

Mindfulness and acceptance

"Mindfulness" is a practice of learning to stay in the present moment and observe with full attention your experience and immediate surroundings. Part of mindfulness is also accepting your experiences without making judgments about them. For example, you may often walk down a street with your mind focused on what happened earlier in the day or what will happen later, or you may even be scanning texts or emails on a mobile device. Mindful walking means focusing your attention on the motion of your feet, the feel of your muscles as you move, the wind blowing against your skin, the colours and sounds that surround you, and other sensory experiences such as smells or even your own breathing. When there are unpleasant parts of your experience, it can be worthwhile to practice acceptance, which means noticing the unpleasantness without trying to change it into something different or positive.

This is not as easy as it sounds. When you first try to practice mindfulness for even a minute or two, it is quite common for your mind to drift into the future or the past. This is to be expected. Awareness of your mind drifting is a good thing, because this gives you the opportunity to remember to return to your current moment and experience. Part of being mindful is to notice your mental drift without judging it. Instead, gently bring yourself back to the present moment. Mindfulness can be practiced during various activities throughout the day, such as while you eat, walk, or talk with someone. Once you are able to be mindful for even a few minutes in situations that don't make you anxious, you are ready to use this skill in situations that make you anxious.

Linda learned to practice mindfulness effectively in the early phases of her therapy. LINDA had a phobia around flying and her anxiety would spiral into a panic attack. Linda was on an airplane when the pilot announced that the plane would be delayed on the runway for 20 minutes. Her initial thoughts were "I won't be able to handle this. I'll have a panic attack," and she became anxious. Linda then decided to experiment with mindfulness.

Linda focused her attention on various parts of her current experience. She noticed shades of blue in the sky and the colours and shapes of the clouds. She allowed her eyes to run over the outlines of the clouds and observed closely the texture of each cloud. Linda tuned in to her breathing and noticed that it began to slow a bit as her anxiety decreased. She felt the texture of her clothes and listened to the sounds of passengers nearby. Linda became so absorbed in these scenes that the 20-minute delay went by quickly with tolerable levels of anxiety. It also helped that she accepted the anxiety she felt. She thought, "This is an unexpected delay. I'm still anxious about flying, and I understand and accept that I am feeling anxious. I don't need to change it. I can tolerate it."

Mindfulness and acceptance help with anxiety in several ways. First, most anxiety is about fears that are not currently happening, but about things we fear might happen in the future, even a few minutes from now. If you learn to keep your mind in the present moment, your anxiety will decrease. Second, when you are fully engaged in the moment,

your brain is not focused on your fears. Focusing on the present moment occupies your mind and helps you feel grounded in your experience. This generally leads to a feeling of relaxation. Third, one of the long-term benefits of mindfulness and acceptance is that they can help you tolerate and feel less anxiety, because you will learn to see your anxious thoughts as simply mental activity rather than as the truth. With practice, you can begin to understand your personal patterns of thinking and responding to events. You can learn that you don't need to respond to your patterns of thinking and emotional reactions. Instead, you can simply observe them as they occur. People who practice mindfulness on a regular basis generally report greater feelings of calm, well-being, and acceptance of life's difficulties.

If mindfulness sounds like something that would be helpful for you, many communities have classes that teach mindfulness. There are also books, audio programs, and mobile apps that teach and can remind you to engage in mindfulness practice.

References

The above was taken from "Mind Over Mood: Change How You Feel by Changing the Way You Think" by Dennis Greenberger and Christine A. Padesky.