

Using Mindfulness to Alter Your Mood

This guest article from [YourTango](#) was written by [Dr. Vickie Change](#).

Mindfulness is at the core of Buddhist meditation, while also being found in a number of European philosophical and spiritual traditions. Some believe that this is because mindfulness is an inherent human capacity. The current Western, psychological notion of mindfulness is defined by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn as intentionally bringing moment-to-moment awareness to the present experience with an attitude of openness and acceptance. Simply put, it is living in the here and now.

Mindfulness is also called heartfulness; reflecting a compassionate awareness towards ourselves and others. Practicing mindfulness is a way of tuning into our full experience; using all of our senses. For instance, to practice mindful walking, start by noticing how your body feels standing upright. Notice whether you are balanced equally on both feet, or have any aches or tingles in your legs, back or shoulders. Feel your feet in your shoes or your hands at your sides. Shift your weight from one foot to another as you start to take a step. You might say to yourself, *"lifting, moving, and placing"* as you move your foot forward and take one step. Slow down so that you can feel each individual movement.

During this process, welcome any thoughts or feelings that arise. You might feel bored, especially when comparing the pace of the walking to how you typically move. Thoughts such as, *"What a waste of time!"* may arise; or perhaps you are planning what to do next. Observe these thoughts, and bring yourself back to the body sensations of lifting, moving, and placing your feet. Try to bring a "beginner's mind" or new perspective to the rich experience of walking. Imagine that you are taking your first steps as a toddler or after a broken leg has healed. Perhaps notice the smell of the air or the feel of temperature on your arms and face.

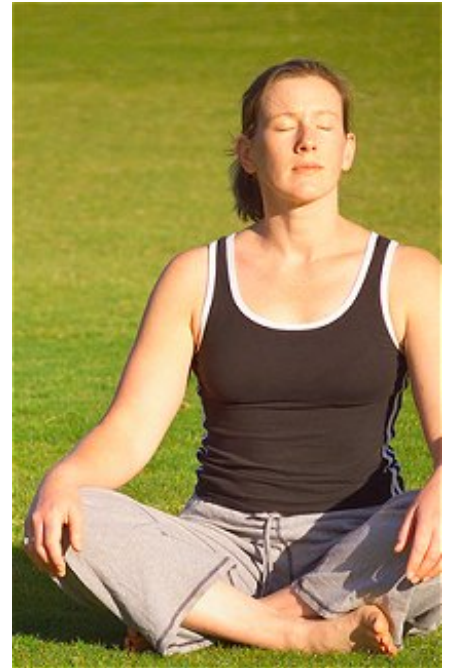
How does walking in this manner differ from the way in which you usually walk? Slowing down and tuning into our bodies and minds can be a deeply healing experience. Notice how it feels to bring your whole selves to the moment and *rest* in awareness. You have probably already experienced moments like this; for instance, when you are completely present with your child, when talking to a friend, thoroughly enjoying a meal, or reading a book. When we slow down and use all our senses to tune into the present moment, we can open ourselves up to new ways of feeling and thinking.

"Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom." — Victor Frankl

Similar to walking, our responses to stress or change can be habitual, learned at a young age or over time. Mindfulness can be used to gain perspective and refrain from automatically becoming mired in sadness, anger, or other difficult emotions. There are important differences between sadness and the entire body phenomenon called [depression](#). Sadness is a natural part of life and a healthy response to loss, disappointment, change, conflict, or other challenging experiences. Depression is a whole body phenomenon that includes harsh negative thoughts, physical aches, fatigue, deep and unrelenting feelings of sadness, and other symptoms. Mindfulness can help us to experience sadness without automatically exacerbating the feelings.

Many of us have a strong urge to understand sadness, anger, despair, irritability, and other difficult emotions when they come. We try to *think* our way out of the problem, which can be called ruminating, fixating, or obsessing. *"Why do I feel this way? What could I have done differently? What are other times this has happened?"* Memory is mood-dependent, meaning that when we are upset, it is easier to think of other times that we felt the same way. Going over and over the problem in our heads can call up similar stressful events and make us feel worse. Additionally, rumination often leads to thoughts such as, *"Why do I get sad? Why can't I make this go away? I'm no good. I'm letting people down. What's wrong with me?"*

This urge can be rooted in the best of intentions — to prevent depression and to feel better. Unfortunately these efforts can get us even more mired in our emotions. Next time you are feeling upset, try something



different. Stop trying to *solve* the problem of being sad by thinking about it obsessively. Instead, allow the feeling to happen. Explore what it feels like in your body.

Over evolution, we have developed a body that prepares for *threats* including worries about the future or loss by freezing, fighting, or running. The body registers these impulses by tensing, contracting, or bracing. You may notice that feeling scared or irritable is related to feeling tense in your chest, an upset stomach, or sweaty palms. Expanding your awareness to include body sensations can allow the storm of emotions to take its course rather than feeding it with self-blaming thoughts. As difficult and counterintuitive as it seems, try your best to sit with the pain; breath with it rather than trying to explain it, change it, or make it go away.

Describe the facts of what is happening, such as *"My stomach is clenched, it's hard to breathe, I feel sad, I feel helpless, I can't believe how strong these feelings are!"* There is a rhythm to emotional experience and if you are open to observing it, it will ebb and flow. Sometimes you might feel very helpless or angry; these emotions may peak, then slowly subside. Even the most intense experiences subtly change from moment to moment.

It may help to say kindly to yourself, *"It's okay, I am feeling very sad."* You may imagine that someone you love is holding you as you experience the pain. It is a good idea to take breaks from the emotion. Life is a process of learning the user's manual to yourself. Know what makes you feel good and how much intense emotion you can withstand. Recognizing your limits and strengths is a powerful way of taking care of yourself.

When you are ready for a break, you might ask yourself, *"What would make me feel a little better right now?"* It may be as simple as going for a walk or drinking a cup of hot tea. You may get support from a friend, therapist, or through prayer. Throughout the experience, ask yourself, *"What is the kindest thing I can do for myself right now?"*

Mindfulness includes noticing what is good about the situation, however subtle it may be. Strong emotions of sadness can cause us to narrow our attention on the *threat*, or challenging situation. Practice expanding your awareness, perhaps by asking, *"What is good right now?"* You may notice that the sun is shining, your friend loves you, or that you are safe in your room.

Like many other healthful habits, continuity and sustained practice are required to build up momentum when using mindfulness. For more information, read a book, look up a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) class, or find a Mindfulness-Based Cognitive [Therapy](#) (MBCT) therapist in your area. MBCT was developed specifically for individuals with recurrent depression. Getting support from others can be very helpful for developing a mindfulness practice.

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APA Reference

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