounds easy. But if you take a good, honest look at things, it's amazing how often *all of us* violate this spirit.

For example, if you are walking to your car after class, work, shopping, or some other activity, then nothing is more important than getting to your car, driving home safely, and enjoying yourself as you do it. So, as you walk to your car, thoughts running through your mind about how much money you just spent, what you will make for dinner, a fight that you had with your boss, the economy, current wars and famine, marital woes, lack-of-a-spouse woes, and so on, are **NOT** in the spirit of mindfulness. When we allow such thoughts to run through our minds, we don't give our current activity "our all," we introduce the unnecessary stress of thinking about one thing while doing another, we hurt our physical and emotional well being, we worry about situations that we cannot possibly do anything about in that moment, and we reinforce a type of "self centered" approach to life that honors the notions in our head more than real life.

So, what follows on the next page are a few tips for honoring the spirit of mindfulness, even when you do not feel like doing mindfulness exercises.

Hallowell's worry technique: Dr. Edward Hallowell suggests that, when worried about something: 1) If you can do something **RIGHT NOW** that will help reduce your worry, then do it; otherwise, 2) Let it go—accept that you've done all you can do for now.

One moment at a time: Make a deal with yourself that you'll take your life one moment at a time, instead of trying to think through your life in advance. Just do “this morning” or “this evening,” and let concerns of future events leave your mind. Just like the AA saying: One day at a time! And remember that with most complicated decisions in life, you actually have to take a little bit of action before you'll know what to decide and what to do; when it gets complicated, you can't 100% think it through ahead of time...let life guide you as you go.

The journey and destination metaphor: I'm sure you've noticed in your life that, once you reach a goal, feeling good about it doesn't last long before you start wanting more. Then, you set new goals, and it's off to the races again! Remind yourself that you spend most of your time striving toward your goal and very, very little time enjoying its achievement. So, doesn't it make sense that it's important that you enjoy the journey more than reaching the destination? Enjoying the journey means engaging in the moment, making it as pleasant as possible, and not getting too concerned about the goal, the reward, the finishing point, how close or far you are from the end, and so on.

Lower your expectations: Seriously! One way we all make ourselves miserable involves comparing the present moment with how we expected it to be, or comparing the present moment with some notion of how close we should now be to our goal. The unavoidable outcome of this activity is to feel disappointed about the gap between what you're *getting* versus what you *wanted*, even if what you're getting is actually kind of nice! Pursue goals in the moment with joyful desire instead of driven expectation.

Don't compare yourself to others: If you're observing other people as a low-key, peaceful way to get new ideas for things that you might like to try, that's fine. If you're comparing yourself with others as a way to judge whether you are OK or not, then you're risking misery. (You can tell the difference between the two approaches by *how you feel* while you're doing them.) Generally, I ask my clients not to use life as some kind of “referendum on your OK-ness.”

Don't let your problems live rent free in your head: This is another great AA saying. Most people would agree that they don't like their problems and that their problems are their enemies. However, they allow these enemies to hang around in their thoughts, chewing up precious energy, focus, health, peace of mind, and well being. Evict them...kick them to the curb!

Stop demanding to be entertained: One reason why people give up mindfulness practice is because they feel *bored*. One client reported this to me about his attempts to practice while driving. I asked him, “What the heck else did you expect to be doing while driving? Watching a movie, cooking and eating gourmet food, or exercising?” Allow yourself a restful time out from the grind.

“I am king of the WORLD!” humor: One way to retreat from an in-your-head, self-centered, overly controlling approach to life is to chuckle when you slip into that mode. “Because I am queen of the world, my boss should just **KNOW** that I deserve a raise without me having to negotiate for it. I decree that it shall **BE!**” Yeah, riight! Don't *judge* yourself...just laugh it off!