Your EAP news

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Finding focus

Being mindful means being more aware of your body, mind, and feelings, right here and now. Mindfulness is used in yoga and for relaxation — and it can help you at work, too. When you're mindful, it's easier to stay on task, avoid distractions, and focus on what needs to happen. Your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) can give you tips and resources to get started.

The benefits of mindfulness

Paying attention to what's going on right this second can be hard. But it is possible to train yourself to focus on the present moment. You become aware of what's going on inside and around you — your thoughts, feelings, sensations, and environment. You observe these moments without judgment. This is called mindfulness.

Mindfulness has its roots in Buddhist meditation. Meditation is a practice that aims to increase awareness of the mind and concentration. Mindfulness can involve a meditation that's practiced in a quiet space. In this practice, you focus on your breathing or sensations in your body. If your mind wanders — like thoughts popping in about things you need to do — you try to return your mind to the present moment.

Mindfulness helps you develop the ability to stay grounded in the present, so you don't spend time focusing on past negative experiences or worrying about things to come.

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The health benefits of mindfulness

Mindfulness-based treatments have been shown to reduce anxiety and depression. There's also evidence that mindfulness can lower blood pressure and improve sleep, help people cope with pain, and overcome depression. Researchers are now studying whether mindfulness training can help with a variety of other conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), eating disorders, and addiction.

Developing healthy habits

Being mindful may also help you make healthier choices. A recent study found that participants practicing mindfulness chose a healthier diet after taking a course on it. Studies also suggest that it can help reduce binge eating and emotional eating. Paying closer attention to your body can help you notice signals that you're full and help you better enjoy your food. This body awareness seems to be one part of how mindfulness helps people adopt healthier habits.

Mindfulness may also help with setting goals, which can have a positive impact on many areas of health and wellness.

Learning to be mindful

Becoming more mindful requires practice. Here are some tips to help you get started.

- **Take some deep breaths.** Breathe in through your nose to a count of 4, hold for 1 second and then exhale through the mouth to a count of 5. Repeat often.
- **Take a stroll.** As you walk, pay attention to your breath and the sights and sounds around you. If thoughts and worries enter your mind, note them but then return to the present.
- **Practice mindful eating.** Be aware of taste, textures, and flavors in each bite. Listen to when your body is hungry and full.
- **Find mindfulness resources that work for you.** And be sure to turn to your Employee Assistance Program (EAP) for help. Their job is to help you become as healthy as you can be, in body, mind, and spirit.

Source: National Institutes of Health's NIH News In Health, *Mindfulness for Your Health*, (accessed March 2022): newsinhealth.nih.gov.

Mindfulness: The art of being present

We spend a lot of time thinking about the past: telling stories, regretting our actions, or feeling happy. We also spend time thinking about the future. We plan dinner, study for tests, and worry. Sadly, we often ignore the present. In turn, we sometimes do not pay attention to the details of our lives. We make quick decisions based on past decisions, and we ignore negative habits.

Mindfulness can help us find the present

The word mindful means aware. Mindfulness is an awareness of the present moment. It is paying attention in a particular way:

- On purpose
- Without judgment
- In the present moment

Scientists have shown that mindfulness:

- Reduces stress, anxiety, and pain
- Eases depression and other behavioral health challenges
- Helps manage post-traumatic stress disorder
- Aids in substance abuse recovery
- Increases productivity
- Makes people happier and more content

Mindfulness practices are activities or habits that help us stop and notice our body, our thoughts and feelings, other people, and our environment. Therapists use mindfulness practices to treat stress and help with addiction recovery.

Meditation 101

Meditation is the most common mindfulness practice. Experts say that meditating even five minutes a day helps. Basic meditation is about being still and trying to quiet the mind. When thoughts arise during a meditation, try to simply observe them and let them go without judgment or reaction.

There are many ways to help focus the mind. To start, be comfortable but alert. Some people sit upright. Others lie down. Possible places are: on the floor, on a pillow, in a chair, or on a bed. The following can all be part of your meditation practice:

- **Breathing exercises:** Notice how your breath comes in and goes out. Let it get slower and deeper. It can help to think, "I am breathing in. I am breathing out." If your mind wanders, come back to your breath.
- **Body scan:** Notice how your body feels. Start at your head. How does it feel? Can you relax your scalp, face, or jaw? Move your attention down your body, noticing and relaxing.
- **Chants, mantras, or prayers:** Repeating words or sounds helps with focus. They can be silent or out loud and can come from anywhere. Even the words, "I am breathing in. I am breathing out," can be a mantra.
- **Guided meditation:** Trained guides can talk you through a meditation period. Their methods might include breathing or body scan exercises, noticing emotions, counting, and thinking of places or objects. Music is often used.
- **Moving meditation:** This method uses motion to focus the mind. One example is the martial art tai chi. Measured breathing and fluid movements keep the mind on the present. Some people reach a calm, focused state with other activities such as yoga, walking, or leisurely bike riding. Others find crocheting or knitting to be useful tools.

Mindfulness beyond meditation

Nonmeditation practices can be done regularly, such as in the morning or throughout the day. They include:

- Breathing exercises
- Emotion check
- Body scan
- Mindful eating
- Keeping a journal or diary

Like any healthy habit, mindfulness becomes easier with practice. To learn more tips for practicing mindfulness, reach out to your Employee Assistance Program (EAP).

Source: Yale New Haven Health/Achieve Solutions: A Beacon Health Options Website, *Mindfulness: The Art of Being Present*, (accessed March 2022). achievesolutions.net.

Two easy exercises for practicing mindfulness

If you'd like to practice mindfulness but aren't sure where to start, try these two simple exercises.

Exercise 1: Basic mindfulness meditation

This exercise takes as long as you want it to — but most people find it takes at least 20 minutes for their mind to settle.

1. Sit on a straight-backed chair or cross-legged on the floor.
2. Focus on an aspect of your breathing, like the sound you're making, the way your belly rises and falls as you inhale and exhale, or the feeling of air flowing through your nostrils.
3. Start to widen your focus. Pay attention to sounds you may hear, or sensations like smell or the feel of the surface on your back or legs.
4. If a thought comes into your head, let it pass. If your mind starts to become too active, return to focusing on your breathing.

Exercise 2. Practicing awareness in daily life

This exercise can be done anywhere, any time, helping you to stay present and fully engaged in your life. Choose any task or moment to practice this exercise, for example, eating a meal, taking a shower, taking a walk, or petting your dog.

1. To begin, focus your attention on the sensations in your body — what you're tasting, feeling, smelling, hearing, or seeing.
2. Breathe in through your nose, letting the air to fill your lungs. Let your belly expand fully.
3. Breathe out slowly through your mouth. Notice how it feels to inhale and exhale.
4. Keep performing the task at hand, slowly and deliberately.
5. When you notice that your mind has wandered, bring your attention back to the moment.

By adding these two basic exercises to your day, you can begin to reap the many benefits of mindfulness. If you'd like more insight on mindfulness and ideas on how to practice it, reach out to your Employee Assistance Program (EAP). They're here to help you focus on all aspects of wellness.

Source: Harvard Health Publishing, *Two mindfulness meditation exercises to try,* (accessed May 2022). Health.harvard.edu.

Important: This document is intended for general information only. It does not provide the reader with specific direction, advice, or recommendations. You may wish to contact an appropriate professional for questions concerning your particular situation.

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