
What Is Mindfulness?

The question “What is mindfulness?” is most easily addressed through an analogy.

When you do fitness training, you practice formal procedures (exercises) that alter the fabric of your body in two ways...

- They increase your baseline strength.
- They increase your baseline flexibility.

When you do mindfulness training, you practice formal procedures (meditations) that alter the fabric of your consciousness in two ways...

- They increase your baseline clarity.
- They increase your baseline equanimity.

The goal of fitness training is not to achieve a temporary state of strength and flexibility that is present when you do the exercises and then vanishes during the rest of the day. The goal of fitness training is to gradually increase your *baseline* of strength and flexibility. In other words, the purpose of fitness training is not to create certain temporary states in your body, but rather to develop certain abiding traits in your body.

The situation with mindfulness training is similar.

The goal of mindfulness training is not to achieve a temporary state of clarity and equanimity that is present when you meditate and then vanishes during the rest of the day. The goal of mindfulness training is to gradually increase your baseline of clarity and equanimity throughout the day. In other words, the purpose of mindfulness training is not to create certain temporary states in consciousness, but rather to develop certain abiding traits in consciousness.

In order to increase your baseline of physical strength and flexibility, what would you need to do? You would need to learn how to properly perform the exercises. You would need to do the exercises with regularity. And you would need to maintain your exercise program over time.

The same is true with mindfulness training. You have to learn how to do the formal procedures properly and practice them with regularity and maintain that practice program over time (months, years, and hopefully decades). By practicing with regularity I mean do at least a few half hour sessions per week plus a mini retreat every month or so. Alternatively you could do a couple of longer retreats every year coupled with your weekly self-practice sessions.

It would seem that the analogy between mindfulness training and fitness training is quite close. However, there are ways in which the two forms of training differ.

- First, no matter how intensely or for how long you maintain a fitness training program, it is unlikely that the strength and flexibility in your body can increase more than two or three-fold.

On the other hand, the traits of clarity and equanimity in your consciousness can grow without limit.

- Second, no matter how much strength and flexibility you have, old age, sickness, and injury will eventually strip them from you.

On the other hand, when clarity and equanimity become deeply ingrained into the fabric of your consciousness, they are relatively immune to the effects of old age, sickness, and injury.

To summarize, mindfulness training increases your clarity and equanimity, and this in many ways parallels how fitness training increases your strength and flexibility.

The meaning of strength and flexibility is fairly obvious as is their relevance to the quality of your life.

The meaning of clarity and equanimity and their relevance to the quality your life may not be obvious at all at this point. So let's discuss what clarity and equanimity mean.

I'll put quotes around those two words to point out that they are specifically defined technical terms within the mindfulness tradition.

“Clarity” can be thought of as the ability to keep track of the components of your sensory experience as they arise in various combinations, moment-by-moment. By “components of sensory experience” I mean the basic building blocks of sensory experience such as physical-type sensations in your body, emotional-type sensations in your body, mental images, internal conversations, and so forth. At a somewhat deeper level of understanding, clarity means a kind of soaking of awareness down into the neuronal circuits that create sensory experience. It's a sort of internally-generated functional MRI of your own nervous system – a deep knowing of yourself at a “cellular” (i.e., neuronal) level.

“Equanimity” can be thought of as an attitude of gentle matter-of-factness with regard to your sensory experience. At a somewhat deeper level of understanding, equanimity becomes a radical non-interference with the sensory circuitry of your own nervous system.

To sum it up in a sound byte: Mindfulness practice trains your nervous system to know itself better and interfere with itself less.

Let me give you an example of what I mean by bringing clarity and equanimity to the sensory components of an experience.

Let's say you're running a long race and at some point a deep part of you is ready to give up. Your original intention was to finish, maybe even win, and objectively speaking your body is

still at least somewhat capable of running, but subjectively you want to quit. In this case, what are the specific sensory components responsible for the perception “I give up”?

Well, for one thing, there are uncomfortable physical sensations in your body that will go away if you stop. How many distinct “flavors” of physical discomfort are there? Let’s say there are three.

Sharp muscle pain due to lactic acid buildup (this sensation is centered in your legs).

The sensation of oxygen hunger due to windedness (this sensation is centered in your chest).

The sensation of weakness/exhaustion discomfort due to tiredness (this sensation is uniformly distributed over your whole body).

So that’s three distinct sensory components right there. Are there any other sensory components involved? Well, there’s probably self-talk, i.e., verbal thinking, a kind of internal hearing centered in your head. The talk is saying to you “Enough already..., I can’t do this..., This really hurts..., There’s so far to go and it’s only going to get worse...”

Are there any other sensory components? Well, you may have some mental images, i.e., visual thinking, a kind of internal seeing on your mental screen. Maybe you see pictures of yourself lying down resting, or sitting with a lemonade.

Furthermore, the physical discomfort and the mental talk may each set off emotional-type sensations in your body, and those are also uncomfortable. The negative talk and physical discomfort may cause your body to be “colored” by subtle flavors of fear, “poor me,” or impatience. By way of contrast, the mental pictures of you resting may create a pleasant flavor of joy/smile.

So in this example, the sensory components that create the perception “I have to quit now.” Are nine in number:

Three distinct flavors of gross physical discomfort in your body.

Three distinct flavors of subtle emotional discomfort in your body.

One flavor of subtle emotional pleasure in your body.

Visual thoughts.

Auditory thoughts.

Now, suppose that your base level of sensory clarity is high so that *without effort* you are able to keep each of those sensory components distinct in awareness. Suppose also that your base level of equanimity is high so that each of those sensory components arises without suppression and passes without fixation – wavelike. In that case you would be able to continue the race even though the contravailing will to quit remains strong and persistent. You would have the *freedom* to ignore it and stay true to your original intention.