



Breath, Thoughts,
Feelings, Sensations

Mindfulness

by David M. Lobenstine, L.M.T.

Mindfulness is a word we hear frequently these days. It is deliciously vague and frustratingly ambiguous. We know we are supposed to practice it—but what exactly is it?

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D., executive director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, and one of the innovators of mindfulness teaching in the U.S., defined mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally.” Simple, yes? So, what do you actually do to be mindful?

You observe the movement of your breath, in and out. You observe the thoughts, feelings and sensations that emerge *with* your breath. That combination—awareness of breath, awareness of self—is a perpetual practice, waiting for us whenever we are ready. This is why mindfulness is one of the easiest things in the world to start doing—and one of the most difficult things to continue doing.

Pay attention

Mindfulness has been around for ages—more than 2,500 years, by some accounts—and has its roots in various Asian traditions, particularly Buddhism. As psychiatrist Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., wrote in his article, “The Science of Mindfulness,” for *Shambhala Sun*, its manifestations are numerous—and are found in everything from yoga to qigong, from chanting to centering prayer—since mindfulness, at its heart, is

simply “cultivating an awareness of awareness and paying attention to intention.”

Today in the West, this ancient concept has been codified into various courses of instruction, most notably mindfulness-based stress reduction and other forms of conscious breathing and meditation.

From more than 100 studies, we know practicing mindfulness has a startling array of benefits: it reduces symptoms of chronic pain, increases psychological hardiness and improves the effectiveness of existing treatments for psoriasis, to name a few. “Mindfulness can help to reduce stress and anxiety and conflict, and increase resilience and emotional intelligence,” wrote mindfulness teacher Gill Crossland-Thackray, in his blog for *The Guardian* newspaper.

There are many techniques and guides to getting started with cultivating mindfulness; I have found Kabat-Zinn’s *Mindfulness for Beginners* and Vietnamese Buddhist monk, teacher and author Thich Nhat Hanh’s *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation* particularly helpful. There are a number of online sources, including www.mindful.org and www.mindfulnet.org, which offer guided meditations and other assistance.

Mindfulness in massage

In this article, I want to focus on *why* mindfulness

can be particularly valuable to massage therapists. As a means of enhancing self-awareness, mindfulness can help us avoid one of our profession's greatest pitfalls: taking care of other people more than we take care of ourselves.

When we think about self-care, we often prioritize body over brain. Those overused extensors of the forearm make their frustrations known a lot more clearly than the murky messages of our mind, and aches can seem much more concrete than emotions. But there is a larger problem lurking beneath our bias toward the body: We massage therapists, I suspect, are not very good at being mindful.

It seems like we would be masters at mindfulness. Being in the present moment should come to us instinctively, as easy as effleurage. But often, the reverse is true. Yes, many of us entered this business because we are aware of our bodies, and because we know the importance of focus—but that focus too often is only on others. We become massage therapists because we have a lot to give, and because we gain great satisfaction from helping people. And here is where we get into trouble: Too much helping, it turns out, is bad for our health. The power of mindfulness, by contrast, is it does not require us to take care of anyone else. Ultimately, mindfulness requires us to do nothing at all but be in the moment—and in my experience, we therapists are *terrible* at doing nothing.

Temper your passion

Massage therapists are good at giving; but our insistence on helping clients—giving everything we have: heart, body and soul—session after session is a big reason why that desire to give can gradually dwindle.

What if we could temper the passion we have at the start of our careers? What if we could transform passion into something slow and steady, like conscious breath itself? If we work with equanimity, with calm awareness, then our desire to give can perpetuate itself—as inevitable and constant as our inhale and our exhale. But to cultivate that awareness, we must not just give ourselves to others; we must give ourselves to ourselves.

Mindfulness offers a perpetual reminder of our ability to take care of ourselves, anywhere, at any moment. But here's where it gets tricky, because what comes next goes against one of our most basic instincts: The way we take care of ourselves, ironically, is by doing nothing. Or perhaps more accurately, the way we take care of ourselves is by doing nothing else. The goal is to just attend to your breath at this moment, and to do only what you are doing at this moment.

"While washing the dishes, one should only be washing the dishes, which means that while washing the dishes one should be completely aware of the fact that one is washing the dishes," Hanh wrote in *The Miracle of Mindfulness: An Introduction to the Practice of Meditation*.

Our default setting

Committing solely to a single task is more difficult than it sounds. Try doing nothing besides washing the dishes. Chances are, you'll start by earnestly attending to the warmth of the water,

6 Steps to Cultivating Mindfulness

Mindfulness has many manifestations; everything can be done mindfully. Below are a few ways to help stimulate mindfulness in your daily life.

1. Body breath. As you inhale, imagine your breath slowly filling your muscles. Notice the areas that feel constricted or resist the expanding breath. As you exhale, envision tension slowly emptying from your muscles.

2. Color walk. The next time you walk somewhere, choose a color, and see if you can notice it in the world around you.

3. Begin with the exhale. Before checking your phone, Facebook, e-mail or any other task you do habitually, pause, follow your breath all the way down to the bottom of your exhale, then continue with your task.

4. End with the exhale. In your next massage session, see if you can allow your strokes to follow the rhythm of your breath. Wait until the bottom of your exhalation before making your first contact with the client. Try finishing each long, slow stroke at the bottom of your exhale. Feel how the enhanced awareness of your breathing enhances your awareness of your client.

5. Stay in session. As you wait for your client to emerge after a massage, resist the temptation to jump ahead: Don't check your phone or run through your mental checklist of what you need to do before your next session. Just follow your breath.

6. Sit. All of these techniques are active versions of mindfulness. Experiment with sitting meditation, too, in order to deepen your conscious awareness. Even a few minutes at a time is a good start; most important is perpetual practice.

—David M. Lobenstine, L.M.T.



PHOTOS BY THINKSTOCK

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the slip of the soap and the squeak of the rinsed glass. You might even feel a little glimmer of delight at the sheer simplicity of what you are doing. And then, before long, you'll start to calculate how many more dishes await you, and feel frustrated no one else offers to wash the dishes—ever!—and debate what you'll have for breakfast the next morning, and so on. In other words, you'll swing from that glimmer of mindfulness to its opposite—mindlessness—our default operating setting for much of our lives.

It is our habitual mindlessness, I believe, that spoils our great desire to give. Like all of the most important things we do, taking care of other people can be done with mindfulness, but it is far easier to do it mindlessly. Without conscious cultivation, our instinct to take care of others can become a mindless act, burdened by the inevitable obligations of life and career.

Giving is not enough

If all goes well, I will give thousands of massages in the coming decades. And that means I will do thousands of loads of laundry, and make and re-make my massage table thousands of times, and explain again and again the way tight pectoral muscles can contribute to upper-back tension. The sheer volume of these obligations is overwhelming.

When we acknowledge the inevitable repetition of our work—of life itself—it is easy to stop caring, to start working on autopilot, to live mindlessly. Our desire to help is dampened by the dawning realization that to be a good therapist, to be a real giver, we will have to *help* forever,

dishes or meditating or giving a massage. We can attend to the movement of our breath no matter what we do, as long as we are doing nothing else. When we pay attention on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally, we reorient our perspective on all we have to do.

The obligations remain, but feel a little less like obligations. There is no endless line of duties stretching out before us, filling our lives with drudgery; instead, there is just the breath we are in right now, just the lone task before us.

Anchored

We don't need to be mindful to be good therapists; however, mindfulness offers a deepened awareness of and engagement in all aspects of life, including our work. As we notice our thoughts and emotions as they arise, we diffuse their cumulative power. We don't try to defeat our thoughts with rational counterarguments; we don't try to suppress inconvenient emotions. We just acknowledge these thoughts and feelings as we continue to follow our breath.

We know interference will always bubble up, but it is less likely to build into something larger and harder to reckon with.


The breath anchors us, enables us to remain even. By being aware of our distractions and acknowledging our obligations, we minimize their soul-sapping strength.

If we are mindful, then we must attend to ourselves, following our breath in and out, as we attend to someone else. We must acknowledge the contents of our own body, mind

and heart as we care for the bodies, minds and hearts of those around us. If we can do nothing—or rather, do nothing else—we can sustain ourselves as we help our clients.

When we cultivate our own capacity for mindfulness, self-care is indistinguishable from being self-aware.

We have no choice but to work. We have no choice but to breathe. With the perpetual practice of mindfulness, we can do both together—and in the process, we can embrace ourselves and our obligations.

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Read "Mindfulness as a Healing Sense of Belonging," by Healing Arts Institute's Douglas Newton, www.massagemag.com/mindfulnessbelonging.

minute after minute, session after session, shift after shift. With this perspective, our work no longer feels exciting, but depleting; giving no longer feels like enough.

The good news is the truth of this realization: Giving is not enough. Giving to others is *never* enough. And yet, we often forge ahead, insisting we can be better therapists if we just get through this shift, if we just ignore our doubts and focus on what the client needs. Instead, we need to adjust the way we are giving. We need to give to ourselves as we give to our clients.

Mindfulness is a means to give to ourselves, wherever we are, whatever we are doing—whether washing the