



Mindfulness for your mental health

Natese Dockery, PhD
Assistant Clinical Professor

In recent years, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, more and more people are recognizing how important it is to take care of their mental health. Just like your physical health, your mental health plays an essential role in your overall well-being. When you're not mentally healthy, it can harm your physical health and even make you sick. Unfortunately, there has been a rise in the number of adults in the U.S. experiencing mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression. You can use mindfulness to improve and/or maintain your mental health.



What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a practice you can use to improve your mental health. Mindfulness is being fully present in the moment. It is about paying attention to what is happening around and inside you without getting too overwhelmed. Mindfulness focuses on the “here and now.” It forces you to accept your feelings and thoughts. Research shows that practicing mindfulness can reduce stress and improve your overall mental health and well-being.

There are several mindfulness practices that can help you improve and/or maintain your mental health. Examples include grounding techniques, guided imagery, mindfulness meditation, and journaling.

Signs and symptoms of poor mental health

Recognizing the signs and symptoms of mental health issues is vital for individuals to understand their mental well-being and to know when it might be time to seek mental health support. Example signs and symptoms of poor mental health include:

- Trouble concentrating
- Trouble sleeping
- Changes in appetite
- Extreme weight loss or weight gain
- Feeling sad or down
- Excessive worry
- Suicidal thoughts

Note: This list is not exhaustive and is just a starting point. If you are concerned about your mental health or the mental health of someone you know, seek help from a mental health professional. If you are in crisis, reach out to the National Crisis and Suicide Lifeline at 988.

Tips on how to incorporate mindfulness into your life

1. **Start small.** Mindfulness does not have to be hard. Try easy things like taking slow, deep breaths to relax.
2. **Set aside time in your day to practice.** Set aside a little time each day to practice mindfulness. Doing it regularly makes it easier to form it as a habit.
3. **Don't worry about being perfect.** It might feel strange or silly at first. That's OK! Just notice those feelings and gently bring your attention back to the present moment.
4. **Be kind to yourself.** Mindfulness takes time to learn. Don't get discouraged if it doesn't feel easy right away. Keep practicing, and celebrate your progress.

How to engage in mindfulness practices

The 5-4-3-2-1 technique is a simple way to engage when you want to try out mindfulness practices. This grounding technique involves identifying five things you can see, four things you can hear, three things you can feel, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.

1. **Find a quiet space** where you won't be disturbed.
2. **Close your eyes** and take a few deep breaths.
3. **Begin to focus on your senses.** Open your eyes.

- ▷ **Identify five things you can see.** These might be objects in your room, the colors of the sky, or the patterns on your clothes.
- ▷ **Name four things you can hear.** This could be the sound of your breath, the ticking of a clock, or a bird chirping outside.
- ▷ **Identify three things you can feel.** Notice the sensations on your skin, the weight of your body in your chair, or the sun's warmth on your face.
- ▷ **Name two things you can smell.** This might be the scent of your favorite perfume, the smell of food cooking, or the fresh air coming in through the window.
- ▷ **Identify one thing you can taste.** This could be the taste of your food, the dryness of your mouth, or the coolness of a drink.

Another popular mindfulness technique is progressive muscle relaxation. **Progressive muscle relaxation (PMR)** is an exercise used to relieve stress. To do this exercise, do these four steps:

1. **Find a tranquil space.** Find a comfortable, preferably quiet place where you are not distracted.
2. **Focus on one muscle group at a time.** Begin with your toes and work your way up to your head.
3. **Tense and release.** Tense each muscle group for about 5 seconds while breathing in. Then, release the tension and allow the muscle to relax completely before moving to the next muscle group.
4. **Repeat for complete relaxation.** Continue tensing and releasing each muscle group in sequence, until you have worked your way up your entire body.

Mindfulness misconceptions

[X] **Mindfulness is a type of religion.** Some people think mindfulness is a religion because some religions use practices like meditation. But mindfulness itself isn't a religion. It's more about paying attention to the present moment without judgment, and relaxing.

[X] **Mindfulness is a “fix” for mental health.** People sometimes think mindfulness can cure mental health problems. While mindfulness can help people feel better, it is not a replacement for things like therapy or medication which may also be necessary for people with more severe mental health issues.

[X] **Mindfulness is all about breathing and ignoring your thoughts.** Some people think mindfulness is just about breathing deeply and trying not to think about anything. But it's more than that. While breathing is important, it's about being present in the moment without judging your thoughts or feelings.

Summary

By incorporating mindfulness practices into your life, you have the potential to improve your mental health and overall well-being. But remember, it takes time to see a difference. Don't give up if you don't feel better right away. It is important to realize that not all things work for everyone. Try out a few different techniques before you completely give up on mindfulness. With a bit of practice and patience, you can discover what works best for you.

References

<https://www.apa.org/topics/mindfulness/meditation>

<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr213.pdf>

<https://www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/>

Shankland, R., Tessier, D., Strub, L., Gauchet, A. and Baeyens, C. (2021), Improving Mental Health and Well-Being through Informal Mindfulness Practices: An Intervention Study. *Appl Psychol Health Well-Being*, 13: 63-83. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12216>

<https://newsinhealth.nih.gov/2021/06/mindfulness-your-health>

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/consumer-health/in-depth/mindfulness-exercises/art-20046356>

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, physical or mental disability or reprisal or retaliation for prior civil rights activity. Reasonable accommodation of disability may be available with prior notice. Program information may be made available in languages other than English. University of Kentucky, Kentucky State University, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Kentucky Counties, Cooperating.