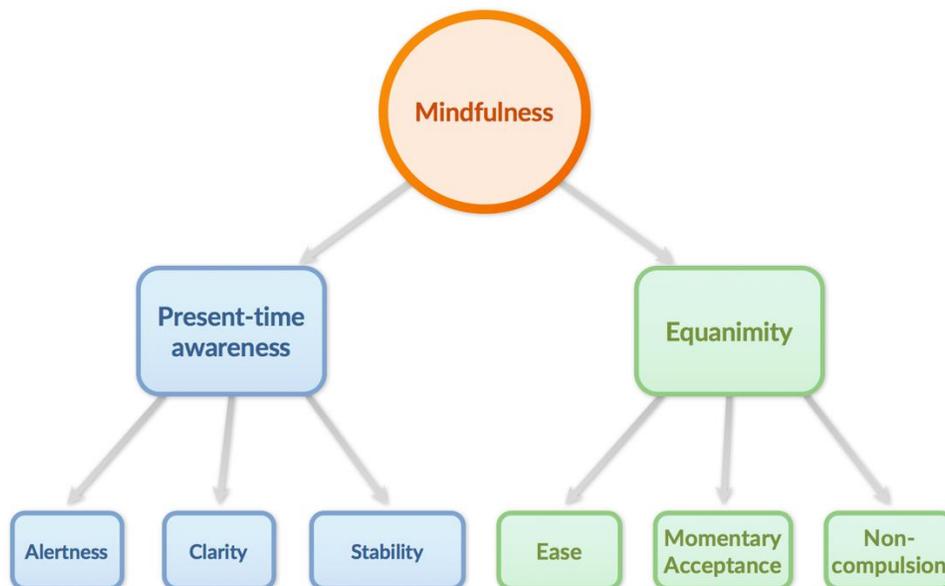


What is mindfulness?

As mindfulness gains cultural momentum, there is a risk that its definition becomes more muddled. If we are to practice effectively and teach these practices to our students and communities, conceptual clarity is important. Of course, no single person or group has the authority to provide the one-and-only definition of 'mindfulness.' This is an open and evolving conversation among practitioners, scientists, and scholars. We do not claim to offer the definitive version of mindfulness, but instead share a definition that has been productive in our practice and teaching, and is supported by the scientific research on mindfulness.

Mindfulness can be considered a *state*, a *trait* or a *practice*. We can have a moment of mindfulness (*state*) and also have a habitual tendency of mindfulness (*trait*). We can do the intentional formal *practice* of mindfulness using different postures and activities: seated mindfulness, mindful walking or mindful eating, for example. The formal practice of mindfulness leads to more moments of mindfulness and ultimately improved trait-level mindfulness. Higher trait-level mindfulness means that we're more mindful even when we're not consciously *trying* to be mindful. This is critically important: we're learning to create a healthy *habit* of mindfulness.

Below is a diagram that highlights two components of mindfulness: present-time awareness and equanimity.



Present Time Awareness

The first component in blue, present-time awareness, is perhaps the most familiar aspect of mindfulness. It refers to a stable, clear, and alert awareness of momentary experience. In present-time awareness, we are awake and alive to the moment. We know sensory experience – sights, sounds, sensations, thoughts – and we *know* that we're *knowing*. When we're on 'automatic pilot' we're still *having* experience but there's virtually no mindfulness present. We are still knowing something (sights, sounds, sensations, thoughts) but we *don't know that we're knowing*. Present-time awareness is thus a kind of *meta-awareness*, where we have rich contact with sensory experience *and* we know it's sensory experience arising in the field of awareness.

Present-time awareness is depicted as a combination of *stability*, *clarity*, and *alertness*. Imagine looking through a telescope at the moon. If the telescope were shaking, it would be difficult to fully take in the sight of the moon. Similarly, *stability* of our attention is important for present-time awareness. The moon would also be obscured if the lens were out of focus. In mindfulness practice, our 'vision' becomes *clearer*. We're able to detect more and more subtle features of our experience. Lastly, we must be *alert* to the present moment. If we looked through a steady and focused telescope but were sleepy, lapsing in and out of awareness, we would miss the grandeur of the moon. Mindfulness steadies the attention, focuses the attention, and remains alert to the object of our attention.

Equanimity

While present-time awareness has important benefits on its own, the second component of mindfulness – equanimity, depicted above in green – is critically important. Equanimity can be defined as a sense of cognitive-emotional balance where there is no compulsion to act out our preferences. It has a number of connotations: ease, non-reactivity, non-manipulation of experience, and the toleration of the arising, intensification, weakening and disappearance of subjective experiences. Equanimity is the balance point between suppression of experience on the one hand, and entanglement with experience on the other. There is now evidence that present-time awareness without equanimity fails to deliver the same psychological benefits from the combination of present-time awareness and equanimity.

Equanimity is often confused with indifference or passive acceptance of suffering in the world. This is a misunderstanding. In the diagram, we include "momentary acceptance" to denote that equanimity marks our relation to present-time experience, not objective conditions in the world. We can be equanimous with our present-time experience, but be deeply committed to changing and improving the conditions in the world.

In sum, we define mindfulness as attending to present-moment experience with openness and curiosity (equanimity). Our definition is similar to other common definitions of mindfulness. For example, Jon Kabat-Zinn defined mindfulness as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.” In this definition, “non-judgmentally” relates to the momentary acceptance component of equanimity.

Future research will seek to better understand the components of mindfulness, how they work together, and how they confer benefits in our personal and professional lives. Of course, you and your patients can do research in the laboratory of your own minds! As you practice, you might examine how present-time awareness and equanimity function together. This exploration will support greater clarity and nuance as we think about, practice, and teach mindfulness.

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Mindfulness with Adolescents

Teaching mindfulness to different ages requires more than targeted curricula. Youth of different ages have unique needs and teaching requires particular skills from the instructor.

Adolescents are in a developmental process of individuation. They are forming a sense of self and all that entails, including comparative and evaluative thought (comparing self to other; feelings of inferiority and superiority, etc.) and a heightened awareness of meaning. For mindfulness programs to be successful with teens, they must take this shift into account. Success in this realm is tied to developing three related skill-sets.

1. **Creating Relevance:** Using explicit content to answer adolescents' underlying questions: *Why should I do this? Why is it interesting? How will it benefit me?*
2. **Creating Connection:** Using interpersonal skills to create safety, connection and an easy flow of engagement with youth.
3. **Working with Resistance:** Creatively addressing adolescent behavior in a way that provides structure while still respecting their autonomy.

I. Creating Relevance

One of the main tasks of a mindfulness instructor is to keep youth interested and engaged by making their teaching relevant to student's lives. We encourage you to develop a variety of different, personalized material to engage youth – idiosyncratic lessons, rhetorical devices, stories or examples. You must attune to the true concerns of the adolescents, and speak directly to those concerns. This is the true art of teaching adolescents.

Here are a few examples of ways you can build upon standardized curricula:

- **Use Metaphor, Myth and Story:** Learn how to tell a good story and use language symbolically. Having a key image or metaphor (sometimes called a “hook”) can be a useful way of drawing students in.
- **Integrate other Disciplines:** Mindfulness teachers often draw on different fields to make their teaching relevant to students. Often, scientific principles can be used to illustrate the relevance of mindfulness practice.
- **Use Current Events & Multimedia:** Try tying your lesson to examples the kids recognize. Use lyrics, scenes from TV, movies, commercials, ads, or other media to illustrate a point or initiate a discussion in your lessons.

II. Creating Connection

Developmentally, teens are undergoing major shifts in their sense of self and their relationships. As a mindfulness instructor, one of your key tasks is to create an experience where youth feel safe, seen, and can explore their identity. This happens *implicitly* through your relationship as well as *explicitly* through your words.

As facilitators, we are continually honing our ability to bring a stable, grounded presence to others, to read subtle cues, and to use the relationship itself as a vehicle for our teaching. Below is an overview of some of these areas that will be essential in your use of this curriculum.

Create a Safe Group Container. Do everything you can to create an environment in which youth are most likely to feel safe sharing with each other.

- Make the physical space comfortable and supportive; when in a group setting, experiment with seating arrangements and lighting.
- Use a set routine for beginning and ending mindfulness that helps individuals recognize the shift and settle (see our suggestions, or create your own).
- Create a culture of respect with “community agreements” or guidelines for how they engage with one another. Try doing some team-building exercises.
- Consciously greet your students, being sure to make eye contact and/or physical gestures depending on the context.

Prioritize Attunement and Relationship. One of the things youth need most is empathic attunement. When teaching adolescents, the *quality of our attention and presence* is as important as the *explicit content we are delivering*. Attune to your kids, sensing where they’re at and what they need. This won’t work if it’s a technique or intervention. It must be a genuine expression of your own deep interest in knowing who they are. Watch out for any mindset of “fixing” students or getting overly attached to a particular outcome. Instead, aim to meet them with a spirit of openness and care, which will build trust.

Attend to your Internal State. Adolescents are still learning to self-regulate by orienting to the nervous systems of adults. Many are desperately seeking a grounded and stable presence to help them relax and settle. In this regard, our own nervous system is our primary intervention when teaching adolescents. Pay attention to how you are feeling when you teach; develop your capacity for offering a solid, responsive presence in the room.

Use your Voice Skillfully. Our internal state is transmitted in many ways: through body language, posture, facial expression, and to a large degree *through our voice*. Our state of

mind is reflected as much in the pitch, tone, rhythm and pace of our speech as by the words we speak. A calm and confident speaker can transmit a sense of ease and spaciousness, creating a safe and clear space for learning. Speak with awareness, taking pauses and allowing for natural silences. This creates a “relaxed power” and gentle authority in your teaching that youth sense intuitively.

Use Language Skillfully. Give individuals *invitations* to practice rather than *commands*. “Let your eyes close” versus “Close your eyes,” conveys a sense of autonomy and choice. Stay alert to any tendency or habit to use your authority in the classroom to attempt to dictate, control, or manipulate their behavior rather than to invite their genuine engagement.

Track Nonverbal Information. Just as our own internal state is reflected through our bodies and our voices, so too are the internal experiences of the youth reflected through their body language. Develop your ability to pick up on subtle, nonverbal information in the room. Use your intuition and the sensations in your own body to help “read the room” and determine what’s needed to best support the group in any given moment.

Be Authentic and Use Self-Disclosure. Youth have an incredibly sensitive internal meter for authenticity. If you’re putting on a front, trying to get their approval, or allowing your own unresolved adolescent issues to take over, they’ll pick up on it. Bring your own authentic self to the dialogue. Develop your own language for teaching mindfulness that reflects your experience and is appropriate to the context within which you teach. When appropriate, be willing to “self-disclose,” to share openly about your personal experience as a way of creating connection and modeling strength through vulnerability.

Develop Group Facilitation Skills. One way that humans experience interpersonal safety is through a lively “back and forth” exchange of information between members of a group. This flowing exchange produces a state of safety, ease and interest – an ideal “learning readiness.” Engage youth by turning didactic content into discussions and hone your ability to ask compelling questions, to draw out the group by varying open-ended and closed (yes/no) questions, to ask clarifying questions, and to synthesize their responses in order to tie the discussion back to the lesson.

Working with Resistance

It's natural for adolescents to assert their autonomy. Encountering "resistance" and behavioral issues are some of the most common challenges. Here are some suggestions:

Learn to See "Resistance" as Information. One of the greatest challenges to effectively working with resistance is our very interpretation of behavior as 'resistance!' Our view of a youth's actions as 'resistance' can inhibit our ability to connect with them. Instead, we can learn to understand such behaviors as valuable information about a teen's needs. We can see it as an attempt to communicate their inner experience, to self-regulate, or to exercise autonomy. This shift in our own thinking helps us stay connected to intentions of curiosity and care, creating new possibilities for engaging.

Handle your Internal State. It can be very frustrating when one or more people seem to do everything they can to undermine our intentions or inhibit learning. Our ability to respond effectively to such behavior issues is proportional to our capacity to manage our internal reactivity. Here are a few tips for handling reactivity.

- **Monitor your responses:** Mindfully track your inner experience and find balance in the moment. Take time outside of class as needed to investigate emotions. Imagine a worst-case scenario to face your fears. What's the worst that can happen? Once we acknowledge that, it has less power. The more you work through your feelings outside of class, the easier it will be to stay clear, grounded, and calm in class.
- **Check your assumptions:** Watch out for thoughts that assume we know what is happening for the child or that attribute malicious intentions to their behavior. They may actually be taking in our care whether they show it or not.
- **Don't take it personally:** The more we take a situation personally, feeling threatened, judging ourselves, or seeking approval, the less likely we are to respond in an appropriate, creative, or skillful way. Remember that there are many factors in a student's life that have nothing to do with you.
- **Redefine success:** Watch out for the belief that you are solely responsible for rescuing anyone. Shift your definition of success from a particular outcome to the integrity of your intention and the quality of relationship you build with the kids.

Engage the Resistance. To "engage the resistance" means to work directly with the children or youth who are acting out. We try to find a way to redirect their energy, to meet the needs they are trying to meet by acting out, and/or to win them over. The level of conversation and strategy will vary depending on the age of the youth. Here are a few best practices:

- **Prioritize connection:** Strengthen your ability to connect empathically and prioritize the quality of relationship. Ultimately, we can't get anyone to do anything, but how we engage often communicates more than what we say.

- **Seek to understand their needs:** Stretch to imagine the youth's concerns. Ask questions and really listen to what they say. Inquire, directly or indirectly, what matters for them. "What do you need right now?" can be a powerful question.
- **Problem solve together:** As you identify what's going on, have a conversation and brainstorm ways they can meet their needs that also honor you and the other students in the room. Communicate clearly your need to balance your care for them with your duty to protect everyone's right to learn.
- **Set clear limits and boundaries:** Creating a simple structure or agreement for behavior etiquette helps students to know what we expect of them and why. Following through on the limits you set sends a clear message that you will respect everyone's right to learn. Be sure to make your requests clear, specific, and doable, and to share the reasons behind what you are asking them to do. This inherently acknowledges their autonomy and helps create buy-in.
- **Walk or sit near the student:** Depending on the context, physical contact can be settling, provide comfort or attention in an unobtrusive way.
- **Elevate them:** Give the student a special role to help them feel like they belong.
- **Use it to teach:** Name what's happening in the room and include it in the lesson.

Refine the Container. Sometimes, it can be helpful to go back and redefine the ground rules. Consider doing a "reset" with your class: discuss everyone's needs; create group agreements and norms; and work to re-establish a culture of respect.