

TEAM WELLNESS SERIES

PART 3 OF 5 - BUILDING RESILIENCE THROUGH MINDFULNESS TRAINING

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One popular strategy to enhance resilience to stress is “**mindfulness training**,” which focuses on improved self-awareness, better attention skills, and deeper relaxation experiences. Research on mindfulness training methods has found numerous positive effects, including several improvements in health which suggests that this approach could provide a significant boost to overall resilience. Many researchers have published extensively over the last 30 years on the benefits of mindfulness training on health and a general sense of well-being. In the most general terms possible, mindfulness training teaches us to pay attention to whatever we are experiencing without any judgment or evaluation of what we experience – either good or bad. We all tend to tune out a considerable amount of mental information throughout any given day. In essence we go on “*auto-pilot*” as we engage in many activities. How common is it that we rushed through eating a meal and did not pay any close attention to what we tasted or experienced in other ways during the meal? Some would call this “*mindless*” behavior versus a healthier “*mindful*” pattern. It has been a cliché for many years, but the notion of “*stopping to smell the roses*” captures the essence and importance of what mindfulness encourages.

One way to understand this is to try to focus your attention (mind) on what you are experiencing right now. For example, if you closed your eyes and began to focus on your breathing, you would pay attention to the sensations, movement, and physiological reactions that you experience. Here, you would not want to judge the experience, such as: “Oh wow, my breathing is too fast or too slow.” You would just try to attend to your experience. A moment earlier before you focused on your breathing you were not even aware of each breath you took because it is automatic and requires no attention under normal circumstances.

In mindfulness training you learn to become aware of your sensations and feelings, but you also want to avoid making any judgments about that experience. As mentioned above, if you focused on your breathing, you would not want to be thinking something negative like: “There must be something wrong since I cannot get calm or relaxed doing this.” Prior to this brief exercise you would be breathing without any conscious awareness or judgement of it. During the exercise you would become “mindful” of the breathing experience. Again, the purpose of mindfulness is to **focus your attention on the experience in the present moment without judging it in any way**. A potential, and very beneficial, byproduct of mindfulness is that when we focus attention on a current experience, we cannot be worrying or thinking about past events or future problems. Obviously, that could be helpful for dealing with certain sources of the stress in our daily lives. This may account for the general sense of “well-being” reported by many of those who go through mindfulness training programs.

Some of the basic exercises in mindfulness training are aimed at teaching a form of *meditation* to help you learn how to focus your attention. In this process, people can learn to achieve deep levels of relaxation. This part of mindfulness training clearly would help you with two major coping skills – *self-awareness* and *physical relaxation*. However, mindfulness training is much more than just relaxation training. You could practice mindful eating, walking, taking a shower, sitting at your desk, etc. Athletes, musicians, artists, and stage performers have used mindfulness training to enhance their health, relationships, productivity at work, as well as their performance skills.

HERE IS A BASIC EXERCISE THAT IS OFTEN TAUGHT IN MOST MINDFULNESS CLASSES:

In mindful breathing simply focus your attention on the act of breathing and noticing what that experience feels like. It is described here, but if you have access to the internet, listen to a sample recording of the instructions that will definitely enhance the experience – iCopeWithStress.com.

Get into a comfortable position, sitting up straight in your chair, or lie down if you prefer. It is helpful if you close your eyes during this practice, but if you do not feel comfortable doing that, you can keep your eyes open. Begin to focus on your breathing, paying attention to each breath as you inhale and exhale. You can breathe in and out through your nose if that is more comfortable, or inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth.

As you settle into your mindful breathing, simply pay attention to what you experience. Notice any sensations throughout your body. It also helps to pay attention to how your breathing is being done. Check to see if you are using your belly as you breathe in and out. Using your belly (actually your diaphragm) does seem to help with deeper relaxation. If you put your hands on your belly, you most likely will feel your belly expand like a balloon as you breathe in and it will compress when you exhale. Sometimes emphasizing this “belly” type of breathing can feel even more relaxing.

*Focus on your breathing for about 4-5 minutes. A normal and expected part of this exercise is that your mind will wander. Your breathing will serve as an “anchor” to return to when you get distracted. You might start thinking about other things, typically from past events or things you need to do in the future. Noticing aches, pains, and physical sensations, or paying attention to sounds around you is also likely to happen. **Again, this is normal and to be expected.** You simply want to catch yourself whenever your mind drifts or wanders as it likes to do, and simply try to re-focus gently back on your breathing. Remember, this is a non-judgmental experience so there is not a good or bad experience. This exercise will give you a little sample of what mindful breathing is like. Try to do this at various times throughout the week to see if it leads to a sense of peacefulness, relaxation, or well-being. Regular practice is recommended for some of the health benefits of mindfulness training. Our website has links to some sites that have lengthier [breathing exercises](#) recorded.*

ANOTHER EASY EXERCISE WHICH ONLY TAKES A COUPLE OF MINUTES

Get a pleasant smelling hand soap such as lavender or any other pleasant one that you can get. Wash your hands for two minutes in fairly warm but not hot water. Try doing this with your eyes closed leaning toward your sink counter, and as in the breathing exercise, focus your attention on whatever sensations in your hands or throughout your body that you experience. After 2 minutes, open your eyes dry your hands and see if you feel just a little more relaxed. Aside from getting good mindfulness practice by doing this exercise on some regular basis, is the physiological fact that warmer hands go along with the relaxation response and cooler hands typically indicate a stress response. Also, in the time of the Corona risks, washing your hands more frequently is a good practice.

After you have had a little experience practicing these exercises, look for times throughout your normal daily routines where you can focus on your breathing and other activities, even if it is only for a minute or two. For example, practice your deep breathing exercise when you are waiting for an elevator; or focus on your breathing for a minute before any breaks you take away from your work area. Take mindful daily showers and use that time for a different practice experience. A 5 – 10 minute mindful breathing exercise in bed before you go to sleep can also improve your get to sleep if that has been a problem. These little practice exercises will help keep your awareness high to look for other situations in your daily activities where you can become more mindful and spend less time being on “auto-pilot”.

SOME QUICK REMINDERS AND OTHER WAYS YOU BENEFIT FROM MINDFULNESS TRAINING:

- Mindfulness is paying attention to what you experience without judging it.
- Mindfulness is good for physical and mental health and well-being.
- Mindfulness is like a habit that needs daily practice to get the maximum benefits.
- Mindfulness improves mental skills like attention and concentration which improves performance
- Improved attention reduces your risk of accidents in stressful times
- If your mind wanders to stressful thoughts or worries during mindful practice, re-focus on the easiest thing – your breath.