

Depression And Mindfulness: The Ancient Practice That Improves Mental Health

By Kerry J. Heckman • ProHealth.com • March 24, 2019



You've probably heard of mindfulness, but did you know it's one of the most useful treatments for [depression and anxiety](#)? Mindfulness is not just having a moment right now—it's an ancient practice that's here to stay. It's time for you to learn how mindfulness can improve depression and anxiety symptoms and overall mental health.

Through treating clients in my therapy practice, I've learned that the simplest strategies for coping with depression are often the most effective. Mindfulness is a simple tool that is always available to us. It's about learning how to live in the present moment and practicing non-judgement and acceptance. It costs nothing but time and patience, and the benefits are endless.

Depression and Mindfulness

Depression can be defined as a manifestation of living in past regrets, whereas, anxiety is a fear of future events. Either way, you are not living in the present moment. With depression and anxiety, ruminating thoughts often come along for the ride. When you are focusing on the present moment, you are more likely to be aware of your thoughts—giving you the opportunity to talk back to them.

For example, you may say in your head, “Thoughts are just thoughts,” or “I’m noticing my thoughts again.” Then, you can move forward and not get caught in the rumination spiral.

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) are two formalized ways to learn mindfulness in a therapeutic setting. MBCT is typically done in individual therapy, and MBSR is an 8-week group commonly found in hospital or therapy office settings. Both have a large body of research backing them up. Many therapists of all backgrounds are starting to incorporate mindfulness into therapy sessions.

If you’re not ready to commit to therapy or a group quite yet, consider engaging some of these mindfulness exercises and see what you notice in your daily life:

1. Daily Mindful Practice.

A good place to start when working on mindfulness is by choosing a mundane task per day and trying to remain present while doing it. Brushing your teeth, washing the dishes, or folding laundry are all easy options. As you are doing the task, notice all five senses. If you are brushing your teeth, notice your face looking back at you in the mirror, the sound of birds outside the window, the minty taste of the toothpaste, the smell of the air freshener, and the feel of the toothbrush in your hand.

Once you’ve practiced a mindful task multiple times, try having a mindful meal. Pay attention to every bite, the taste and smell of the food, and the environment around you. This is a great way to only eat until you are full and not add extra calories because you weren’t paying attention.

Finally, try a mindful walk around your neighborhood. Notice things you haven’t noticed before: a patch of daffodils, vibrant graffiti, a dog enjoying a stroll, ivy crawling up a building. Leave your headphones behind and be present with the world around you.

2. Non-judgement & Acceptance

Non-judgement and acceptance are skills to become aware of our thoughts and then productively interact with them. If practiced consistently, these two concepts can significantly reduce suffering.

Simply put, non-judgement is not labeling things “good” or “bad.” To use a common [symptom of depression](#) as an example, consider insomnia. Our first inclination would be to label insomnia as “bad.” However, if we adjust our thoughts to label insomnia as “is” or “present” without a qualifier, we may still have nights without restful sleep, but we are not adding to our suffering by thinking about how bad it is that we have sleepless nights. Over time, you will start catching yourself using qualifiers. The non-judgemental qualifier I use in my own practice of non-judgement is, “interesting.”

Acceptance is seeing things just as they are, not as you believe it should be or wish it were. Accepting the present moment, even if there is pain, allows us to give up resistance and become aligned with life. Part of acceptance is noticing your intrusive thoughts, accepting they are there, and then observing them as they pass. To practice acceptance, you must come back to it over and over again.

Mindfulness Meditations

Meditation has a profound effect on the [nervous system](#) that researchers have studied for years, but starting or maintaining a meditation practice can be difficult. Some of the fear comes from the expectation of sitting in silence with your thoughts for a long period of time. People with depression often have uncomfortable thoughts and don't want to be alone with them, which is a valid concern.

Instead of sitting in silence, I encourage my clients to start slowly and use guided meditations. For example, start with 1 minute a day for a week and then increase to 2 minutes a day for a week. You can find thousands of guided meditations of all lengths on the [Insight Timer](#) app. Working up in this way will ease you into the practice of depression and mindfulness, and you will be more likely to stick with it. Your goal should be to work up to 10 minutes a day, which is about how long you need for your body to get into a relaxed state.

Experiment with different times of the day. For me, if I don't meditate first thing in the morning, I tend not to go back to it. Others find meditation helps them decompress after work or relax before going to bed. Find a place in your home that has pleasant surroundings and is quiet. For parents, consider meditating while your children are asleep, or as an alternative, you may even meditate with your children and help them to develop this healthy habit.

Mindfulness isn't a one-time thing, it's a way of life. The sooner you start using these practices as part of your [depression treatment](#), the sooner you will see the impact on your mental health. All moments spent in the present are an opportunity to focus directly on the gifts that are right in front of you—gifts that depression may otherwise rob you of.



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