

Wellness Tips

Cultivating Mindful Awareness

Given our accelerated pace of life and the achievement-based expectations we carry, often we fall into 'doing mode' rather than 'being mode'. We forget we are human beings and not human doings.

What drives much of our doing is our thinking. Thinking, rather than awareness, tends to be what we default to. While nothing is wrong with thinking itself, thought that is "not held and examined in the larger field of awareness...can run amok" posits Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Deepening the capacity for internal awareness is transformational for well-being. You can do this by practicing mindfulness.

Cultivating mindfulness encourages us to *shift from doing to being* by honing attention and awareness. It allows you to observe and describe your experience from a place of gentle detachment. It allows you to be aware of what is happening in the here-and-now with curiosity rather than evaluation and judgment. It allows you to notice things as they are, without trying to force your experience to be different.

Mindful awareness doesn't require sitting like a pretzel or repeating a mantra. It doesn't require following a guided meditation. It just requires *turning your attention to the present moment, with intention, non-judgmentally*.

How do we begin cultivating mindfulness? What are we actually practicing?

1. **Observation:** Notice inside and outside of you. Be aware of sensations, thoughts, and feelings. Push nothing away, cling to nothing. Just observe your experience.
2. **Description:** Label what you are observing and aware of using fact-based descriptive words only (e.g., "I'm noticing bright light"). Describe your feelings as they arise (e.g., "I am noticing frustration is present"). Describe your thoughts as they enter awareness (e.g., "I am noticing worries about money").
3. **Participation:** Throw yourself into your here-and-now activity. Be involved without evaluation or judgment. If you're cooking, cook. If you're staring at the wall, really look at that wall.

Remember, core components of mindfulness are *intentionality* and *non-judgment*. Seek to do one thing at a time with your full attention. No need to evaluate the experience as good/bad, right/wrong, positive/negative. Stick to what you can directly observe and allow each moment to be what it is.

Cerebral background chatter will emerge. Simply notice if you fall into thinking mode. No need to judge your mind for thinking. No need to judge emotions that arise. Simply be aware of what emerges, hold it gently, and turn your attention back to what you want to focus on.

For many, it can be helpful to anchor yourself to your breath. A yoga teacher once told my class *take your breath with you for company wherever you might go*. Observing the inhale and exhale of each breath can bring you to the here-and-now. Below is a short breath-based practice if you'd like to try:

Take ten slow deep breaths. Focus on the rise and fall of your rib cage and the air flowing in and out of your lungs. Notice the sensations as air flows in and what you feel when air flows out. Focus on emptying your lungs. Let any thoughts and images come and go in the background, as if they were cars passing by on the street outside. When a new thought or image appears, acknowledge its presence, as if you were nodding at the passing motorist. As you do this, keep your attention on the breath as it flows in and out of your lungs. You may find it helpful to say to yourself "thinking" when a thought or image appears. This helps you acknowledge and let be. Sometimes a thought will capture your attention and take you away from the exercise. When you realize you've been caught up in thinking, just notice what distracted you and gently refocus on your breathing.

For beginners, another good starting place is practicing mindfulness of a daily activity. Start with something you don't have much thought or feeling about, such as brushing your teeth or washing the dishes. When engaging in this activity, just observe and describe without judgement or evaluation what you're sensing through smell, taste, touch, sight, and sound. What is most important is becoming aware of your awareness of the moment. As Dr. Kabat-Zinn states in *Mindfulness for Beginners* "Ultimately, the objects of attention are not as important as the attending itself."

From a state of awareness, Dr. Kabat-Zinn argues "our doing can come out of our being and be much more integrated and effective." We function well when we feel rooted and grounded in our being.

Cultivating mindful awareness is different from knowing about mindfulness. Cultivating mindfulness takes dedicated practice as many of us never learned this skill as youngsters. You're encouraged to make space for daily practice in order to reap the benefits.

If you'd like guided practice, download the Headspace app (available to CCOM students) or search online options. If you're interested in learning more, you can find more resources on the UIHC Mindfulness Programs website (<https://uihc.org/mindfulness-programs>), watch Dr. Kabat-Zinn explain mindfulness: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmEo6RI4Wvs>, or read some of the following books:

Mindfulness for Beginners (Jon Kabat-Zinn)

Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life (Jon Kabat-Zinn)

You Are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment (Thich Nhat Hanh)

If you'd like to talk with someone about cultivating mindful awareness, or for any other questions / concerns, feel free to contact the MSCC to talk with a counselor or schedule an appointment:

Medical Student Counseling Center osac-mscc@uiowa.edu 319-335-8056 1240 MERF

Check out the MSCC Website for past Wellness Tips:

<https://medicine.uiowa.edu/md/student-support/student-counseling/mscc-wellness-programs-and-resources>

Remember, life is really hard at times - be gentle with yourself!

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Pronouns: she/her