

How to Practice Mindfulness

When practicing mindfulness it is good to remember that:

1. You are building on something you can and are doing already.
2. You can't get mindfulness wrong because it's just about noticing whatever is going on right now. If you notice there is some confusion or struggle right now, that is also moment of mindful awareness!
3. What's easy and attainable works best. With mindfulness, less really is more... Taking it easy and doing what feels easily attainable will pay dividends when cultivating mindfulness.

We practice cultivating mindful awareness by making use of the fact that the attention will always wander away from where we direct it. All minds wander and we cannot stop the attention slipping off somewhere else because the attention is influenced by automatic systems that operate so much faster than our conscious processes. So these automatic systems can whisk the attention away before we even consciously know it is happening. All we can do is notice when the attention has been shifted elsewhere and then consciously choose where to focus the attention next (and knowing the attention will inevitably drift off from wherever we direct it once again).

It is those moments of realising that the attention has been shifted elsewhere that are the heart of mindfulness practice: the more times we notice when the attention has wandered off and then make that conscious choice about where we will intentionally direct the attention next, the more productive the period of mindfulness practice. It's like going to a mental gym – the more repetitions of this cycle of the attention, the more we develop our 'mindfulness muscles'.

Mindfulness practice is therefore very straightforward and just cycles around 2 simple steps:

1. **You choose a specific physical sensation as the focus for your attention: something you can see, hear, smell, taste, touch or feel in the body.** We call this a '**Focusing Anchor**'. Ideally you would choose something that is neutral or pleasant and that stands out vividly enough so it is easy to find when we return our attention to it. Common examples of Focusing Anchors are the feeling on the feet on the floor (standing or sitting), the feeling of an object in your hands, the sensations of the belly moving with the breath or a specific sound you can hear.
2. **When the attention wanders off, as it naturally does, you will at some point realise this has happened and you then choose to return the attention to the Focusing Anchor.** While it wanders you are in autopilot mode – the attention is taken here and there, caught in the flow of whatever is happening; pleasant or unpleasant. At the moment you notice it has been carried away from your Focusing Anchor you can start making choices again. You can choose to briefly notice what caught the attention. You can choose to be easy on yourself about the attention wandering – it's just what happens. Then you can choose where to direct the attention next. Generally, when practicing mindfulness, the invitation is to choose to return the attention to the Focusing Anchor. This is not a rule: there may be times you choose to linger with what captured the attention or you might choose to direct the attention to something else entirely. The important thing is that you are **choosing** – and it is being able to make choices about where you direct your attention and then choosing your actions in response to what you are noticing that, moment-by-moment and little-by-little, will bring greater freedom into your life. Perhaps a better name for this than '*mindfulness*' could be '*choicefulness*'.
1. [Back to 1 Again] **Once again you direct your attention to your chosen Focusing Anchor.** Of course, the attention will wander off once more after some moments and you will go round this cycle again [and again and again...].

As we get familiar with mindfulness practice we notice there are opportunities to be attentive to what we are experiencing in the different parts of this cycle.

If we remember that all we are doing when we are being mindful is noticing what's going on right now - then however it is right now is just how it is.

This means that if you are experiencing a moment of ease or relaxation, then you can notice how it is to be experiencing **this** moment of ease and relaxation. You may notice you have a liking for this experience and your mind may want to have a think about it and what it all means. The invitation while practicing mindfulness is to just notice that that is what the mind is doing, allow it to do what it is doing in the background and to bring your attention back to your chosen Focusing Anchor. In these moments you are noticing your Focusing Anchor with whatever your mind is doing and whatever you are feeling alongside.

At other times you may be experiencing boredom, frustration or other less pleasant feelings and the invitation is to explore how it is to experience **this** moment of boredom or frustration etc., just as it is. You may notice a "not liking" of this experience and your mind may want to take your attention off to think about what you are experiencing; fixing it or sorting it out in some way. The invitation is again to just notice what the mind is up to and allowing it the room and space to do whatever it is doing in the background. Then bring your attention back to your chosen Focusing Anchor. The intention in mindfulness practice is to allow what is present to be 'alongside', such as feelings of boredom or frustration, while the attention returns to the Focusing Anchor each time it is carried away.

A helpful metaphor can be to consider each mindfulness practice as a journey, with you driving along the road noticing the scenery as you go along. In the back (and possibly in the passenger seat at times) you have passengers who, being strapped in, can't actually physically touch you (if it helps you can imagine very secure straps only released by the driver or even a safety screen!). While they can't touch you, they can certainly voice their opinions and do so at every opportunity. You may at times choose to act on what they are saying but much of the time you can just be aware they are in the back and allow them the space to say what they are saying while you return your attention to driving and being attentive to the surroundings. This is not about ignoring, controlling, blocking out or distracting yourself. You are aware these 'passengers' are there and at times will be caught up in what they are saying. While you might not like them and may wish they were not there, the fact is they **are** there and so the intention is to explore how it is to not get into a battle with them. How is it to be willing let these 'passengers' get on with whatever they are doing while you keep returning your attention to the driving and surroundings?

In this way each mindfulness practice will have 'passengers' accompanying you for the 'ride'. The invitation is to explore how it is to be willing to allow them to be there for the duration of the practice.

Using the word 'A.N.Ch.O.R. we can summarise the 5 steps of mindfulness practice process:

A = become **Aware** the attention has wandered away from the Focusing Anchor: a key moment of mindful awareness and the heart of mindfulness practice.

N = **Notice** what has pulled at and captured the attention without getting caught up in it. Possibly label it: e.g. 'loud noise', 'busy thoughts', 'tired feeling', 'frustration feeling', 'planning thought', 'ache in legs'. Experiment responding with ease to what you are noticing:- allow whatever is there the room and space to do what it is doing, even just for a few moments; like a passenger accompanying you 'for the ride'.

Ch = Then **Choose** to return the attention to the Focusing Anchor.

O = **Observe** the thoughts and feelings that sometimes flare up as you choose to return the attention to the Focusing Anchor. There could be thoughts and feelings of relief, reluctance, boredom, interest, tiredness, clarity or confusion for example.

R = **Return** the attention to the Focusing Anchor. Once again return to noticing the fine detail of the Focusing Anchor, bringing it into the foreground of the attention. Let what you are sensing fill your awareness, perhaps feeling your way into what you are sensing. Allow whatever captured the attention to be alongside, somewhere in the background.