

Making Mindfulness Accessible



 QUICK READ



Over the past several decades, mindfulness has gone from something associated mainly with the ancient practice of meditation to a buzzword making its way to the general public.

Now, mindfulness has become a more secular, widely recognized, and commonly used practice to manage physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health.

After a year that brought unprecedented challenges—and highlighted preexisting mental health, chronic disease, and inequity crises—across the globe, it's a topic that is more relevant than ever before.

For many, feelings of uncertainty, worry, anxiety, fear, burnout, grief, depression, and overwhelm have increased. COVID's many disruptions have deprived us of our usual social and self-care coping mechanisms, childcare, recreation and exercise reprieves, and so much more. In a time when our inner dialogs have become louder than ever, it's no wonder the Live Services team at Virgin Pulse has been having more conversations with members about mindfulness. Why? Because mindfulness is an important foundational practice to help us cope during times like these. Mindfulness can reduce the noise of incessant worry, spanning across many areas of wellbeing, including:

- Stress relief
- Blood pressure management
- Chronic pain
- Sleep
- Productivity and focus
- Emotional regulation
- Deep social connections
- Mental health conditions, including depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, eating disorders, couples' conflicts, and obsessive-compulsive disorder.¹



So, What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a state of active attention to the present moment. It is also described as observing one's thoughts and feelings without judging them as good or bad.² One can intentionally practice mindfulness by tuning in to the breath, body, thoughts, sounds, or the world around us. However, it's also easily practiced and accessed while going about daily life and activities.³

What Mindfulness Is Not

First, it's crucial to acknowledge that mindfulness is not a substitute for professional treatment and care of mental health conditions. As appropriate, our Coaches and Guides refer to healthcare providers, Employee Assistance Plans, or other relevant, available resources offered by Virgin Pulse or employer-sponsored benefits. Mindfulness is, however, a powerful complement to these approaches. A University of Oxford study found that mindfulness plus cognitive therapy reduced episodes of depression by 50% in chronically depressed patients who were not helped by any other means.⁴ Still, there can be some misconceptions about what mindfulness is and what it is supposed to accomplish.

Dispelling Common Misconceptions

Misconception: "Mindfulness isn't working because I am not able to stop my thoughts and emotions."

Truth: Simply put, getting lost in thought, noticing it, and returning to your chosen object of meditation—breath, sound, body sensation, or something else—is how it's done.⁵ There is no end to mindfulness, no point where you reach mastery. It is a lifelong, ongoing practice of returning your attention over and over again.

Misconception: "I'm bad at mindfulness because my mind just won't stop wandering."

Truth: Just like a monkey swings from branch to branch, our minds will always want to swing from thought to thought, which is sometimes referred to as "monkey brain." Mindfulness is the practice of bringing your attention back to the present over and over and over (...and over), no matter how often it tries to swing away. Introduce some compassion and humor to the process. Instead of: "Bad monkey! Get back here!" Try: "You silly little monkey! I know you want to swing and play right now. And I see you, I hear you. But right now, it's time to come here and be still."

Misconception: "I can't do mindfulness because I don't have the right personality (or the time!) to do a 30-minute seated, silent meditation."

Truth: Each person's experience with establishing a regular mindfulness practice is unique. A mindfulness routine may start out with just one minute of focus, gradually working up to 10-15 minutes per day.

Like all aspects of wellbeing, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to mindfulness. There are many ways to practice and reap the benefits of mindfulness, such as:

- Walking meditation, mindful eating, mindful listening, yoga, repeating a mantra, counting breaths, progressive muscle relaxation, visualization, and practicing gratitude.
- Short pauses throughout the day to recalibrate. The breath is useful here because it's always accessible to us. Square breathing, sometimes known as 4x4 breathing, is one that our Coaches and Guides often use with members.
- Guided Meditations. There are endless resources for guided meditations. Virgin Pulse Coaches and Guides often provide members additional evidence-based options, which are vetted and pre-approved through a clinical review process.

Bringing It to Life

Here is an in-depth look at the knowledge and real-life application a coach might explore with a member in a coaching conversation.

Try this:

Imagine that your mind is a ship out at sea. The wind and the waves are your thoughts. Your breath is the anchor. Tune into that breath. You may even want to bring your hand to your belly as you physically notice the breath moving in and out of your body. As you breathe, you will notice your mind wander, your ship being carried away by ruminations on the past, thoughts about the future, or just what you're going to make for dinner tonight. Acknowledge those thoughts without judgment. (We wouldn't judge a wave or the wind, right? They are just doing what they naturally do: shift, meander, and move). No matter how far or for how long you have been carried away, simply bring your attention back to the breath, to the anchor, the present moment.

Try this:

Choose an everyday activity— brushing your teeth, for example. Rather than being lost in thought and operating on autopilot, engage all your senses and be present to the full experience. What color is the toothpaste? What does it smell like? Feel the bristles massaging your gums and polishing your teeth. Notice your arm moving back and forth. Acknowledge gratitude for the clean water swishing around in your mouth. Fully immerse yourself in the experience.

Mindfulness is about finding what works for you. Our Coaches and Guides empower members to experiment to find an approach that suits their lifestyle, personality, culture, and values. Coaching members on mindfulness can improve their overall health and wellbeing and empower them with one more tool to progress toward their vision of a thriving life.

Here's what one Virgin Pulse coaching participant had to say about his coach's guidance on mindfulness: "This is a total game-changer. I had a total misconception of what meditation was and was supposed to accomplish. It's so cool that you're the coach I was paired with since you have so much experience with this. I'm leaving with a golden nugget of information. I'm so excited to revisit a

meditation practice with new eyes."

VP Live Coaching features a whole-person approach that blends lifestyle optimization with specialization in an industry-leading 22 conditions, providing total population health management that helps the healthy stay healthy, improves clinical outcomes, and reduces costs associated with chronic conditions. Members access coaching resources directly through their app and once paired with a coach, they identify their goals for a thriving life and work together to progress toward their vision and achieve their targeted outcomes.

Also part of the VP Live product suite, Next-Steps Consult helps members get the most out of their wellbeing program. It is a concierge-style conversation between the member and Health Guide, focused on determining a member's first or next step in their wellbeing journey with personalized guidance of all that Virgin Pulse and their employer's benefits have to offer. Our Health Guides uncover the best route for a member based on their health status, motivators, and obstacles, with deep knowledge of client programs and resources.

Eager to start your own mindfulness practice? Connect with one of our wellbeing experts and [schedule your demo today](#).



1 <https://www.helpguide.org/harvard/benefits-of-mindfulness.htm#:~:text=Mindfulness%20improves%20physical%20health.&text=Mindfulness%20can%3A%20help%20relieve%20stress,sleep%2C%20and%20alleviate%20gastrointestinal%20difficulties>

2 <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/mindfulness>

3 <https://www.takingcharge.csh.umn.edu/mindfulness-why-isnt-it-working-me>

4 <https://www.mindful.org/what-mindfulness-is-and-isnt/>

5 <https://www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/>

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