

Mindfulness in a Nutshell

Julia Kamenetsky, Psy.D. | Rhode Island College

The term mindfulness has been a hot topic for some time. Although the term grows out of various contemplative and philosophical traditions, it has been around the sector of mental health and psychology for a number of decades due to its connection to various health benefits. In my work as a clinical counselor at a regional state college, the term and practice comes up quite frequently. I incorporate it in my work with students and promote it in a mindfulness group that is open to all members of the college community (faculty, staff, and students are all welcomed). In a nutshell, mindfulness is a practice of letting one's attention intentionally rest on the present moment while fostering a non-judgmental attitude. That sounds fairly simple, and that is intentional. When I introduce people to mindfulness for the first time and guide them through an exercise, the most common response ranges anywhere from some hesitation whether one is "doing it right," to outright frustration and certainty that nothing beneficial is happening. The important lesson in the experience is it is a *practice* rather than perfection, and it requires a combination of faith and some scientific understanding why mindfulness is beneficial in the first place.

The science is rooted in our understanding of our nervous system; specifically the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). The ANS is responsible for such functions as breathing, digestion, and heartbeat. The ANS further breaks down into the Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) and Parasympathetic Nervous System (PNS). The SNS allows us to have the fight or flight response, and the PNS allows us to power down in order to rest and allow digestion to take place. My go-to anecdote about the fight or flight response is that our prehistoric ancestors relied on it to function in order to pass on their genes. Those ancestors who saw a saber-toothed tiger and thought it was just a pretty cat likely were eaten, but those who experienced an automatic fear response, and ran as fast as they could, or fought it off, got to pass on their genes to future generations. We can say, therefore, we are wired for responding to dangerous situations quickly, and we are likewise wired to experience anxiety. The SNS and PNS might sound like opposites, and it is true they do some seemingly opposite things, but they are in fact complementary and a number of processes require them to work in concert.

How does all this physiology apply to our topic of mindfulness, you ask? Although our fight or flight response truly does keep us safe in the world, we can develop a fear response to something we imagine may bring us threat, but in actuality, the situation either may or may not be unsafe or might not be unsafe at all. Further, a tendency to spend much of our mental time in the future is an example of a state of anxiety. Examples of this would be continuously imagining whether we'll succeed at our endeavors, whether we will be liked or disliked, and what we will be doing in the future. All of these are examples of not being in the present; not being mindful. The point of mindfulness is not to constantly be in the present without any awareness of our past or future, as that would be impossible. The point is to become more aware of the time we tend to spend in the future or in the past while missing the present moment. The other important layer of mindfulness is that when we do notice we are not in the



present, we do not judge ourselves for it. We simply name it, “Oh, it seems like I’ve been thinking about the past/future a lot in the last hour/today.” After acknowledging this, we have the choice to turn this around, and this turning often begins with choosing to focus on something in the present, and for that we have our senses.

We can choose to focus on our breath which turns our attention to bodily sensation; we can pick up an object with an interesting texture, and use our sense of touch to examine it; we can look at an interesting and/or intricate pattern and use our vision to get into the present; we can use our sense of hearing and sit still while trying to hear a certain number of distinct sounds (e.g. birds chirping, humming of a fan, footsteps in the distance, etc.); and we can also use our sense of taste and/or smell to be more present. To integrate some of these, we can become very present while peeling an orange: noticing its color, feeling and seeing its texture, listening for the sounds when the orange is peeled, noticing physiological reactions such as salivation and/or hunger, noticing the fragrance of the orange as it is being peeled, and bringing up a segment of the orange to sniff it without taking a bite. The mindfulness exercise can continue further during the eating of the orange, which can be done in a very deliberate, usually slow, and conscious way. A common reason why we do not practice mindfulness is we assume it requires a lot of time, commitment, and skill. Although it does require conscious commitment, we can incorporate it into our daily activities, and we will quickly see we already have the required skills, we just need the intention.

Mindfulness also extends to our work with students. As the academic year picks up the pace, our intentions to stay in the present can get pushed out by projects, appointments, and deadlines. Often, if we are experiencing this increase in pace due to the time of the year, we can count on others experiencing the same thing. Keeping this in mind can be used as a cue to get into a more mindful state together with others. This can be as simple as doing a Mindful Minute. To do this, one would set a timer for one minute, and take slow, fairly deep breaths while counting the breaths. The number of breaths one took when the timer goes off is one’s Mindful Minute. One can then take that number of breaths, and know that only a minute is needed to shift into a more mindful gear. The key is to stay in the present, and to foster our kindest and least judgmental attitude with ourselves and others. As long as we are practicing this with intention, we are practicing mindfulness.