

Mindfulness

Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition of mindfulness:

***“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way;
On purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”***

As parents we don't want to teach our children to be perfect. We want to teach our children to be safe with being imperfect and to respond to it with compassion, curiosity and creativity. - Jamie Pekarek Krohn

As parents we need to recognize that our children's lives are stressful, and that we contribute significantly to that stress. In fact research from Dr. Georgia Witkin at Mt. Sinai hospital in New York showed that the greatest source of childhood and adolescent stress is not school work, extracurricular activities, or peer pressure, but parental stress. So as parents one of the best things we can do to decrease our children's stress is to decrease our stress.

When we as adults learn mindfulness—paying attention here and now with kindness and curiosity and then choosing our behavior—we can support our children and teenagers in bringing these skills into their lives. If we are in the present, we aren't worrying about our third grader getting into college and we aren't passing this stress onto them in our day-to-day interactions. If we learn to witness our anger, fear, and sadness with kindness and compassion we show our children that this way of working with intense emotion is possible. If we slow down and choose how to respond to a difficult situation in daily life, and especially if we do it during challenges with our children and “out loud,” “Honey I am really frustrated, that you did X again, I am going to take a few minutes and then we can discuss this.” Then they see that they can do the same with various difficulties. Children learn what they live; the best way to support them in practicing mindfulness is to practice ourselves. - Amy Saltzman, MD

The cultivation of moment-by-moment awareness of our surrounding environment is a practice that helps us better cope with the difficult thoughts and feelings that cause us stress and anxiety in everyday life.

With regular practice of mindfulness exercises, rather than being led on auto-pilot by emotions influenced by negative past experiences and fears of future occurrences, we harness the ability to root the mind in the present moment and deal with life's challenges in a clear-minded, calm, assertive way. In turn, we develop a fully conscious mind-set that frees us from the imprisonment of unhelpful, self-limiting thought patterns and enables us to be fully present to focus on positive emotions that increase compassion and understanding in ourselves and others. - Pocket Mindfulness - Alfred James

Resources

There are many helpful ways to learn more about mindfulness. Below is a brief list of resources that may be nice to start exploring.

Articles:

<http://www.mindful.org/mindfulness-children-and-parenting/>

<http://www.mindful.org/five-steps-to-mindfulness/>

<http://www.mindful.org/can-mindfulness-make-us-better-teachers/>

<http://www.mindful.org/5-ways-to-bring-mindfulness-home/>

Books:

Mindfulness for Beginners – Jon Kabat-Zinn

Parenting From the Inside Out – Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell

The Kindness Handbook – Sharon Salzberg

The Miracle of Mindfulness - Thich Nhat Hanh

The Mindful Child – Susan Greenland

Websites:

<http://www.mindful.org/>

<http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/mindfulness/definition>

<http://health.ucsd.edu/specialties/mindfulness>

Apps:

Headspace

Smiling Mind

6 Simple Mindfulness Exercises

1. Mindful Breathing

This exercise can be done standing up or sitting down, and pretty much anywhere at any time. All you have to do is be still and focus on your breath for just one minute.

Start by breathing in and out slowly. One cycle should last for approximately 6 seconds. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow effortlessly in and out of your body.

Let go of your thoughts for a minute. Let go of things you have to do later today or pending projects that need your attention. Simply let yourself be still for one minute.

Purposefully watch your breath, focusing your senses on its pathway as it enters your body and fills you with life, and then watch it work its way up and out of your mouth as its energy dissipates into the world.

If you are someone who thought they'd never be able to meditate, guess what? You are half way there already! If you enjoyed one minute of this mind-calming exercise, why not try two or three?

2. Mindful Observation

This exercise is simple but incredibly powerful. It is designed to connect us with the beauty of the natural environment, something that is easily missed when we are rushing around in the car or hopping on and off trains on the way to work.

Choose a natural object from within your immediate environment and focus on watching it for a minute or two. This could be a flower or an insect, or even the clouds or the moon.

Don't do anything except notice the thing you are looking at. Simply relax into a harmony for as long as your concentration allows. Look at it as if you are seeing it for the first time. Visually explore every aspect of its formation. Allow yourself to be consumed by its presence. Allow yourself to connect with its energy and its role and purpose in the natural world.

3. Mindful Awareness

This exercise is designed to cultivate a heightened awareness and appreciation of simple daily tasks and the results they achieve.

Think of something that happens every day more than once; something you take for granted, like opening a door, for example. At the very moment you touch the doorknob to open the door, stop for a moment and be mindful of where you are, how you feel in that moment and where the door will lead you. Similarly, the moment you open your computer to start work, take a moment to appreciate the hands that enable this process and the brain that facilitates your understanding of how to use the computer.

These touch point cues don't have to be physical ones. For example: each time you think a negative thought you might choose to take a moment to stop, label the thought as unhelpful and release the negativity. Or, perhaps each time you smell food, you take a moment to stop and appreciate how lucky you are to have good food to eat and share with your family and friends.

Choose a touch point that resonates with you today. Instead of going through your daily motions on autopilot, take occasional moments to stop and cultivate purposeful awareness of what you are doing and the blessings it brings your life.

4. Mindful Listening

This exercise is designed to open your ears to sound in a non-judgmental way. So much of what we see and hear on a daily basis is influenced by our past experiences, but when we listen mindfully, we achieve a neutral, present awareness that lets us hear sound without preconception.

Select a piece of music you have never heard before. You may have something in your own collection that you have never listened to, or you might choose to turn the radio dial until something catches your ear.

Close your eyes and put on your headphones. Try not to get drawn into judging the music by its genre, title or artist name before it has begun playing. Instead, ignore any labels and neutrally allow yourself to get lost in the journey of sound for the duration of the song. Allow yourself to explore every aspect of track. Even if the music isn't to your liking at first, let go of your dislike and give your awareness full permission to climb inside the track and dance among the sound waves.

The idea is to just listen, to become fully entwined with the composition without preconception or judgment of the genre, artist, lyrics or instrumentation.

5. Mindful Immersion

The intention of this exercise is to cultivate contentment in the moment and escape the persistent striving we find ourselves caught up in on a daily basis. Rather than anxiously wanting to finish an everyday routine task in order to get on with doing something else, take that regular routine and fully experience it like never before.

For example: if you are cleaning your house, pay attention to every detail of the activity. Rather than treat this as a regular chore, create an entirely new experience by noticing every aspect of your actions: Feel and become the motion when sweeping the floor, sense the muscles you use when scrubbing the dishes, develop a more efficient way of wiping the windows clean. The idea is to get creative and discover new experiences within a familiar routine task.

Instead of laboring through and constantly thinking about finishing the task, become aware of every step and fully immerse yourself in the progress. Take the activity beyond a routine by aligning yourself with it physically, mentally and spiritually. Who knows, you might even enjoy the cleaning for once!

6. Mindful Appreciation

In this last exercise, all you have to do is notice 5 things in your day that usually go unappreciated. These things can be objects or people – it's up to you. Use a notepad to check off 5 by the end of the day.

The point of this exercise is to simply give thanks and appreciate the seemingly insignificant things in life; the things that support our existence but rarely get a second thought amidst our desire for bigger and better things.

For example: electricity powers your kettle, the postman delivers your mail, your clothes provide you warmth, your nose lets you smell the flowers in the park, your ears let you hear the birds in the tree by the bus stop, but...

- Do you know how these things/processes came to exist, or how they really work?
- Have you ever properly acknowledged how these things benefit your life and the lives of others?
- Have you ever thought about what life might be like without these things?
- Have you ever stopped to notice their finer, more intricate details?
- Have you ever sat down and thought about the relationships between these things and how together they play an interconnected role in the functioning of the earth?

Once you have identified your 5 things, make it your duty to find out everything you can about their creation and purpose to truly appreciate the way in which they support your life.