

What is Mindfulness?

Adapted from A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Handbook, Stahl and Goldstein, 2010 and

<https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/>

Mindfulness is the basic human ability to be fully present, aware of where we are and what we're doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed by what's going on around us.

Mindfulness is a quality that every human being already possesses, it's not something you have to conjure up, you just have to learn how to access it. It is cultivating an awareness of the mind and body and living in the here and now. Mindfulness is being with yourself and observing, without judgement, your breath, thoughts, emotions, body sensations.

Non-judgment is an important concept. Many of us have frequent critical, judgmental thoughts about ourselves and others throughout the day. In mindfulness the idea is to become aware of one's breath, thoughts, emotions and body sensations without judging them. This may be a change for you. Be kind to yourself as you practice mindfulness, being non-judgmental may not happen quickly but part of the process is to notice and accept your thoughts and emotions.

Mindfulness can be done formally or informally. Formally is when you set aside a time each day to intentionally be aware of your breath, your thoughts, your emotions and your body sensations. Informal mindfulness can happen in the flow of your day when you bring mindfulness to everyday activities such as work, eating, parenting, talking with other people etc. At some point in your mindfulness practice you might use a mindful check-in when you are experiencing stress, racing thoughts or anxiety to help you understand what might be causing these things.

As you begin a mindfulness practice think about how you plan or schedule things. Can you keep mental track of when you plan to do your formal practice? Or do you need a printed calendar or a reminder on your phone or your computer? There is a weekly schedule template at the end of this handout if it would help to have something ready to use.

Formal practice – Mindful Check-in

The mindful check-in is a 3-minute mindfulness practice that is a good place to begin your practice.

Find a quiet relaxing environment (as best you can!) with as few distractions as possible. You can do this sitting up or lying down but be aware that it may be easy to fall asleep if you are lying down. Many people keep their eyes closed but some prefer to keep them partly open.

Once you have a place and a posture, begin slow breaths. Notice your breath on the inhaled, going into your body. Then notice the exhaled as the air leaves your lungs. Take a few slow breaths. Next notice your body, are parts of your body tense, are parts relaxed, are parts sore? Thoughts may come into your mind. This is normal. Notice the thoughts and then let them go.

Notice if there is judgement that goes along with any of the thoughts. Judgement is common for many people, note it and let it go by clearing your mind. One person I know visualizes her thought as words going right to left in front of her eyes. Then the words “scroll off” your vision. She says this helps her let go of thoughts.

Do this for 3 minutes. At the end notice your thoughts, emotions and body sensations. Some people like keeping a journal about their practice. I also include a journal template at the end of this handout.

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Mindful Check-In Journal:

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Mindfulness and Your Body

Adapted from:

<https://www.mindful.org/beginners-body-scan-meditation/>, A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Handbook, Stahl and Goldstein, 2010 and The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma, Bessel Van de Kolk, Penguin Books, September 8, 2015.

Becoming more aware and in tune with your body has several positive outcomes:

- 1) You can become more aware of your physical self.
- 2) You may become more aware of your emotions, such as fear or anxiety and with greater awareness you can decide what to do next.
- 3) You can bring your full attention to real-time experiences happening in the present moment—helpful when emotions or thoughts feel intense or difficult to handle.
- 4) You become aware of pleasant and unpleasant sensations, learning to notice what happens when we simply hang in there and feel what’s going on in your body without trying to fix or change anything.

The method to increase connectedness with your body and awareness of what is happening in your body is called the body scan. The body scan is a systematic method to bring awareness to different parts of your body. Some people have a routine where they start in the same place and bring awareness to parts of their body in the same order each time. Others choose to quickly check in with their entire body, a quick “once over” and notice which part(s) of their bodies need awareness. It might be easier to begin with the scan starting with the same place and going in the same order while you learn.

Doing the body scan

Find a comfortable place with few distractions. Pick a posture that is comfortable. Many people choose to lie down to do the body scan but some struggle to stay awake while lying down. Experiment by lying, sitting on the floor, a chair or the couch until you find the best posture for yourself. You are also not locked into one posture; you can listen to your body and decide each time. 45 minutes is a good time when you are beginning but 45 uninterrupted minutes can be hard to find at times. Set aside however long you are able.

Start with noticing your breath and how it feels when you inhale and you exhale. Again, you might be distracted by thoughts, if so notice them non-judgmentally, and bring your attention back to your breath and then to where you left off before the thought occurred. Pick a progression of areas of your body and follow it. For example, begin with your left foot. Be aware of all the parts of your foot, your toes, the arch, your heel. Notice the sensations: is there pain, tingling, tightness, dry skin etc. Then slowly move to your ankle, your calf, your knee and so on. There is a recorded body scan script that will guide you on this webpage: <https://www.mindful.org/beginners-body-scan-meditation/>.

Be aware that many sensations and emotions may arise during a body scan, especially if you have experienced trauma. As Bessel Van de Kolk says in The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma:

“We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for

how the human organism manages to survive in the present. Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think.”

If you are doing a body scan and difficult thoughts and memories arise, shift to mindful breathing, notice your breath as you inhale and exhale until you regain a sense of calm and grounding. You may want to journal about the experience sometime after you have some distance from it.

Stahl and Goldstein note that there are 4 potential barriers to becoming aware of your emotions:

- 1) Some people have had the emotions invalidated or ridiculed while they were growing. They may have been told “It’s ridiculous that you’re scared.” Or “Boys don’t cry, be tough.” Or similar things. You may have learned to deny or repress emotions. If they come up it may be disruptive.
- 2) Some people confuse thoughts with emotions. As your awareness increases try and key into whether you are having thoughts or emotions. For example, the thought may be “I’m stupid.” While the emotion might be shame, guilt or sadness.
- 3) You might become aware of an emotion that might be hard to define. Emotions are not always clear cut, so it may take some time to become clear what the emotion is.
- 4) Some people may not have the vocabulary to describe what they are feeling.

Developing a Mindfulness Practice

Adapted from A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Handbook, Stahl and Goldstein, 2010

When developing your mindfulness practice there are some important concepts. One is the attitudes of mindfulness that will guide your practice:

- 1) Beginner's mind: awareness of things as if they are new, a sense of curiosity.
- 2) Nonjudgment: awareness of developing a nonjudgmental observer, noticing thoughts, emotions and body sensations without judging them.
- 3) Acknowledgement: awareness to acknowledge things as they are.
- 4) Non-striving: awareness of being in the moment, not trying to concentrate, not trying to breathe in a certain way.
- 5) Letting be: simply let thoughts, emotions and body sensation be as they are.
- 6) Awareness of self: being aware of the truth or untruth of your own experience.
- 7) Compassion for self: non-judgmental compassion for yourself as you are.

Breathing: Breathing is what mindfulness is built upon. Using breathing as a place to start being in the moment with yourself. Abdominal breathing is the preferred method. This is deep breathing that reaches into the abdomen rather than staying in the chest only. One way to know you are abdominal breathing is to put your hands flat on your belly. When you inhale you should feel your belly pushing out and then contracting as you exhale.

Vagus nerve, breathing and emotion awareness

Note: this section speaks to neurobiology and has links to more detailed information about the brain. If this is not interesting skip ahead to the next section.

Simply stated, the vagus nerve is a set of 3 nerves that start at the brain stem and extend to the gastrointestinal tract. It is responsible for monitoring the major organs and messages go the body from the brain and from the body to the brain to help maintain normal bodily functions.

The nervous system has 2 parts: the sympathetic and the parasympathetic. Briefly the sympathetic system prepares us for action – “acceleration.” The parasympathetic system controls rest and relaxation – “deceleration.” If the brain detects danger or stress it notifies the sympathetic system into action – increased alertness, muscle tension, to be ready to act. The sympathetic system sends signals to the brain that it's time to relax the brain and body. One thing that stimulates the sympathetic system to send this message is abdominal breathing.

For more information this is one of many sources: <https://www.healthline.com/human-body-maps/vagus-nerve#problems>

Additionally, a mindful practice can increase positive thoughts and feelings about oneself, which causes the parasympathetic to send calming messages to the brain.

Mindful Breathing Practice:

A reminder of how to do breathe mindfully:

Find a place that is comfortable and has few distractions. Find a comfortable posture, sitting on the floor or in a chair or elsewhere if it works for you. Once you are in place close your eyes fully or leave them slightly open, depending on your preference.

Begin abdominal breathing. Until you are feeling confident about your abdominal breathing you may want to put your hands on your belly to be sure that your breaths are deep and go into your abdomen. You should feel your hands moving in and out as you inhale and exhale. Gently direct your attention to your breaths, notice your breath going in and out.

It is very common for thoughts to come into your mind. If this happens, non-judgmentally notice the thoughts and then let them go. Bring your awareness back to your breath. The act of bringing your awareness back to your breath is a mindful act in itself.

One caution: As you develop your mindfulness practice, and maybe use mindfulness to increase your awareness of your emotions in the present moment unpleasant or painful memories or thoughts may come up. The handout called “Mindfulness, Stress Reduction and Emotion Management” has some specific ways to respond to these difficult thoughts and/or emotions. You may want to journal after a session if these thoughts or emotions arise. This may be useful for processing these later. A journal template is on the next page if having it would be useful.

Date: _____

Difficult or painful thoughts or memories:

Reflections on thoughts and/or memories:

Mindfulness, Stress Reduction and Emotion Management

Adapted from A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Handbook, Stahl and Goldstein, 2010

Sources of stress

We all have stress and it comes from different and sometimes many sources. Some of the sources of stress are:

- 1) Everyday stress – getting out the door in the morning, paying bills on time, putting kids to bed etc. All the things that have to happen for us to function.
- 2) Special circumstances – death in the family, pandemic, divorce, sick child or relative, moving.
- 3) Existential stress – Am I where I should be? Is my life meaningful?
- 4) Anxiety from these and other sources.
- 5) Relationships – both positive and negative stress
- 6) Work – too much to do, dissatisfaction, job loss, starting a new job.
- 7) Past trauma.

If you aren't tuned into your sources of stress, take a moment and write down current stresses. Notice the number and intensity of the stress. Don't forget positive changes or events, even these can bring on stress.

Many of us have a great amount of stress daily. Work, parenting, COVID-19, caring for aging family etc. Stress cause hormones to be released in the brain. This can trigger the fight/flight/freeze/fawn response. This can cause our brain to stay in hypervigilance, a state of high alert, tense muscles, inability to relax. This state is detrimental to our health.

How we respond to stress

Jon Kabat-Zinn has studied stress and developed the idea that there are stress reactions and stress responses. Stress reactions are our habitual, often unconscious ways of trying to handle stress and may include unhealthy habits such as smoking, substance use, over working etc. These are again, harmful to our mental and physical health. Stress responses are planned, healthier ways to respond to stress: exercise, good diet, good sleep etc. Mindfulness can be a great addition to these positive strategies.

Specifically, there are several things that may happen to you when you are stressed:

- 1) Anxiety.
- 2) Negative self-talk, self-criticism.
- 3) Different ways and patterns of thought:
 - a. Catastrophizing: we expect disaster and imagine the worst possible outcome.
 - b. Exaggerating the negative and minimizing the positive: positive experiences are downplayed and negative experiences are exaggerated.

- c. The “shoulds”: I should be better at my job, parenting, running etc. I shouldn’t have forgotten that appointment, etc.
 - d. Blaming others or situations rather than seeing one’s part in something. This can lead to a sense of helplessness – “if the problem is outside me, there’s nothing I can do to change it.”
- 4) Emotions can become intense and you might remember painful past experiences, which further complicates things.

Reacting vs. responding:

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/focus-forgiveness/201609/react-vs-respond>

A reaction is instant. It’s driven by the beliefs, biases, and prejudices of the unconscious mind. When you say or do something “without thinking,” that’s the unconscious mind running the show. A reaction is based in the moment and doesn’t take into consideration long term effects of what you do or say. A reaction is survival-oriented and on some level a defense mechanism. It might turn out okay but often a reaction is something you regret later.

A response on the other hand usually comes more slowly. It’s based on information from both the conscious mind and unconscious mind. A response will be more “ecological,” meaning that it takes into consideration the well-being of not only you but those around you. It weighs the long-term effects and stays in line with your core values.

How do you cope with stress?

There is a spectrum of stress coping strategies that are more or less “healthy.” Coping strategies are anything you do to manage the thoughts, emotions and body sensations related to stress. Strategies range from exercise, meditation, connecting with others to using alcohol and/or drugs, isolation, working long hours etc. Take a moment and write down what strategies you use. Then reflect on your choices, as non-judgmentally as you can: are your choices short term, get through the moment things that may be functional but in the long run aren’t the best! Or are you using strategies that work on the moment and are functional and sustainable?

Some of the best stress coping strategies are preventive: enough sleep, good diet and exercise. Mindfulness is a positive strategy that is both effective in the moment and a good long-term strategy.

The hierarchy approach to stress management

Mindfulness can be something you practice regularly each day. It can also be used in moments of stress. When you are stressed or upset one approach to try is what I call “The Steps of Stress Management in the Moment.” If you are stressed or anxious try these steps:

- 1) Cognitive approach: use self-talk (use your inner voice) to reassure yourself that "I'm safe," "I can handle _____ situation", "I've handled things like _____ in the past and I can handle it now."
- 2) Do the "Mindful Check-in."
- 3) Do "The 4 questions"

The mindful check-in is a 3-minute mindfulness practice.

Find the quietest place available. Sit down. Close your eyes if you'd like or keep them partly open.

Begin slow breaths. Notice your breath on the inhale, going into your body. Then notice the exhale as the air leaves your lungs. Take a few slow breaths. Next notice your body, are parts of your body tense, are parts relaxed, are parts sore? Thoughts may come into your mind. This is normal. Notice the thoughts and then let them go. Notice if there is judgement that goes along with any of the thoughts. Judgement is common for many people, note it and let it go by clearing your mind. One person I know visualizes her thought as words going right to left in front of her eyes. Then the words "scroll off" your vision. She says this helps her let go of thoughts.

Do this for 3 minutes.

Once you have done the Mindful check-in notice how you feel. Try and become aware of the source of your stress and what emotions you are feeling. Am I feeling worried because I haven't gotten that task at work done? Am I sad because my son didn't play well at his baseball game over the weekend? Am I upset about the fight I just had with my partner? If you are able to become aware of the emotion(s) you can try and respond to what's really going on. You can offer yourself reassurance and make a plan of how to get the work task done. You can feel the sadness about your son and decide how to support him.

The Four questions:

Adapted from *The Gift of Our Compulsions: A Revolutionary Approach to Self-Acceptance and Healing*, by Mary O'Malley, New World Library, Novato, CA, 2004

"We need to learn how to be in a new relationship with our compulsions (emotions). We have been taught to dominate them, only to have them dominate us. And if we do control one, another seems to take us over. We stop smoking and we find ourselves overeating. We let go of drinking, and we end up shopping. We try to think positive thoughts to stop our worrying, and we find our to-do lists taking over our lives..."

"What we fight controls us. What we resist, persists."

"There is another way of working with compulsions. This new way is about being curious rather than controlling and about responding rather than reacting. Our compulsions(emotions) thrive

in reaction. They heal in response. They won't let go until they teach us how to engage with them, giving them the attention and the compassion, they need to heal."

For the most part, we can control our actions, we can't control our thoughts, emotions, or body sensations. Trying to control the uncontrollable usually makes matters worse. The four questions are designed to enable you to be present in a different way with a feeling that you would ordinarily try to control.

The Four Questions:

1. In this moment, what am I experiencing in my emotions and in my body? Think of these feelings as signals from a part of you that needs your attention.
2. For this moment, can I let this experience be here without trying to get rid of it, without criticizing it, and without criticizing myself for having it? This is a part of you that is coming forward for healing. Find out if you can give 30 seconds of attention with pushing it away or judging it.
3. For this moment, can I touch the experience with compassion? Can I allow myself to show compassion or mercy to the part of myself that is suffering?
4. Right now, what do I truly need? What does this suffering part really need from you at this moment?

The best time to use the four questions is whenever you become aware of a feeling you do not want or an action you may regret. To use the example of wanting to stop smoking, you may use the four questions at any point in the "wave of compulsion": when you have the urge to smoke, while you are smoking or after you smoke. Usually people are best able to start using the four questions at the end of the wave, with the regret. Gradually, you can work up to using the four questions earlier in the cycle.

You can do the four questions as often as you have unpleasant feelings and can find about two minutes for yourself. The practice is quick, deceptively simple and very powerful.

Notes on the Four Questions:

Question one is designed "to pull out attention out of the story in our heads so we can see what is going on right now." Finding a few simple words for the physical and emotional feelings allows a little bit of room for you to step back and work with the feelings rather than being immersed in them.

You may need many tries before you are able to show yourself 5 - 30 seconds of acceptance at Question Two. Its intent is to help you be able to experience your emotions without pushing them away or ignoring them.

Loving Kindness Meditation for Oneself

<http://summitmindfulness.com/2020/01/loving-kindness-meditation-for-oneself/>

Loving kindness meditation is a method of developing compassion. It comes from the Buddhist tradition, but it can be adapted and practiced by anyone, regardless of religious affiliation. It is essentially about cultivating love. It focuses on developing feelings of goodwill, kindness and warmth towards ourselves and others that is unconditional. It is a quality of the heart that simply wishes well to all beings without seeking anything back in return.

Loving kindness meditation for oneself is a very effective way to start befriending ourselves and treating ourselves with gentleness, care, kindness and love. It counteracts the voice of the harsh inner critic that we all have within us. From this place of self-compassion, we are likely to become less critical of ourselves when we make mistakes. The more loving and patient we are with our difficulties, the less lost we are in reactivity thereby leading to wiser choices and wiser actions. We are also likely to dissolve our past aversive experiences with other people and to let them go instead of letting them affect us in adverse ways.

It is very easy to perform loving kindness for our loved ones and benefactors but it is more difficult for us to practice it for our own selves. However, as with any other skills set, we can improve by performing this practice on a regular basis.

This guided meditation will help us practice loving kindness towards ourselves. We will focus our attention on ourselves knowing that we too deserve unconditional love, kindness and happiness just like all other living beings. The guided meditation will have some traditional phrases of loving kindness. In the short period of silence that follows each phrase, we will repeat it a few times and breathe in the qualities of warmth, kindness, compassion or love towards ourselves. We will do this with all our heart.

The idea is to start with a small flame of the intent behind each phrase. We will attend to it and nurture it. We will slowly get more fuel for the tender feeling that arises in our heart as we offer loving kindness to ourselves and allow it to expand and to gain momentum. If we notice that our minds have wandered off, we will gently bring it back to this practice.

This meditation track is available in the “Guided Meditation” page (link below) that can be accessed from the “References” menu option. Please feel free to either stream these exercises or click on the “Download” button to download the mp3 files to your computers or mobile devices.

<http://summitmindfulness/resources/guided-meditations>

May you be happy !!!

May you be peaceful !!!

May you live with ease!!!

A Loving-Kindness Meditation to Boost Compassion

<https://www.mindful.org/a-loving-kindness-meditation-to-boost-compassion/>

Compassion helps us mend relationships and move forward while fostering emotional intelligence and well-being. Enjoy the benefits of loving-kindness with this guided meditation.

Time required: 15 minutes daily

How to do a loving-kindness meditation:

Relax Your Body:

Close your eyes. Sit comfortably with your feet flat on the floor and your spine straight. Relax your whole body. Keep your eyes closed throughout the whole visualization and bring your awareness inward. Without straining or concentrating, just relax and gently follow the instructions.

Take a deep breath in. And breathe out.

Bring Your Attention to The Warmth of Your Heart

Keeping your eyes closed, think of a person close to you who loves you very much. It could be someone from the past or the present; someone still in life or who has passed; it could be a spiritual teacher or guide. Imagine that person standing on your right side, sending you their love. That person is sending you wishes for your safety, for your well-being and happiness. Feel the warm wishes and love coming from that person towards you.

Now bring to mind the same person or another person who cherishes you deeply. Imagine that person standing on your left side, sending you wishes for your wellness, for your health and happiness. Feel the kindness and warmth coming to you from that person.

Now imagine that you are surrounded on all sides by all the people who love you and have loved you. Picture all of your friends and loved ones surrounding you. They are standing sending you wishes for your happiness, well-being, and health. Bask in the warm wishes and love coming from all sides. You are filled, and overflowing with warmth and love.

Send Loving-Kindness to Loved Ones

Now bring your awareness back to the person standing on your right side. Begin to send the love that you feel back to that person. You and this person are similar. Just like you, this person wishes to be happy. Send all your love and warm wishes to that person.

Repeat the following phrases, silently:

May you live with ease, may you be happy, may you be free from pain.

May you live with ease, may you be happy, may you be free from pain.

May you live with ease, may you be happy, may you be free from pain.

Now focus your awareness on the person standing on your left side. Begin to direct the love within you to that person. Send all your love and warmth to that person. That person and you are alike. Just like you, that person wishes to have a good life.

Repeat the following phrases, silently:

Just as I wish to, may you be safe, may you be healthy, may you live with ease and happiness.

Just as I wish to, may you be safe, may you be healthy, may you live with ease and happiness.

Just as I wish to, may you be safe, may you be healthy, may you live with ease and happiness.

Now picture another person that you love, perhaps a relative or a friend. This person, like you, wishes to have a happy life. Send warm wishes to that person.

Repeat the following phrases, silently:

May your life be filled with happiness, health, and well-being.

May your life be filled with happiness, health, and well-being.

May your life be filled with happiness, health, and well-being.

Send Loving-Kindness to Neutral People

Now think of an acquaintance, someone you don't know very well and toward whom you do not have any particular feeling. You and this person are alike in your wish to have a good life.

Send all your wishes for well-being to that person, repeating the following phrases, silently:

Just as I wish to, may you also live with ease and happiness.

Just as I wish to, may you also live with ease and happiness.

Just as I wish to, may you also live with ease and happiness.

Now bring to mind another acquaintance toward whom you feel neutral. It could be a neighbor, or a colleague, or someone else that you see around but do not know very well. Like you, this person wishes to experience joy and well-being in his or her life.

Send all your good wishes to that person, repeating the following phrases, silently:

May you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be free from all pain.

May you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be free from all pain.

May you be happy, may you be healthy, may you be free from all pain.

Send Loving-Kindness to All Living Beings

Now expand your awareness and picture the whole globe in front of you as a little ball.

Send warm wishes to all living beings on the globe, who, like you, want to be happy:

Just as I wish to, may you live with ease, happiness, and good health.

Just as I wish to, may you live with ease, happiness, and good health.

Just as I wish to, may you live with ease, happiness, and good health.

Take a deep breath in. And breathe out. And another deep breath in and let it go. Notice the state of your mind and how you feel after this meditation.

When you're ready, you may open your eyes.

Gratitude

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/gratitude>

Thankfulness

Gratitude is the expression of appreciation for what one has. It is a recognition of value independent of monetary worth. Spontaneously generated from within, it is an affirmation of goodness and warmth. This social emotion strengthens relationships, and its roots run deep in evolutionary history—emanating from the survival value of helping others and being helped in return. Studies show that specific areas of the brain are involved in experiencing and expressing gratitude. Brain scans of people assigned a task that stimulates expression of gratitude show lasting changes in the prefrontal cortex that heighten sensitivity to future experiences of gratitude.

What Is Gratitude?

Gratitude is a spontaneous feeling but, increasingly, research demonstrates its value as a practice—that is, making conscious efforts to count one's blessings. Studies show that people can deliberately cultivate gratitude—and there are important social and personal benefits to doing so. It is possible to feel grateful for loved ones, colleagues, animals, nature, and life in general. The emotion generates a climate of positivity that both reaches inward and extends outward.

Is gratitude an emotion?

Gratitude is an emotion, one that makes a person feel happier. Gratefulness is also a mood as well as a personality trait. Some people are just more inclined to feel grateful as a daily habit.

Is gratitude a feeling?

Gratitude is both a temporary feeling and a dispositional trait. In both cases, gratitude involves a process of recognizing, first, that one has obtained a positive outcome and, second, that there is an external source for that good outcome. (the article below explains more about this process.)

Why Gratitude Matters

Psychologists find that, over time, feeling grateful boosts happiness and fosters both physical and psychological health, even among those already struggling with mental health problems. Studies show that practicing gratitude curbs the use of words expressing negative emotions and shifts inner attention away from such negative emotions as resentment and envy, minimizing the possibility of ruminating, which is a hallmark of depression.

Does gratitude reduce stress?

People who are grateful feel less pain, less stress, suffer insomnia less, have stronger immune systems, experience healthier relationships, and do better academically and professionally. Overall, it can boost both your mental and your physical health.

Are grateful people less depressed?

Grateful people are indeed less likely to have mental health problems like depression. One study found that a gratitude intervention was successful in reducing negative affect and increasing mental resilience in a group of older adults.

Can gratitude help you engage in better self-care?

How to Cultivate Gratitude

Gratitude starts with noticing the goodness in life. A materialistic culture that encourages constant wanting and sees possessions as the source of happiness is not the most fertile ground for gratitude. But it is not an insurmountable barrier to developing it. Envy and especially cynicism and narcissism are similarly *thieves* of gratitude. In fact, the cultivation of gratitude may be at least a partial remedy for narcissism.

How do you practice gratitude?

Just being around your family and friends can help you feel more grateful. Also, being more appreciative of life and feeling less cynical pushes you in a more thankful frame of mind. At other times, when you are facing a tough decision, seeing it as a gift is useful, some people wouldn't mind having such a decision to make.

What makes a person feel grateful?

This depends on the person, and we all differ in the degree to which we are inclined to experience and express gratitude. It can be something as simple as a healthy spring shower, just because the rain washes everything clean. Engaging in a more specific act, such as volunteering to help others, makes people feel good about themselves.

Is gratitude contagious?

Tips to Foster Gratitude

- Keep a journal of or in some way note big and little joys of daily life.
- Write down "three good things"—identify three things that have gone well for you and identify the cause.
- Write thank-you notes to others.
- Think about people who have inspired you and what about them was most significant.

- Engage in "mental subtraction." Imagine what your life would be like if some positive event had not occurred.

The Science of Gratitude

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hope-resilience/201911/the-science-gratitude>

Why giving thanks is one of the best things you can do this holiday season (or anytime)

With this week marking the start of the holiday season, many of us will be taking stock of that for which we are most thankful. While this is generally recognized as a good thing to do, many of us may not spend much time thinking about why, or how we can do it better. There's a growing field around the science of gratitude that looks to answer these questions from an evidence-informed perspective, so I asked two experts to share more about their work in this area.

Robert A. Emmons is a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, as well as founding editor and editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Positive Psychology*. Peter C. Hill is a professor of psychology at Biola University's Rosemead School of Psychology. He is also a past president of Division 36 (Psychology of Religion) of the American Psychological Association (APA) and was elected Fellow of the APA in 1998. Together they are co-directors on a \$4.1 million initiative entitled *Gratitude to God: Psychological, Philosophical, and Theological Perspectives*. In this interview, they both offer insight drawn from their research on what gratitude really means, how it impacts our lives and those around us, and how we can intentionally cultivate it this holiday season.

JA: How do you personally define gratitude?

RE: Gratitude is an affirmation of the goodness in one's life and the recognition that the sources of this goodness lie at least partially outside the self. So, it emerges from two stages of information processing: affirming and recognizing. Gratitude is the recognition that life owes me nothing, and that all the good I have is a gift. It is a response to all that has been given. It's a way of seeing that alters our gaze. Living gratefully begins with affirming the good and recognizing its sources.

PH: There are gradations of gratitude and an important predictor of the degree to which gratitude is experienced is the extent to which the benefactor made a personal sacrifice in providing the valued benefit.

JA: What are some ways gratitude can help us live more resiliently?

RE: If we have learned one thing from the science of gratitude (and parenthetically we've learned a lot!) is that there is no resilience without gratitude. It's impossible. Gratitude is absolutely indispensable for growing an unshakable core of calm, strength, and happiness. Gratitude helps us recover from loss and trauma, gratitude widens the perceptual field and

helps us see the big picture and the opportunities in it, and of course, it connects people together.

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In *The Little Book of Gratitude*, I present the ARC model for why gratitude makes us resilient:

- *Gratitude amplifies*: Like a microphone or amplifier, gratitude pumps up the volume on the good in our lives. The good that we see in ourselves, the good that we see in others, and the good that we see in the world are multiplied and magnified through a grateful outlook.
- *Gratitude rescues*: Left to their own devices, our minds tend to hijack each and every opportunity for happiness. Negativity, entitlement, resentment, forgetfulness, ungratefulness all clamor for our attention. Whether stemming from our own internal thoughts or the daily news headlines, we are exposed to a constant drip of negativity. Weighed down by negativity, we are worn down, worn out, emotionally and physically exhausted. To offset this chronic negativity, we need to continually and perpetually hear good news. We need to constantly and regularly create and take in positive experiences. Gratitude is our best weapon, an ally to counter these internal and external threats that rob us of sustainable joy.
- *Gratitude connects*: We cannot and do not live alone. One just needs to imagine human relationships existing without gratitude—they would unravel. Gratitude is the moral cement, the all-purpose glue, the emotional spackle that squeezes into the cracks between people, strengthening and solidifying these relationships. Without gratitude, we'd be in relational ruin. Organizations, families, societies would crumble.

PH: Positive emotions thrive off of each other. As a positive emotion, gratitude feeds and is fed by, in a reciprocal manner, other positive emotions such as feeling more secure, more loving, more contented, happier, and more joyful as well as a number of other warmth-based emotions. Expression of gratitude creates a social bond with others. Such a sense of connection helps fuel psychological (and possibly physical) resiliency which, in turn, according to Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory, triggers an upward spiral towards improved emotional well-being, even in the face of challenge.

JA: What are some ways people can cultivate gratitude during this holiday season?

RE: Everyone is exhausted during the holidays. But because gratitude energizes, it is our best approach. It sounds corny, but one of the best things we can do for ourselves is to give the gift of gratitude. Make a gratitude phone call or visit. Select one important person from your past who has made a major positive difference in your life and to whom you have never fully expressed your thanks. Choose someone who is still alive. Tell them how your life is better because of what they have done for you. This will be transformational for both you and the receiver. Gratitude, by its very nature, is an external focus. It's about receiving a gift or benefit

from a source out there. It's about other people doing things for us that we could never do for ourselves; it's about noticing the good, taking in the good, and giving back the good. Grateful people are absorbed by the good that others are doing for them. Focus on the other—this is the best gratitude message we can give people.

PH: I like Bob's practical suggestions. The bottom line is behavioral practice. It's no secret that we often take those things that are common to our everyday lives more for granted and that includes our relationship with others. Since the holiday season involves a focus (and time spent) with those closest to us, perhaps we should wake up each day during this season with a strategy of creating an opportunity to express thanks for those close to us, such as a spouse, child, parent, or sibling. It is just a matter of finding something to compliment that significant other and expressing gratitude for their skill or sacrifice. It's catchy and this fosters that upward positive spiral on a family systems level.

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JA: How can we support others in our lives who might feel like there's little to be thankful about as the holidays approach? For example, supporting a loved one who is going through a difficult time or has experienced a recent loss.

PH: There is nothing that will make that person more grateful than you simply being there with a listening ear. They need empathy, not advice. It may very well be your sacrifice of time and your understanding spirit that they feel thankful for. And, remember, gratitude is a positive emotion that may help energize that person to see some things beyond their sense of loss and despair. This likely won't happen immediately, but it is perhaps one small step toward recovery.

RE: We know that suffering in life is inevitable and unavoidable, and no one is going to feel grateful in that season of life. Perhaps they think they should (or we think they should), but gratitude is never a should, but always a could. Gratitude is an attitude, not a feeling that can be easily willed. What do we do to help? Listen, be compassionate, be present. Be the reason for their gratitude.

Eventually, and over time, we come to realize that there is more to life than our losses, and gratitude for life gives us a realistic perspective by which to view our losses and not succumb to victimhood or despair. The ability to perceive the elements in one's life and even life itself as gifts would appear essential if we are to transform tragedies into opportunities. In doing so, grateful individuals begin to heal from past wounds and look forward to the future with a fresh affirmation toward life. We realize that we can be grateful even if we don't feel grateful. It is under these conditions where we have the most to gain by a grateful perspective on life. In the face of demoralization, gratitude has the power to energize. In the face of brokenness, gratitude has the power to heal. In the face of despair, gratitude has the power to bring hope. I've talked to many, many people who have overcome trials and tribulations and what they have in common is that gratefulness became their spiritual lifeline.

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JA: What are you working on now?

RE: There is so much left to be done! We are at the dawn of a global gratitude renaissance. There is unprecedented enthusiasm for new scientific information on the science and practice of gratitude. Remarkably, though, the spiritual side of gratitude has been largely ignored. Over \$10 million has been invested in research on gratitude, but very little of that has been directed to exploring gratitude to God. Given its centrality within all of the major spiritual traditions, it is time to address this imbalance, and that is why Pete Hill and I are directing the Gratitude to God research initiative to encourage serious scholarship from the sciences and the humanities. Nearly \$3 million will be invested in research projects. Gratitude has strong religious roots. The texts, teachings, and traditions of world religions tend to encourage gratitude. The impulse to give thanks is very natural. It says something very fundamental about us as human beings. The need to understand origins is a spiritual quest. Gratitude directs our minds to the vast oceans of realities not visible. We are excited about this project and are convinced that it will contribute to a bigger, better, and deeper understanding of gratitude.

PH: Gratitude is such a powerful force both internally and interpersonally, yet some people have trouble being thankful. We need to explore gratitude's dynamics even more, especially toward a better understanding of how gratitude can be further cultivated. As Bob mentioned, we are now turning some of our research efforts toward exploring gratitude beyond its expression toward other people. In most cultures, including ours, the majority of people are religious. Gratitude is rooted in many religious traditions, yet research on gratitude toward a transcendent reality has been ignored. Many religious people thank God as the source of all goodness, which includes the goodness of others for which one is thankful. If I choose to thank God for my family, for example, I am experiencing a double dose of gratitude—toward God and toward those others. That may double gratitude's benefits.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Script

Progressive muscle relaxation is an exercise that reduces stress and anxiety in your body by having you slowly tense and then relax each muscle. This exercise can provide an immediate feeling of relaxation, but it's best to practice frequently. With experience, you will become more aware of when you are experiencing tension and you will have the skills to help you relax. During this exercise, each muscle should be tensed, but not to the point of strain. If you have any injuries or pain, you can skip the affected areas. Pay special attention to the feeling of releasing tension in each muscle and the resulting feeling of relaxation. Let's begin.

Sit back or lie down in a comfortable position. Shut your eyes if you're comfortable doing so.

Begin by taking a deep breath and noticing the feeling of air filling your lungs. Hold your breath for a few seconds.

(brief pause)

Release the breath slowly and let the tension leave your body.

Take in another deep breath and hold it.

(brief pause)

Again, slowly release the air.

Even slower now, take another breath. Fill your lungs and hold the air.

(brief pause)

Slowly release the breath and imagine the feeling of tension leaving your body.

Now, move your attention to your feet. Begin to tense your feet by curling your toes and the arch of your foot. Hold onto the tension and notice what it feels like.

(5 second pause)

Release the tension in your foot. Notice the new feeling of relaxation.

Next, begin to focus on your lower leg. Tense the muscles in your calves. Hold them tightly and pay attention to the feeling of tension.

(5 second pause)

Release the tension from your lower legs. Again, notice the feeling of relaxation. Remember to continue taking deep breaths.

Next, tense the muscles of your upper leg and pelvis. You can do this by tightly squeezing your thighs together. Make sure you feel tenseness without going to the point of strain.

(5 second pause)

Progressive Muscle Relaxation Script

And release. Feel the tension leave your muscles.

Begin to tense your stomach and chest. You can do this by sucking your stomach in. Squeeze harder and hold the tension. A little bit longer.

(5 second pause)

Release the tension. Allow your body to go limp. Let yourself notice the feeling of relaxation.

Continue taking deep breaths. Breathe in slowly, noticing the air fill your lungs, and hold it.

(brief pause)

Release the air slowly. Feel it leaving your lungs.

Next, tense the muscles in your back by bringing your shoulders together behind you. Hold them tightly. Tense them as hard as you can without straining and keep holding.

(5 second pause)

Release the tension from your back. Feel the tension slowly leaving your body, and the new feeling of relaxation. Notice how different your body feels when you allow it to relax.

Tense your arms all the way from your hands to your shoulders. Make a fist and squeeze all the way up your arm. Hold it.

(5 second pause)

Release the tension from your arms and shoulders. Notice the feeling of relaxation in your fingers, hands, arms, and shoulders. Notice how your arms feel limp and at ease.

Move up to your neck and your head. Tense your face and your neck by distorting the muscles around your eyes and mouth.

(5 second pause)

Release the tension. Again, notice the new feeling of relaxation.

Finally, tense your entire body. Tense your feet, legs, stomach, chest, arms, head, and neck. Tense harder, without straining. Hold the tension.

(5 second pause)

Now release. Allow your whole body to go limp. Pay attention to the feeling of relaxation, and how different it is from the feeling of tension.

Begin to wake your body up by slowly moving your muscles. Adjust your arms and legs.

Stretch your muscles and open your eyes when you're ready.

Meditation and Mindfulness Apps for iOS and Android – reviewed by Kaiser Permanente

<https://wa-health.kaiserpermanente.org/best-meditation-apps/>

Guided meditations and meditation training for beginners: 1 (Simply Being), 2 (Omvana), 5 (Insight Timer), 7 (buddhify), 8 (Stop Breathe & Think), 10 (Calm)

Meditation timers with or without a soundtrack: 3 (WhiteNoise), 4 (Equanimity, Bodhi Timer), 5 (Insight Timer)

Apps for relaxing and centering, not necessarily meditation: 11 (Gratitude Journal, Attitudes for Gratitude), 12 (SimpleMind+, SharpMindMap), 13 (My Mood Tracker, T2 Mood Tracker), 14 (Breathe2Relax)

Apps that focus on neuroscience instead of spirituality for those who have a skeptical nature: 6 (Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics), 9 (Headspace)

1. Simply Being

iOS: \$1.99, Rating: 4.5 stars | Android: \$1.99, Rating: 4.5 stars

Simply Being is a solid, affordable app that features voice-guided meditations as well as relaxing nature sounds. Unlike some of the pricier meditation apps, there isn't much choice in meditation themes or voices. But the app's relative simplicity could be a virtue: More elaborate apps can be overwhelming and even distracting.

2. Omvana

iOS: free*, Rating: 4.5 stars | Android: free, Rating: 4.5 stars

Omvana offers a wider range of guided and music-only options like an iTunes of meditations. It claims to have "the largest library" of guided meditations and self-hypnosis tracks online. While some tracks are available at no cost, most tracks cost a few dollars each. It's worth noting the self-hypnosis tracks, which claim to help you lose weight, find love, or acquire wealth, are not based on neuroscience and are of dubious value.

3. WhiteNoise

iOS: free, Rating: 5.0 stars | Android: free, Rating: 4.5 stars

As its name suggests, this app uses white noise to mask distracting sounds during meditation and to promote relaxation. You can also use WhiteNoise to help with sleep. It comes with 40 pre-recorded white noise sounds, such as falling rain, a bubbling brook, or ocean waves. You can loop these samples, or even mix them together to create your own soothing sounds. What's more, you can record and loop your own favorite sounds. No guided meditations here.

4. Equanimity

iOS: \$4.99, Rating: 4.0 stars

This app could be your favorite if you're an established meditator looking for a timer you can customize. No guided meditations, no music or nature sounds. Equanimity allows you to set unobtrusive gongs,

bells, or chimes to signal the end of your session. The elegant timer shows you how much time is left in your meditation without distracting you. Also included are a meditation journal and a way to log meditations so you can track and monitor your practice. A comparable option for Android is [Bodhi Timer](#).

5. Insight Timer

iOS: free*, Rating: 5.0 stars | Android: free*, Rating: 4.5 stars

To maximize your options, Insight Timer is a popular choice. It features 3,000 free guided meditations as well as several hundred free music tracks to play while you're meditating. You can also use a variety of timer options, such as those found in Equanimity and Bodhi Timer. It has a wealth of free content, including guided meditations for sleep, although there are upgrades that require a purchase. If you don't value music or voice guidance, this app is likely to be overkill for you.

6. Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics by 10% Happier

iOS: free*, Rating: 5.0 stars

Here's training for meditation skeptics by meditation advocate Dan Harris. This app's content is firmly based in neuroscience and omits the spiritual components present in many other apps. The free seven-lesson course teaches basics of meditation, with access to more advanced meditations and courses for a subscription of \$9.99 per month, or \$79.99 for a year. Unfortunately, Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics is not yet available for Android.

7. buddhify

iOS: \$4.99, Rating: 5.0 stars | Android: \$2.99, Rating: 4.5 stars

First of all, despite the name this app has no apparent relation to Buddhist meditation. Its 11 hours of guided meditations are customized for activities such as walking in the city, taking a break at work, waiting around, and going to sleep. These situation-based meditations help to make Buddhify compatible with busy, urban lifestyles. There are also meditations that aim to reduce anxiety and take your mind off pain. For a single, relatively low payment, Buddhify offers many of the features of much costlier meditation apps. Some users do have minor quibbles with this app, such as the fact it 300+ MB of storage and can't be transferred to an SD card on Android devices. Some user reviews also mention the meditation guide speaks faster than they prefer.

8. Stop, Breathe & Think

iOS: free*, Rating: 4.0 stars | Android: free*, Rating: 4.5 stars

Stop, Breathe & Think combines a library of guided meditations with the mood tracking features of apps such as My Mood Tracker (13). It even "curates" suggested meditations based on your mood. With its goal-oriented tracking focus, it is something like a meditation Fitbit. You can purchase additional guided meditations, or receive full access to their library with a subscription of \$4.99 per month or \$41.99 for a year.

9. Headspace

iOS: free*, Rating: 5.0 stars | Android: free*, Rating: 4.5 stars

Like Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics, Headspace teaches less spiritual, more science-based meditation techniques, beginning with a free introductory course. You purchase a subscription to gain access to additional courses, as well as guided meditations. Headspace includes mood tracking features as well, and you can download guided meditations for offline use. A Headspace subscription is \$12.99 per month, or \$94.99 for a year. A lifetime membership costs \$399.99.

10. **Calm**

iOS: free*, Rating: 5.0 stars | Android: free*, Rating: 5.0 stars

Calm combines rich features and a large library of guided meditations with a simple, clean interface. Guided meditations range in length from 3 to 25 minutes, so you can always find a meditation to fit your schedule. Like other subscription-based apps, Calm provides a basic course in meditation for free, with more advanced meditations requiring a subscription starting at \$9.99 per month.

11. **Gratitude Journal**

iOS: \$3.99, Rating: 4.5 stars

This is not a meditation app as such. Instead, this app makes it easy to take time out of each day to note what you're grateful for. You can personalize your journal to give it a distinct look and feel, and can even add photos or audio to your journal entries. Another feature is the ability to set reminders so you don't forget to take time out of your day to be thankful. An attractive alternative for Android is [Attitudes for Gratitude](#).

12. **SimpleMind+**

iOS: free, Rating: 4.5 stars

This isn't a meditation app, either, but it's useful if you find a "brain dump" useful to clear your mind for meditation. SimpleMind+ is a free [mind mapping](#) tool that helps you clear your head of clutter. An Android alternative, which is also free, is [SharpMindMap](#).

13. **My Mood Tracker**

iOS: \$9.99, Rating: 4.5 stars

Here's another app that isn't for meditation, but may help you center and find the peace you need. My Mood Tracker encourages you to monitor and track your mental and emotional well-being. A reminder system asks you how you feel at various points of the day, so you can track your mood over time. This can promote relaxation and contentment by helping you to identify and mitigate stressors. A free alternative for Android and iOS is [T2 Mood Tracker](#), which is highly customizable but a little clunky.

14. **Breathe2Relax**

iOS: free, Rating: 4.5 stars | Android: free, Rating: 4.0 stars

Breathe2Relax by National Center for Telehealth and Technology helps you relax and relieve stress through exercises such as diaphragmatic breathing, also known as "belly breathing." It is completely free.

For kids here are some apps – reviewed by CommonSenseMedia

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/lists/meditation-apps-for-kids>

Free, online tracks for guided meditations

<http://summitmindfulness.com/resources/guided-meditations/>