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INTRODUCTION

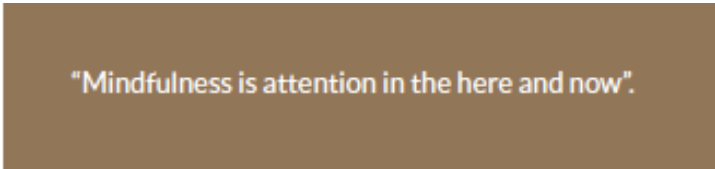
This Training

MINDFULNESS DEFINED

Mindfulness refers to attention that can be directed inside as well as outside of ourselves. Attention to feelings, body sensations, thoughts, or emotions, for example, is directed inward. Attention to a conversation with a friend, trees in a forest, sounds, or a book, for instance, is directed outward.

Mindfulness refers to attention in the here and now. Attention to the things that are happening in this very moment. This may sound easy, but how many times is our attention redirected by our thoughts? Although thinking is undeniably very handy, as it allows us to make plans and solve difficult problems, at the same time, it often triggers many problems. Our mind can get easily lost in endless thinking (worrying and rumination). Our thoughts create emotions and feelings like fear and sadness. We lie awake at night because we worry about what might happen tomorrow. We cannot stop thinking about that mistake we made last week. In our mind, we are constantly busy with the things that need to be completed. These are only a few examples of how our mind can make life difficult.

Mindfulness teaches us to deal with these problematic thoughts by focusing our



"Mindfulness is attention in the here and now".

attention on the here and now. Mindfulness helps us create a different relationship with our thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

Mindful attention means attention without judgment. Often, sensations like tension or fear are automatically labelled as “bad,” “inappropriate,” or “unwanted.” When we judge a certain feeling (“I experience fear, this is bad, I don’t want to feel this way”), we automatically create a conflict, a conflict between the current feeling (“bad”) and expected or ideal feeling (“good”). Any attempts to resolve this conflict, for instance by suppressing a negative feeling, require a lot of energy (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Muraven, & Tice, 1998) and paradoxically cause us to feel even worse (rebound effects; Wegner, 1994).

Acceptance plays a key role in mindfulness. Through mindful attention and acceptance, we allow every feeling, emotion, sensation or thought to be there. They are there anyway. Instead of fighting against feelings or thoughts, mindfulness fosters willingness to acknowledge, allow, and accept these internal states. By letting go of this struggle and fight, we save energy (Alberts, Schneider, & Martijn, 2011) and realize that the things we fight against often fade away automatically, often sooner than when we actively fight against them. As soon as we acknowledge emotion, one can experience it as a temporary state; in other words, the emotion comes and goes. In this way, one becomes an observer of one’s own inner states (through observing the self; Deikman, 1982). One is no longer identified and completely lost in the content of thoughts or feelings but becomes their observer. This observer can still experience emotions

or feelings but can now also decide whether he/she want to be fully taken by them. By observing thoughts without judgment, one can experience their transient nature. In addition, we learn that not everything we think is true. In sum, mindfulness can help us identify less with feelings, emotions, or thoughts. In other words, we are not our emotions or thoughts, we can simply be aware of our emotions or thoughts.

BALANCE

It is possible that this definition of mindfulness gives the impression that mindfulness means living in the present moment only, without thoughts about the future and without all automatic patterns of thinking. Mindfulness is about balance. For instance, there is nothing wrong with goal setting. Goals can provide direction, motivation, and meaning to achieve a future state. However, problems occur when the balance between goals (future desired state) and the present moment (things we do in the present to achieve a desired future goal) is lost. In this case, it is possible that we are so focused on reaching our goals, that we forget to live in the present. Our life becomes a sequence of goals, with our mind constantly living in the future and preventing us from enjoying the present. This can easily lead to frustration, especially when we notice that we fail to reach our goals in the anticipated time span (Boekaerts, 1999). In some cases, we even fail to reach our goal because of our obsessive focus on the goal (Wegner, 1994). Mindfulness helps us become aware that living in the present moment is the key to reaching our goals. By focusing our attention on the present moment, we often become more efficient and effective in terms of goal achievement.

The same principle of balance applies to automatic behavior. In some cases, automatic patterns of behavior are very helpful. Driving a car, writing and making gestures are all examples of helpful automatic patterns. However, in some cases, automatic patterns can cause unwanted behavior, like responding aggressively when you receive a criticism or automatically starting to worry when we appraise an event as negative. In these cases, mindfulness can help us become more aware of these automatic patterns and change them in order to create more balance between helpful and less helpful patterns.

Finally, mindfulness is a way of dealing with and perceiving reality. It can provide insights. Not by means of conflict or fighting, but by cultivating an open attitude and acceptance. It offers a different way of relating to reality than the one to which we are often accustomed. You can decide for yourself whether this view is valuable.

WHAT IS NEEDED

This training requires about 15 to 30 minutes a day and is most effective when done at home. Different types of exercises include formal meditation and more informal daily practices. These exercises can be both valuable and fun and provide you with practical opportunities to link the insights obtained from the weekly sessions with your personal life.

PATIENCE

The effects of your efforts will not always be immediately evident. You may compare it to gardening. You need to prepare the soil, plant the seeds, water them, and patiently wait for the garden to grow. Therefore, take your time to do the homework and try to do it to the best of your ability.

Advice 1:

Store this booklet in a clearly visible location. This will remind you to complete the training and exercises.

Advice 2:

Determine when and where to practice. Create a method that will drive your automatic behavior. For example:

When: every evening, after doing the dinner or washing the dishes Where: in my bedroom What: I will practice seated meditation

THE MODELS

The models presented in this booklet aim to clarify certain processes. They point to reality but are not the same as reality. In the same way that the word “hat” is not in reality a hat, reality is reality, and thus the models presented are simply models. Reality is far too complex to be completely translated into words, concepts, figures, or models. Reality can only be experienced in the here and now because reality is nowhere else. Models, words, and concepts can provide insights and help create experience, but they can never actually be the real experience in and of itself.

WITHOUT JUDGMENT

We are very used to judging everything and everyone around us. We compare present experiences with past experiences or expectations and make judgments automatically. We experience something and we automatically start thinking what the experience means or whether it is “good” or “bad.” This process of

judgment prevents us from being fully present in the here and now. We see the present through the lens of our judgment.

Trying not to judge is similar to trying not to think of a white bear. The more we try not to think about the white bear, the more we think about it. It is enough to become aware of judgment. During practice, notice when your mind judges and direct your attention in a compassionate way back to the practice.

ENDLESSLY STARTING OVER AGAIN

Mindfulness is about starting over again and again. Once you get distracted during practice, gently redirect your attention back again. You will do this many times. In fact, it is part of the exercise. In this way, you train redirection of attention, a crucial aspect of attention regulation. Mindfulness cultivates open awareness, which is the hallmark of a beginner's mind. It allows us to look at reality for the first time, like a young child who experiences something for the very first time.

WITHOUT STRIVING

The exercises do not aim to achieve a certain goal, which is perhaps the most paradoxical and most difficult aspect of mindfulness to explain. This may sound very strange. People participate in mindfulness trainings because they wish to achieve the goal of worrying less, experiencing less stress or less pain, and the like. The exercises aim to cultivate awareness of the present.

Awareness of the present can hardly be called a goal because goals are always related to the future. The problem is that when we start doing the exercises to achieve a certain goal (I am now going to meditate because I want to become calm and relaxed), the goal not only focuses our attention on the future, but also makes us aware during the exercise that we are not achieving the goal fast enough, if at all. The goal of mindfulness is not to achieve a goal (like becoming relaxed or becoming the best meditator ever) but to be present with whatever arises in the present moment. Paradoxically, this type of awareness has been linked to several positive health-related outcomes, but it can only be cultivated in the present, with a future detached mindset.

ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance starts with perceiving reality as it is in the present moment. Acceptance is first about acknowledging what is present. In general, we often see what we don't want to see and what we wish to see differently. We devote much time to denying what is there. Consequently, we waste a lot of precious

energy by resisting something that cannot be changed in the first place. During practice, both pleasant and unpleasant sensations may arise, along with diverse emotions and thoughts. Instead of denying them and pushing them away, mindfulness requires willingness to let them be in the present moment, as they are. Remember that the goal of mindfulness is not to get rid of these internal states but to change one's relationship with these states. Mindfulness cultivates a more friendly, acceptance-based relationship with internal states. In other words, when unpleasant states arise, try to welcome them and perceive them as part of the exercise, part of reality. Let them be as they are.

LETTING GO

Sometimes, positive experiences arise during the exercises. People often want to hold on to these experiences. We attempt to prolong their duration and make them last longer. Open awareness means detachment from all events. In fact, when we try to change the course of positive experiences, we are doing the same thing as when we try to push away the negative states. In both cases, we try to alter the reality instead of experiencing it with an open, detached attitude. It is enough to observe and give the positive experience room to follow its natural course. The more freedom you allow for experiences to occur, the more freedom you will experience.

COMPASSION

Practice compassion. Don't be angry at yourself when you inevitably get distracted during the exercises. Thoughts and feelings will always arise. Every mind operates like this. Your mind is no exception. Awareness in this moment gives you an opportunity to direct your attention back to the exercise in a gentle, compassionate way. Thus, be kind to yourself when you notice pain, anger or fear. Be kind when you notice that you make judgments and get distracted and when your mind wants to avoid pain. Practice friendly, open awareness.