

5 Reasons To Be Mindful

by KindSpring.org Editors

Mindfulness. In today's era of high-speed travel, incessant texting, and digital distractions, it's not society's defining trait. And we're all to blame. Because we've all been there. Driving to work while making a phone call. Eating dinner while writing tomorrow's to-do-list. Watching a movie while texting and eating popcorn. The list goes on.

In a hyper connected world, bombarded by multiple forms of stimulation, how do we remain aware of the quiet gifts that the present moment has to offer? Cultivating a mindfulness practice can be a powerful way to train our minds and tune into the beauty of here and now. There are many ways to approach it.

Whether we take a few minutes to notice our breath, or eat a meal with silent attentiveness, the subtle impact of such a practice carries far-reaching ripples, within and without. Below are 5 compelling reasons to start a mindfulness practice today.

Mindfulness tunes out unwanted distractions

For almost half of our days, our minds are wandering. Perhaps even more striking is that the more our minds wander, the less happy we report to be. Stanford researcher Clifford Nass points out that when we multitask, we weaken our brain's ability to filter out important from irrelevant inputs, and thus end up bouncing from "document to phone to music to web all day at work".

Taking time to be mindful can regulate brain waves that focus the mind and screen out unwanted distractions. Experiment for yourself: for a few minutes, close your eyes and focus your attention on your breath. Simply observe any sensations that arise in the body or thoughts in the mind, without judgment. How does this affect your ability to focus on what is important?

Mindfulness calms the mind

"The practices of mindful breathing, sitting meditation, and walking meditation release tensions in the body and also in the mind... We humans have lost the wisdom of genuinely resting and relaxing. We worry too much. We don't allow our bodies to heal, and we don't allow our minds and hearts to heal. Meditation can help us embrace our worries, our fear, our anger, and that is very healing," explains Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk whose efforts in peace and reconciliation inspired Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to nominate him for a Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. In addition to his experiential insight, science continues to confirm the extensive influence of mindfulness

to reduce rumination, anxiety, and stress.

Mindfulness inspires us to be compassionate and altruistic

“It is in giving that we receive.” Saint Francis of Assisi as well as other wisdom teachings across the ages have described nature’s abundance in giving. Today, a growing body of research agrees: we are hardwired to be kind. Cultivating a mindfulness practice helps quiet various voices of the mind, enabling us to drop into our natural inclination to help others.

Researchers at Northeastern and Harvard studied the link between mindfulness and compassion. Upon completing an 8-week-long meditation training, study participants were tested to see if they would help someone in pain. Called into a meeting where they entered a waiting room with three chairs: two occupied by actors, leaving the third one for the participant, a woman would walk in on crutches, wincing with pain, and lean against the wall. The actors looked away and didn’t give up their chairs. About half of those who had received the mindfulness training stood up to offer their chair to the woman, whereas only 15 percent of those who had not received the training did so.

Mindfulness helps us feel good about helping others

Not only does mindfulness improve our ability to express compassion towards others, but it also can ignite a deeper sense of joy while we do it. When researchers C. Daryl Cameron and Barbara Fredrickson examined the role of mindfulness in helping others, they found that helping behavior could be predicted by two specific aspects of mindfulness: the ability to focus on the present moment and maintaining a non-judgmental acceptance of thoughts and experiences.

Yet beyond just the compulsion to extend a helping hand, participants who practiced “present-focused attention” and “nonjudgmental acceptance” also reported increased positive emotions-- such as “love/closeness, moral elevation, and joy”-- and decreased negative emotions-- such as stress, disgust, and guilt-- during the act of helping.

Mindfulness enables us to show up authentically

Ultimately, a mindfulness practice brings us inwards, putting us in direct contact with our thoughts and bodily sensations-- the deeper parts of ourselves that skate below the surface. By watching our thoughts arise and pass away, and feeling the sensations of our body change moment to moment, we develop a more nuanced awareness of who we truly are. This practice, if done consistently, can help guide us to understand our own unique calling. From the Ancient Greeks to Emerson to Gandhi, elders across the ages have reminded us to “know thyself.” By understanding ourselves and our place in the world, we are better poised to live, work, and serve others from a place of authenticity, in a way that honors the timeless strands of our interconnected whole.