

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness means maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment. Mindfulness also involves **acceptance**, meaning that we pay attention to our thoughts and feelings without judging them—without believing, for instance, that there’s a “right” or “wrong” way to think or feel in a given moment. When we practice mindfulness, our thoughts tune into what **we’re sensing in the present moment** rather than rehashing the past or imagining the future.

Though it has its roots in Buddhist meditation, a secular practice of mindfulness has entered the American mainstream in recent years, in part through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn and his Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program, which he launched at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. Since that time, **thousands of studies have documented the physical and mental health benefits of mindfulness** in general and MBSR in particular, inspiring countless programs to adapt the MBSR model for schools, prisons, hospitals, veterans centers, and beyond.



WHY PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

Studies have shown that practicing mindfulness, even for just a few weeks, can bring a variety of physical, psychological, and social benefits. Here are some of these benefits, which extend across many different settings:

- **Mindfulness is good for our bodies:** A seminal study found that, after just eight weeks of training, practicing mindfulness meditation boosts our immune system’s ability to fight off illness.
- **Mindfulness is good for our minds:** Several studies have found that mindfulness increases positive emotions while reducing negative emotions and stress. Indeed, at least one study suggests it may be as good as antidepressants in fighting depression and preventing relapse.
- **Mindfulness changes our brains:** Research has found that it increases density of gray matter in brain regions linked to learning, memory, emotion regulation, and empathy.
- **Mindfulness helps us focus:** Studies suggest that mindfulness helps us tune out distractions and improves our memory and attention skills.
- **Mindfulness fosters compassion and altruism:** Research suggests mindfulness training makes us more likely to help someone in need and increases activity in neural networks involved in understanding the suffering of others and regulating emotions. Evidence suggests it might boost self-compassion as well.
- **Mindfulness enhances relationships:** Research suggests mindfulness training makes couples more satisfied with their relationship, makes each partner feel more optimistic and relaxed, and makes them feel more accepting of and closer to one another.
- **Mindfulness fights obesity:** Practicing “mindful eating” encourages healthier eating habits, helps people lose weight, and helps them savor the food they do eat.

HOW TO CULTIVATE MINDFULNESS

Jon Kabat-Zinn emphasizes that although mindfulness can be cultivated through formal meditation, that's not the only way. "It's not really about sitting in the full lotus, like pretending you're a statue in a British museum," he says in this Greater Good video. "It's about living your life as if it really mattered, moment by moment by moment by moment."

- **Pay close attention to your breathing**, especially when you're feeling intense emotions.
- **Notice—really notice**—what you're sensing in a given moment, the sights, sounds, and smells that ordinarily slip by without reaching your conscious awareness.
- **Recognize that your thoughts and emotions are fleeting and do not define you**, an insight that can free you from negative thought patterns.
- **Tune into your body's physical sensations**, from the water hitting your skin in the shower to the way your body rests in your office chair.

SERVICES AND RESOURCES FOR MINDFULNESS

Mental Health Services at the Colonial Health Center offers a number of services for students experiencing sleep related issues:

- **Individual counseling**: Students can see a counselor for brief therapy to work on mental health challenges that can incorporate mindfulness; sessions usually occur on a weekly basis
- **Group counseling**: Students struggling with life changes who want to practice coping skills such as mindfulness techniques may wish to consider joining at group at MHS, which are free and unlimited to GW students
- **Learning skills and Self-Help Library**: Students can peruse pamphlets, books, podcasts, and videos on improving mindfulness as well as many other topics
- **Workshops** are offered throughout the year on various topics, including mindfulness; visit our website for information about upcoming workshops
- **Referrals** are available for therapists in the community, mental health agencies, and other campus and community resources
- **MHS's website** (healthcenter.gwu.edu) has up-to-date information on services offered by MHS, as well as links to related topics; also visit us on Facebook (facebook.com/GWHealthCenter) or Twitter (@GWHealthCenter)
- **Call-a-Counselor 24/7**: Students may contact MHS anytime, day or night, to speak to a counselor about their mental health concerns, including anxiety; (202) 994-5300



Mental Health Services at the Colonial Health Center offers workshops, an online self-help library, and other online resources as well as individual and group counseling. To access services, come in or call us at (202) 994-5300.