

What the Heck is Mindfulness?

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Sarah here. We hope that you enjoyed last week's blog on the importance of silence. This week, we're pivoting from silence to a topic that people often associate with silence: mindfulness. Although, spoiler alert, mindfulness isn't all about silence. At this point, many people have heard of mindfulness, but they may not know what it is, why it's helpful, or how to practice it.

The easiest way to understand mindfulness is to point out examples of mind/lessness. Can you remember a time when you were driving somewhere and you zoned out, only to realize that you'd driven miles or maybe you'd arrived your destination? Another example that many people can identify with is mindless eating, which often happens while sitting on the couch watching TV or scrolling on a phone or tablet. Think of that automatic action of getting popcorn from a bowl or chips from a bag without even thinking, only to realize that you've eaten way more than you intended. Being mindless is about not paying attention to what you're doing or how you're feeling in the moment. Mindlessness is like being on autopilot.

What, then, is *mindfulness*? Mindfulness involves:

- Intentionally focusing your awareness or attention on the thoughts, feelings, physical/bodily sensations and/or experiences that you're having right now- in the present moment
- Noticing/observing these inner sensations and experiences without judgment or evaluation



Unlike relaxation, mindfulness is *not* about a particular outcome you're hoping for. Rather, mindfulness is just about being present and aware in the moment. It's about being fully present in the here-and-now and about experiencing *all* of life- not just the thoughts, feelings, sensations, and experiences that feel "good" or "positive." It's about being okay and aware of whatever you're feeling and experiencing in the present moment.

Now, before you roll your eyes and say to yourself that this is some hippy dippy touchy-feely stuff, hear me out. Research suggests that practicing mindfulness can decrease anxiety, depression, and stress, improve emotional and behavioral regulation, impulse control, and attention, lower blood pressure, improve sleep and pain management...and the list goes on. Mindfulness literally changes your brain for the better. While a lot of the research focuses specifically on mindfulness meditation, nonjudgmental and intentional awareness can be focused on anything- where you are (your surroundings), what you're doing (an activity you're engaged in), who you're with (the people who are physically present at this moment) or how you're feeling (your thoughts, emotions, and physical/bodily sensations). So, while mindfulness can involve meditating, it can also involve active engagement in daily life activities.



It's a bit paradoxical that being present, opening your awareness to all of your experiences, and *not setting out to change those experiences* actually leads to so many positive changes. It makes



sense. We spend so much time trying to avoid difficult or challenging feelings and experiences. Sometimes, when we just acknowledge what's already there, it sets us free. If you and your family are new to mindfulness and want to give it a try, why not practice a mindful activity together? Some principles of mindfulness can be easier to learn using a concrete activity rather than meditation. Mindful walking and eating are great starter activities. Keep it simple and brief- no need to start with a lengthy exercise. Just focus on noticing, observing, and describing your experience, thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations. As an added bonus, you get to engage in activities together as a family and your focus is on being totally present and engaged!