Mindfulness: The Key to Health and Wellness

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What Makes Up Our Experience of Reality?

- Thoughts
- Beliefs
- Emotions
- Sensations
- Physical Senses
- Perceptual Experiences
Our Focus For Now:

- Thoughts
- Emotions

What if I never find out who’s a good boy?
Thoughts

- Thoughts arise throughout the majority of our day.
- Thoughts feed our emotions and vice versa.
- Thoughts present as words, images, or a combination of both.
- We can take thoughts very seriously (especially the ones we’d be better to release)
- We don’t have to listen to our thoughts.
That is Very Important!

- We don’t have to listen to our thoughts.

- Your thoughts might be telling you otherwise right now.

- You don’t have to listen to those, either.

- It can be a strange idea, but when you experience it, it is incredibly powerful.
Emotions

- Aren’t bad or good.
- Are signals from our brain that we are either getting, or not getting what we want.
- Come with a physical feeling.
- Are specific to an object, unlike a mood which is vague.
- We’d like to be happy all the time. We may be able to note that’s not a reality, but parts of us hang on to that idea. This creates an interesting dilemma (at times).
So What Do We Do?

- There are many different ways of relating to life, but one approach can have an impact upon almost every aspect of our lives.

- That approach is...

[Totally obvious but obligatory build up of suspense despite everyone knowing what this presentation is about...]
Mindfulness

- An Ancient Practice
- Is a Natural Capacity Within Human Beings
- Isn’t Just for Hippies
Defining It Can Be Tricky

- There are many definitions of mindfulness floating around and some are very wrong unique.

- This is partly due to the nature of mindfulness, which is an ability, an action and a practice, but not necessarily an idea that replaces another idea.

- If thoughts were clouds, mindful awareness would be the sky.
This is What Google Says:

- Mindfulness - A mental state achieved by focusing one’s awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one’s feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique.

- It’s close enough – what really counts is practicing mindfulness.
Mindfulness Has Many Benefits

- Increased self-awareness
- Greater empathy and compassion
- Improved focus
- Reduced anxiety
- Improved decision-making skills
- Enhanced relationships
- A chance to live your life, not just think about it all the time!
Two General Categories of Mindfulness

**Formal**
- Periods of dedicated mindfulness practice, such as sitting meditation or walking meditation.

**Informal**
- Recognizing and accepting your experience at any given moment throughout the day.
Elements of Mindfulness – I KNOW Now

- Intentional
- Kind
- Non-Striving
- Open
- Witnessing
- Now (the present moment)
What is Your Mind Telling You?

- What thoughts are arising right now?
- Are you experiencing an emotion? How do you know?
- What happens when you start noticing?
- What happens when you finish the sentence: “I’m having the thought that...”
Life is Often Like This

- Something happens, we have a reaction, and we take it to be the truth.

- That last step of the previous slide, which asks you to finish the sentence: “I’m having a thought that...”, is the chance to interrupt our reactions and, instead, learn to respond.

- Responding means deliberately choosing thoughtful and value driven next steps.

- This recognition/acceptance is the informal practice of mindfulness that allows us the opportunity to respond.
Mindfulness of Thoughts (FYI)

- We are not trying to make our thoughts go away (it’ll backfire).

- We are not trying to create a glorious sense of liberation (but will totally accept such an experience).

- We are not trying to be without thoughts, but we are learning to let go of thoughts that aren’t helpful.

- We don’t need to have it all figured out.
How To: Mindfulness of Thoughts

- Take a moment to think of something you need to do for work.

- Say to yourself [not out loud] “I’m having the thought...[finish the sentence]”.

- Now, say to yourself, “I notice I’m having the thought...[finish the sentence]”.

- Repeat if you like.
What Was Your Experience Like?
Mindfulness of Emotions (FYI)

- The word “feeling” is quite literal – we feel things in our body.
- We may have learned to tune these feelings out.
- We aren’t trying to make them go away.
- Instead, we are looking to meet our experiences in a kind and accepting manner.
How To: Mindfulness of Emotions

- Bring to mind a not too pleasant memory of an experience you had - like a bad moment at work.

- Don’t focus on anything traumatic or the worst day EVER.

- As you think about it, notice what happens in your body.

- Places to tune into: the chest, abdomen, neck or face.
How To: Mindfulness of Emotions (cont.)

- Find the place in your body where you feel the strongest sensation (you can stop recalling the memory).

- Imagine that your breath is able to move in and out of that place on your body.

- As you breathe out, silently say “yes” in recognition of the permission you are giving that sensation to be present (not trying to make it go away).
What Was Your Experience Like?
How To: Mindful Breathing

- The aim is to bring awareness to the breath as it is.
- Pay attention to where you most strongly feel the sensation of breathing – try the body.
- Each time the mind naturally wanders off into thoughts or feelings, gently bring your attention back to the breath.
- Treat everything that arises as “no big deal” while you’re trying this.
What Was Your Experience Like?
But How is Mindfulness the Key to Health & Wellness?

- Mindfulness can be utilized at any moment in our waking lives.
- Mindfulness gives us the ability to respond rather than react – it gives us a choice!
- With this choice, we can break the cycles that keep us from living healthy lives.
Thoughts to Keep (for a bit)

- Mindfulness takes practice.
- The practice is simple, but life-changing.
- You need to have an experiential understanding of mindfulness to share it with others.
- You can practice mindfulness. The only thing that would say otherwise is a thought.
More Thoughts to Keep (for a bit)

- We aren’t trying to make a problem out of thoughts.
- We are aiming to utilize mindfulness to recognize what thoughts are arising, determine whether they are helpful, or not, and then choose to not engage the unhelpful thoughts.
- As we learn to not feed our unhelpful thoughts, we can choose better actions for our life.
- We have to watch out for the hidden agenda to make things “better” because mindfulness isn’t about fixing, it’s about flexing.
Introducing Mindfulness to Youth
Building Upon What You Just Learned
Introducing Mindfulness to Youth

- It’s best to focus upon an experiential introduction.

- Once a young person has experienced a mindful moment, then help them to understand the name for the experience.

- Playing a game is a great introduction.
How to: Mindful Breathing for Youth (Varying Ages)

- Kids have (sometimes) been exposed to breathing exercises and have many ideas floating around, including: “It doesn’t work.”

- Explain: “We aren’t trying to make anything work, we are just learning how to slow our roll; to pause.”

- To pause: Have them count their breaths, up to ten, and then prompt them to answer the question “What’s the best thing I can do now?”

- Note that when we pause, we can think more clearly and usually that means we get more of what we want and less of what we don’t.
How To: Mindfulness Breathing for Kids

- Breathing Buddies: A classic exercise that is being utilized in many schools - the use of a stuffed animal can help kids become aware of their breathing.

- Have the children lay on their backs and place the stuffed animal upon their abdomen.

- Instruct the participants to rock the stuffed animal to sleep by taking ten (or more) mindful breaths.
Mindfulness of Thoughts for Youth – Interesting Discussions

- How many thoughts do you think you have a day? Do you pay attention to all of them? If you can ignore some, I bet you could ignore some of the other ones that haven’t helped you get what you want.

- How long does a single thought last? Does any thought last forever? If not, that would mean that even our scariest thoughts won’t last forever.
How To: Mindfulness of Thoughts for Kids

- With kids, prompt them to shut their eyes and watch thoughts pass by, like they are watching a thought parade.

- Ask them to tell you what thoughts are going by in the parade. The capacity to recognize thoughts is a big accomplishment.

- Try it for 30 seconds to a minute. Increase the time if you feel it is necessary to create the experience.

- Offer praise.
How To: Mindfulness of Breathing for Teens

- Pausing, as mentioned above, or you can adapt this practice, such as taking 3 breaths instead of 10.

- Note to them that nobody will ever know if they are practicing mindfulness unless they mention it.

- Introduce it as a game, like...
Game: Keep Your Cool

- This game takes at least 2 participants, but is best with more.

- The object of the game is to have one person try to keep their focus while the others try to distract that individual, most commonly by making them laugh (a ground rule of respect is needed).

- Play a few rounds without introducing mindfulness, then have the person try “keeping their cool” by mindfully breathing while the others create distractions.
Processing: Keeping Your Cool

- Draw a discussion of the differences between playing the game with and without mindful breathing.

- Note that the distractions in the game are like distractions in life.

- Prompt a discussion of whether or not there are internal experiences that are similar to the “distractions”. Ideally, a connection to thoughts will be made.

- You could adapt this for one-on-one work.
How To: Mindfulness of Emotions for Teens

- You can create an experience similar to the one you practiced above, or...

- If experiencing a challenging emotion, prompt mindful awareness by asking them to bring attention to their chest.

- Have them give a name to their experience like “anger” or “tight”. Avoid personal language such as “I’m angry”.

- Have them pause by breathing ten breaths “through” the sensation, while giving permission to whatever catches their attention by saying “yes” (this takes a little practice).

- Frame it as having the strength to face challenges.
Keep In Mind

- It takes everyone practice to get this.
- Not everybody is going to be interested.
- If a young person only learns that they don’t have to listen to all of their thoughts, they have learned something amazing!
Resources

- Mindfulness is a hot topic these days. You can find countless articles online (but not all of them are great).

- **Mindful Schools** is well established at bringing mindfulness to young people and has online trainings for professionals.

- Jon Kabat-Zinn, who created Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) has authored many books. *Wherever You Go, There You Are* is a nice starting point for adults.

- Apps - try the free versions and see what you like. **Headspace** is a popular one.

- Research Peer Reviewed Journal Articles.
Questions???
Free Guided Meditation

- If you’d like a guided meditation that I recorded, please add your email to the list, or email me at john@mindfullyouth.org.

- It will be the only email I send – I don’t do promotional emails.
Thank You, Thank You Very Much.