

Mindfulness

Life never stops and it seems there is no shortage of things to feel stressed or anxious about. For our students this might include worries about schoolwork, COVID-19, our families, or many other unknowns about the future. One tool that many have found helpful for coping with difficult emotions is *mindfulness*.

What is Mindfulness?*

Mindfulness is a set of psychological skills for effective living that involves paying attention with openness, curiosity, kindness, and flexibility.

This definition tells us five important things.

1. Mindfulness refers to a **set of skills**. These include everything from accepting painful feelings to savoring pleasurable experiences, from gently observing your thoughts to grounding yourself amid overwhelming emotions.
2. Mindfulness is an **attention** process, not a *thinking* process. It involves paying attention to your experience, as opposed to being “caught up” in your thoughts.
3. Mindfulness involves an attitude of **openness and curiosity**. Even if your experience in this moment is difficult, painful, or unpleasant, you can be open to it and curious about it instead of running from it or fighting with it.
4. Mindfulness involves **flexibility** of attention: the ability to consciously broaden, narrow, sustain, or redirect your focus so you can attend to different aspects of your here-and-now experience, as desired.
5. Mindful attention includes the quality of **kindness**. It’s not like the cold, clinical detached attention of a scientist studying a lab rat; it’s like the warm, caring attention that a loving parent gives to a child.

*This section is an adaptation of a portion of a chapter on mindfulness in Russ Harris (2019), *ACT Made Simple: And Easy-to-Read Primer on Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, 2nd Ed.*

Why Mindfulness?

A substantial body of research on mindfulness has found a wide range of benefits for children and teens (not to mention adults), including improved academic success, improved patience, better emotion regulation, improved concentration and memory, improved resilience for coping with adversity, pain, or illness, improved empathy, improved self-acceptance, and decreased stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms.

Research also suggests that mindfulness may be a protective factor against alcohol and drug abuse and psychological distress leading to disorders such as depression. For more on the benefits of mindfulness, see [here](#).

Resources for Learning and Practicing Mindfulness

Like all skills, mindfulness skills must be learned and practiced in order to be useful. Here is a list of great websites and apps that can help get you started. These sites and apps have a wealth of information, tips and practical mindfulness activities.

Websites:

- For younger kids: [GoNoodle Flow](#)
- For teens and adults: [Mindful.org](#)

Apps:

- [Smiling Mind](#) (free)
- [Stop, Breathe & Think](#) (free version with optional paid premium membership)
- [Calm](#) (free trial, then paid subscription)
- [Headspace](#) (free trial, then paid subscription)
- [Abide](#) (A Christian meditation app that combines mindfulness with Scripture meditation and prayer - free version with optional paid premium membership)

One final note: Is it OK for Christians to Practice Mindfulness?

Some Christians have raised concerns about mindfulness, citing its historical connection to Eastern religious practices, especially buddhist meditation. However, mindfulness as discussed and practiced today at the popular level and in clinical settings is not tied to any religious perspective. It is, rather, a scientifically proven, psychologically-based tool for reducing stress, anxiety and depressive symptoms and improving cognitive function and overall well-being.

To clear up some misconceptions, mindfulness is not about becoming one with the cosmos or emptying the mind or escaping from reality. It is simply about shifting our attention *away from* the busyness of life and anxieties about the future and *towards* our present reality, noticing our breathing, bodily sensations, thoughts and feelings with an attitude of acceptance, curiosity, and compassion.

So what does the Bible say about this? While the Bible doesn't directly address mindfulness practice, it does have a lot to say about how we should think about our past and our future and stay focused in the present, and gives a number of reasons for why this is good.

For example, in Matthew 6:25-34 Jesus speaks to the issue of worrying. He tells us that we need to be aware (mindful) of God's providential love for us. He tells us to notice the birds, notice the flowers, notice how God cares for all of these creatures and plants and to rest in the assurance that God loves you much more than that, and no detail about you escapes his notice. Jesus instructs us not to worry about the future (the realm of anxiety), but to attend to the present reality of God's goodness. This practice leads to gratitude, which is [antithetical to anxiety](#).

For more on understanding mindfulness from a Christian perspective, check out [this article](#) and this short (11 min.) [podcast](#). Also try out the [Abide](#) app.