Module 1: What is Mindfulness?

Module 1 Exercise 1

Before learning about mindfulness let's try a very brief, very simple mindfulness exercise. Set a timer for two minutes. Then close your eyes and focus on your breath for those two minutes. Don't try to change your breathing. Don't try to change anything. Just concentrate on the sensations of your inhalations and exhalations. Give it a try now before reading on!

How was it? What did you notice about your two minutes of mindful breathing? Did any thoughts creep into your consciousness, pulling your focus away from your breath? How did you feel when this happened? Angry at yourself? Annoyed? Frustrated with the exercise and with having to spend two minutes doing nothing but breathing? Did you start to feel self-conscious about your breathing? Maybe you even felt that you couldn't remember how to breathe naturally! Did you feel that your posture seemed off? Were you trying to estimate or count down how much time was left in the two minutes? Was there an itchy spot on your foot that you just couldn't stop thinking about? Did thoughts of your long to-do list keep popping up? Did you think about how much you regret snapping at your kids this morning? Maybe bigger worries crept in: will you have enough money to retire comfortably? Should you get your cholesterol levels checked? Did you choose the right career path? Should you have gone to law school?

This very simple exercise demonstrates that mindfulness, though it may seem incredibly simple, can be surprisingly difficult. This may be especially true in the twenty-first century. Most of us are almost always connected, almost always busy or occupied, and rarely away from the distractions of a digital device. We may not be used to being alone and undistracted, with nothing to experience but the present moment. Concentrating on the present may seem like the simplest, most straightforward, easiest thing to do. However, distracting thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations are always there, ready to pull you out of your existence in the present. Developing the skills to not only resist distraction but also to forgive yourself when you do get distracted is what mindfulness is all about.

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness as a concept has origins in many ancient religious traditions including mystical and monastic sects of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Kornfeld, 2001). However, mindfulness is most often associated with Eastern religious and spiritual practice, primarily Buddhist spiritual traditions that scholars estimate go back over 2500 years (Fogelin, 2012).

Thich Nhat Hahn was a Buddhist monk, Nobel Peace Prize recipient, author, teacher, and mentor to many including Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In some of the more than 100 books he wrote in his lifetime, Hahn presented mindfulness for Western, secular audiences. Mindfulness, according to Hahn, is the "energy of being aware and awake to the present…the continuous practice of touching life deeply in every moment" (Hanh, 2005). More specifically, mindfulness is

living with focus and intention in the present moment. Mindfulness is being aware of the feeling of your lungs expanding as you breathe in, the sound of your footsteps as you walk, and the flavors and sensations of each bite of food as you chew. Mindfulness is a purposefully conscious state of awareness of the moments and experiences that make up your life.

In the second half of the twentieth century, around the time that Thich Nhat Hahn and others were introducing mindfulness to western seekers of clarity and enlightenment, others were working to incorporate mindfulness into western, secular medicine. One notable early proponent of mindfulness in medicine was Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, who was at one time a student of Thich Nhat Hahn. Kabat-Zinn developed an influential mindfulness meditation program that was effective in decreasing suffering and increasing quality of life in people living with chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). We will discuss Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program in more detail later in this course. Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness can be summarized as paying attention on purpose to the present moment, non-judgementally.

Although the skills that make up mindfulness are usually developed and cultivated during intentional practice, often in the form of meditation, the eventual goal of mindfulness practice is usually to incorporate awareness of the present into everyday life. This is true both for mindfulness with spiritual origins and for mindfulness with more secular origins. Being mindful in the course of everyday living can be challenging for many people. Thoughts, worries, anxieties about the future, ruminations about the past, and even completely unimportant distractions can easily creep into the forefront of your consciousness and take focus away from the present moment. Practicing mindfulness meditation is done to strengthen the "mindfulness muscles". In the same way that you might go to the gym to increase your fitness and energy so that you are able to play with your kids, take a romantic walk on the beach with your partner, or travel the world, many people practice mindfulness so that they can develop skills and competencies that help them get the most out of life.

Module 1 Exercise 2: How mindful are you?

Mindfulness has been described as both a state and a trait. You may generally be more or less mindful than another person, and you may also be more or less mindful at different times of the day, at different points in your life, or while engaged in different activities. Many scientists and academics have developed mindfulness scales to measure both how mindful a person is compared to other people, and how mindful a person may be at a particular moment.

The following questions have been adapted from a few different published, peer-reviewed, and validated mindfulness scales (Baer et al., 2006; Brown & Ryan, 2003; Cardaciotto et al., 2008; Lau et al., 2006; Walach et al., 2006). However, it is important to note that the questions that appear here have not been tested, validated, or peer-reviewed. They are not diagnostic and should only be used to give you a general sense of how mindful you are. This means that if the answer doesn't seem right, or true to your lived experiences, please disregard them and go with how you feel.

Answer the following yes/no questions. The questions are split into groups according to whether they address cognitive, emotional, physical, or interpersonal mindfulness along with a section for general mindfulness. A lot of yes answers may mean that you are probably pretty mindful while a lot of no answers may mean that you aren't very mindful. You may find that you are more mindful in some domains than in others.

Cognitive Mindfulness

- I can stay focused on what's happening in the present at work, school, or during my hobbies or other relaxation activities.
- I can finish work or school tasks without becoming distracted or unfocused.
- Most of the time, I am aware of the thoughts that pass through my mind.
- I am comfortable with and accepting of even my darkest and least pleasant thoughts.
- I am comfortable thinking about problems or difficulties I have, even if there isn't a solution in sight.
- I don't often get carried away in trains of thought.
- When I have an unexpected or uncommon reaction to something, I become curious about where the reaction came from.
- I notice my reactions to things, thoughts, feelings, events, or emotions.
- I can identify my thoughts and feelings without overanalyzing them.
- I generally regard my thoughts as temporary entities that are distinct from myself.

Emotional Mindfulness

- I am generally aware of my emotions in real-time, as I am having them.
- I can tell when I am starting to feel frustrated or upset before I become overwhelmed.
- I am comfortable with my unpleasant emotions (guilt, shame, fear, sadness, etc).
- I can control my emotional reactions.
- I can mostly identify what has caused my mood to change. I tend to not be surprised when I snap at people, cry, or laugh.
- I can recognize my feelings without needing to react to or modify them. I am okay with being sad or having other uncomfortable feelings sometimes.
- I can observe my feelings without getting overwhelmed by them.
- I notice when my mood changes, even when the changes are subtle (e.g. the change from giddiness to excitement).
- I generally am aware that feelings are fleeting and temporary. When I am sad, angry, happy, or scared I understand that this is a temporary state of being.

Physical Mindfulness

- I have a high degree of awareness of my body in space. I'm not overly clumsy or careless.
- I notice when my body is feeling tense or uncomfortable.
- I eat only when I am hungry. I don't snack mindlessly or finish my plate by default. I tend not to ever feel uncomfortably full after eating.
- I am mostly aware of how the physical world feels on my body (e.g. temperature, wind, humidity).

- I notice changes happening in my body like my heart beating faster, my face getting flushed, my muscles getting tense, etc.

Interpersonal Mindfulness

- I remember names, faces, and important details about people that I meet.
- I completely listen when people are talking to me.
- When I'm with someone, I am mostly aware of their facial expressions and body language.
- When I'm interacting with someone, I stay aware of how my feelings, thoughts, and energy levels change.
- When I'm listening to someone, I do so with my whole attention.

General Mindfulness

- I take in my surroundings and am aware of what's going on around me when I am walking or driving.
- I feel that I do things with intention and a sense of deliberateness.
- I take my time and am generally attentive to the things that I do.
- I spend most of my time thinking about what I am currently doing rather than being overly focused on the past or the future.
- I am comfortable and accepting of even the parts of me that I am least proud of.
- I am comfortable when I don't have anything to do or anything to distract myself with (e.g. alone in a waiting room or on public transport without a book or device).
- I am aware of how fleeting and temporary each moment is.
- I can forgive myself when I make mistakes or behave poorly.
- I am generally open to new and unexpected thoughts, feelings, and sensations.
- I notice things in my environment, like the sounds of birds singing, the color of the sky, the feeling of the sun on my skin, etc.
- I don't tend to rush.
- I tend to do one thing at a time. I don't often try to multitask.
- I accept all my thoughts and emotions, even those that I think aren't kind, justified, or worthwhile.

Not to fret if the above exercise suggested that you aren't very mindful. Mindfulness can be very difficult to achieve and, as we will see, mindfulness can be developed and cultivated through intentional, deliberate practice (Brown and Ryan, 2003).

Mindfulness in Two Parts

As we defined it earlier, mindfulness is "living in the moment". Many scholars and practitioners of mindfulness have broken down this sense of deeply experiencing the present into two components: awareness and acceptance (Kabat-Zinn, 1982; Baer, 2003; Bishop et al., 2004). Awareness is the self-regulation required to pay attention to and maintain focus on the present. Acceptance is an attitude of curiosity and non-judgment about what you are experiencing.

Awareness

Awareness is the observation of things as they are happening in the present moment and as they change from moment to moment (Bishop et al., 2004). This includes experiences that start outside your body - what you see, hear, feel, smell, etc. This also includes experiences inside your body and mind - physical sensations like hunger or cold as well as emotional reactions, mental images, and mental talk. Mindfulness means being aware of what is happening in the world around you and your own reactions.

Notably, mindfulness calls for awareness to be non-elaborative. If you notice that you hear a dog barking, you don't start to guess why the dog is barking. If you notice that you feel cooler, you don't start thinking about when you'll need to turn on the heater or start fretting about the heating bill. Getting lost in a stream of thoughts or getting fixated on a specific detail will pull you away from existing fully and mindfully in the present moment.

Acceptance

In addition to awareness of your internal and external environments, mindfulness also entails an attitude of openness or acceptance toward your experiences. A mindful person attends to what is happening with an attitude of curiosity, detachment, and nonreactivity. Acceptance means seeing things as they are, without projecting, interpreting, or elaborating (Quaglia et al., 2015). For example, being mindful would mean that if you heard the neighbor's baby crying you would acknowledge what you heard without venturing guesses about the reasons for the baby's cries. If you noticed that you were starting to feel anxious, you would acknowledge your feelings without generating hypotheses about why you felt that way. If you felt a headache starting, you would acknowledge the pain in your head without trying to predict how long it will last. If you noticed that you felt tired, you would accept this without berating yourself for staying up too late last night.

Importantly, acceptance in this context should not be equated with passivity or resignation to situations or circumstances that aren't ideal. You can still strive for improvement and for change while fully experiencing, and acknowledging your experiences, even your negative ones. Acceptance means inviting experiences, not suppressing them, even if they are difficult (Creswell, 2017). For example, if you find that you are out of breath after a very brief period of cardiovascular exercise, acceptance means fully experiencing and acknowledging your breathlessness, elevated heart rate, high body temperature, perspiration, and other evidence of your exertion. Acceptance doesn't mean ignoring your poor cardiovascular health and accepting that you should continue to live with poor cardiovascular health. On the other hand, acceptance also means not berating yourself for your poor cardiovascular health or dwelling on the choices that resulted in your poor health. Acceptance is the ability to experience events fully, without resorting to either extreme preoccupation with or suppression of your experiences.