

# WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?



*“The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.”*

– William James, psychologist & philosopher

## WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Mindfulness is like exercise for our minds. It exercises the muscles of paying attention and developing healthy attitudes.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of health-based mindfulness training, describes mindfulness as the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to things as they are. Non-judgment means being open and accepting. It does not mean a lack of discernment.

The key points are:

1. Mindfulness is a training
2. It involves paying attention to present moment experience
3. It's all about *how* we pay attention

## BENEFITS OF MINDFULNESS

- Resilience
- Self-regulation
- Concentration
- Mindfulness training teaches us how to notice and shift out of unhelpful cognitive routines
- Being more responsive and less reactive
- Awareness of thoughts, emotions, impulses to act, body sensations
- Present moment awareness
- Acceptance / non-aversion
- Kindness and compassion
- Ability to let go
- Self-awareness
- Increases grey matter and cortical thickness in the brain

## MINDFULNESS IS THE “HOW” OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING

The training in attention and positive habits of mind is a powerful form of social and emotional learning (SEL). Mindfulness provides an increased capacity to recognize our emotions and habits of mind while they are present, and respond intelligently to the moment rather than react to it. That's why mindfulness is the “how” of SEL.

*“It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.”*

– Aristotle

## AWARENESS OF THOUGHTS

Mindfulness teaches us to be aware of a thought without accepting it. By taking a step back to observe our thoughts, we are able to discern helpful and accurate thoughts from those that lead us astray. We can respond rather than react.



Source: Mindful Schools

## AUTOPILOT VS. MINDFULNESS

In a car we can sometimes drive for miles “on autopilot,” without really being aware of what we are doing. In fact, we may be on autopilot for much of our lives, unaware of the thoughts and feelings that drive us.

On autopilot, unseen thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations can trigger old habits of mind that are often unhelpful, and may lead us to react in negative and unskillful ways. Mindful awareness creates an opening to choose a different course; we do not have to go down the same old mental ruts that have caused problems in the past.<sup>1</sup>

## DEVELOPS HEALTHY ATTITUDES

How we pay attention matters. In mindfulness training, we practice adopting certain attitudes, including acceptance and openness (i.e. non-judgment), as well as kindness, compassion, curiosity, gratitude and generosity.

<sup>1</sup> Segal, Williams and Teasdale, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2013

## MINDFULNESS IS A TRAINING

Mindfulness can be cultivated through mind-body practices (such as meditation) that are founded on a discerning mode of awareness.

What you practice becomes stronger. This is the science of neuroplasticity, which shows that our repeated experiences shape our brains.<sup>2</sup>

Mindfulness trains our minds, which over time actually rewires our brains.

## REDUCES MIND WANDERING

A recent Harvard study found that people’s minds wander an astounding 47 per cent of the time. It concluded “a human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind.”<sup>3</sup>

Mindfulness training reduces mind wandering. It builds our attention, our ability to focus our mind where we want it and keep it there.<sup>4</sup>

**Discover Mindfulness** is an Ontario-based, non-profit whose mission is to be a hub for information and a catalyst for the integration of mindfulness into education as a means to overall well-being for educators, students, families and society.

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To see the detailed studies, please visit [discovermindfulness.ca/evidence](http://discovermindfulness.ca/evidence).

<sup>2</sup> Kays et al, The Dynamic Brain: Neuroplasticity and Mental Health, J. Neuropsychiatry, Vol 24, Issue 2, Spring 2012, 118-24. See also Shapiro, “Does Mindfulness Make You More Compassionate?” Greater Good Science Center, Feb 27, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Killingsworth and Gilbert, “A Wandering Mind is an Unhappy Mind,” Science, Vol 330, Nov 12, 2010

<sup>4</sup> Morrison et al, “Taming a wandering attention: Short-form mindfulness training in student cohorts,” Front. Hum. Neurosci., 06 January 2014