

**SKILLS
FOR LIFE**
S E R I E S

MINDFULNESS

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What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is deliberately paying attention to current thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and environment without judgment (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). This awareness involves curiosity, acceptance, compassion, and kindness. Thus, being mindful means that a person is fully present in the current moment, without judging it (Baer et al., 2019; Bishop et al., 2004; Germer et al., 2013; Germer, 2004).

There are multiple ways of characterizing mindfulness, but the most common descriptors include the following:

- ▶ Self-regulated attention
- ▶ Orientation to experience



Self-regulated attention

- ▶ Maintaining vigilance for extended periods of time
- ▶ Flexible attention, or the ability to refocus attention once feelings, thoughts, or sensations have been detected
- ▶ Focusing your attention on current events, thoughts, feelings, sensations, and perceptions
- ▶ Acting with awareness, that is, concentrating on one thing at a time
- ▶ Inhibiting elaborative processing of experiences, thoughts, feelings, sensations, and perceptions

Orientation to experience

- ▶ Curiosity and openness: the willingness and readiness to subject oneself to both pleasant and unpleasant experiences
- ▶ Self-acceptance and self-compassion
- ▶ Avoiding irrational reactions to experiences
- ▶ Understanding your thoughts and feelings in a broader context, and being aware that they are relative and transitory
- ▶ Gaining insight into your mind's inner workings
- ▶ Decentering from one's own experiences, thoughts, feelings, sensations, and perceptions (not identifying with one's own experiences)
- ▶ Expressing your emotions, mood, perceptions, and thoughts in words

As a 21st century citizen with mindfulness skills, you should be able to do the following:

- ▶ Take your time to pay attention to what surrounds you.
- ▶ Stop and analyze the situation you live in.
- ▶ Live the current moment to the fullest, avoiding distraction.
- ▶ Avoid being reactive to what happens now.
- ▶ Have control of yourself.
- ▶ Be aware of what surrounds you and accept it.
- ▶ Be present, being aware of who you are.

Why Mindfulness?

Mindfulness improves well-being because it increases cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and environmental awareness. When cognitive and behavioral control are increased, people can have meaningful engagement with their environment (Carson & Langer, 2006). Therefore, mindfulness improves sleep quality and immunity and bolsters positive emotions, while it decreases anxiety, depression, stress, and burnout, and lowers negative emotions (Biegel et al., 2009; Bishop et al., 2004; Cheang et al., 2019; Davidson et al., 2003; Khoury et al., 2015). A mindful person breaks free from automatic thoughts, bad habits, and unhealthy behavioral patterns.

In school settings, mindfulness has shown to be very beneficial. For students it increases academic achievement and well-being, reduces risky behavior, and improves the quality of relationships with peers and teachers. Moreover, socioemotional skills are easier to develop when combined with mindfulness. When students are aware of their emotions, thoughts, and bodily sensations, they can regulate their emotions, impacting their behavior, stress levels, relationships, and ability to focus (Lantieri & Zakrzewski, 2015). In the same way, mindfulness also helps teachers to understand their emotions, to effectively communicate and relate with their students, and to set up positive learning environments (Jennings, 2015).

How to develop Mindfulness?

Mindfulness can be developed by practices that aim at sustaining the focus of attention on mental or physical objects, such as the breath, a sound, a part of your body, or a visual percept. This focused attention can be cultivated through meditation, certain forms of yoga and martial arts, or activities that are frequently incorporated into educational approaches (Lillard, 2011).

For adults, the two most widely used mindfulness-based programs are Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 2013) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) (Zhang et al., 2021). MBSR is an eight-week group-based program inspired by Buddhist meditative practices. It includes meditation instruction and practice, yoga exercises, group discussions, and individual support (Ivtzan & Hart, 2016). MBCT combines mindfulness with principles of cognitive behavioral therapy (Segal et al., 2004). It aims for participants to observe their own thoughts, understand the mechanisms by which negative automatic thoughts (NATs) trigger depressive symptoms, and sever the connection between NATs and habitual depressive emotional or behavioral responses (Barnhofer et al., 2009).

Work in developing mindfulness among children and youth, and within school settings, is relatively recent. However, results so far support finding ways to increase school-based opportunities to develop this skill among students (Campbell, 2014).

- ▶ The Mindfulness Education (ME) program
- ▶ Learning to BREATHE

The Mindfulness Education (ME) program

ME is a theoretically derived, teacher-taught, universal preventive intervention that focuses on promoting social and emotional competence in students through lessons of mindful attention training, three times per day (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). The ME program aims at enhancing elementary students' self-awareness, focused attention, self-regulation, and stress reduction.

The program includes four components: (1) **quieting the mind**, which can be achieved by listening to a resonating instrument (e.g., chime or bell) and focusing on the breath; (2) **mindful attention**, which involves being aware of sensations, thoughts, and feelings; (3) **managing** negative emotions and thinking; and (4) **acknowledging** self and others. The mindful practices start with sitting in a comfortable position, listening attentively to a single sound (e.g., a bell or chime), and then focusing on one's own breath as a way to locate oneself in the present moment.

The ME program was piloted with students in 4th to 7th grades in Canadian public schools. The results revealed that these students reported being more optimistic compared to their peers who were not involved in the program. Teachers also reported that participating students improved their competency in social behaviors.



Learning to BREATHE

Learning to BREATHE (L2B) is a mindfulness class created for adolescents based on the MBSR program (Bluth et al., 2016). It is guided by six themes, each represented by a letter in the acronym “BREATHE”: Body, Reflections (thoughts), Emotions, Attention, Tenderness, and Healthy habits. Standard mindfulness techniques, such as the body scan, sitting meditation, lovingkindness practice, walking meditation, and mindful movement, are taught through practical exercises and guided discussions (Broderick, 2013).

L2B is implemented over the course of a school semester through 11 weekly 50-minute lessons. The first four sessions cover activities for body mindfulness; sessions 5 through 7 explore mindfulness of thoughts; session 8 discusses mindfulness of emotions; session 9 covers concentration exercises; and session 10 is given to tenderness or loving-kindness. The last session presents walking meditation, and the students talk about how they feel about the program overall and specifically how they would use what they learned in the class.

L2B was carried out at a non-traditional high school in the United States that caters to high-risk youth in grades 9 through 12 who have struggled academically within the traditional school setting. Students in the mindfulness class showed lower levels of anxiety and depression compared to peers who were not in the class.

A woman with long dark hair is sitting in a meditative pose on a grassy field. She is wearing a light-colored t-shirt and has her eyes closed. The background is a soft-focus landscape with green grass and a blue sky. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter.

How to assess and measure Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is generally measured through self-reported instruments that inform about state or trait characteristics of related skills. Trait characteristics are those that do not change or that remain constant within the individual, while state characteristics can change over time (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Therefore, state-based instruments are more appropriate for measuring changes within the individual over time.

Although the majority of the instruments assess trait characteristics of mindfulness (Hill & Labbé, 2014), such as the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (Baer et al., 2008), the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) (Brown & Ryan, 2003), and the Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale—Revised (Feldman et al., 2007), there are also instruments developed to measure state characteristics of mindfulness, such as the MAAS state version (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and the Toronto Mindfulness Scale (Lau et al., 2006).

RESOURCES:

- ▶ [Video. What Is Mindfulness?](#)
- ▶ [Video. Measuring Mindfulness](#)

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- ▶ [Video. How Mindfulness Changes the Emotional Life of Our Brains](#)
- ▶ [Video. The Power of Mindfulness: What You Practice Grows Stronger](#)

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