

MINDFULNESS 101 (Adapted from work by Cindy Sanderson, Ph.D.)

Mindfulness is “awareness without judgment of what is, via direct and immediate experience.”

You're being mindful when:

- You eat dessert and notice every flavor you are tasting, instead of eating the dessert while having a conversation and looking around the room to see who you know. If you're being mindful, you're not thinking about “is it good or bad to have dessert?” you're just really having dessert.
- Having gotten free of your anxiety or self-consciousness, you dance to music and experience every note, instead of wondering if you look graceful or foolish.
- Thinking about someone you love or someone you hate, you pay attention to exactly what your love or your hate feels like. You're not caught up in justifying the love or hate to yourself; you're just diving into the experience, with full awareness that you're diving in.
- You walk through a park, you actually walk through the park. What does that mean? It means you let yourself “show up” in the park. You walk through the park aware of your feelings about the park, or your thoughts about the park, or how the park looks, or the sensation of each foot striking the pavement. This is different than taking a walk in the park and not “showing up” - instead, walking through the park while you are distracted by thoughts of what you'll have for lunch, or the feelings towards a friend with whom you just argued, or worries about how you're going to pay this month's bills.

If you stop to think about it, you'll realize that very few of us devote ourselves to living mindfully, meeting each moment of life as it presents itself, with full awareness, letting our judgments fall away. Instead, we do things automatically, without noticing what we're doing.

We have a tendency to churn out judgments about ourselves and others. We regularly do two or three or five things at once. We frequently get so caught up in thoughts and feelings about the past or future that we're lost in them, disconnecting from what is happening right now in front of us.

So how does this relate to mindfulness? Mindfulness is a means of reconnecting with the present. The practice of mindfulness is “the repetitive act of directing attention to only one thing in this one moment.” And if you are brand new to mindfulness, you may respond with either “I can already do that” or “Why on earth would I do that?”

My reply is :

- a) it's harder than it sounds
- b) the reason you do this kind of practice is to gain control of your attention, enhance your ability to reduce anxiety

Although it can be challenging to master, mindfulness is a skill that can be learned like any other.

There is nothing mysterious about it. It's like learning to ride a bike or cook good meals or paint with watercolors or play a musical instrument. You start with easy practice and progress to harder practice. You take classes in it from people who know more about it than you do. You make friends with other people who are interested in it so you have a built in support group to keep you going when you get discouraged. Sometimes you'll feel like you're making a lot of progress; other times you'll be discouraged. If you practice, however, it is likely that your mindfulness skills will improve.

I hope you'll stop and think about the following sentence:

Whatever your attention is on, that's what life is for you at any given moment.

EXAMPLE: Perhaps you've decided to take a break from working so you can make yourself some tea; as you stand at the stove, your mind wanders off and ruminates about a conversation you had yesterday. You don't get a break because your mind isn't on the tea; your mind is worrying and carrying you away.

EXAMPLE: Perhaps you are sitting in a session with someone who cares about you and has a kind expression on her face; but you're not looking at her face...not really. Instead, you are feeling so self-conscious and ashamed that you begin to "space out." You miss out on a moment of connection with a person who cares for you and instead have one more moment of rejecting yourself.