

6 Brief exercises for introducing mindfulness

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Mindfulness is actively being aware of one's inner and outer environments in the present moment. Core mindfulness skills include observation, description, participation, a nonjudgmental approach, focusing on 1 thing at a time, and effectiveness.¹ Psychotherapeutic interventions based on each of these skills have been developed to instill a mindful state in psychiatric patients. Evidence suggests these interventions can be helpful when treating borderline personality disorder, somatization, pain, depression, and anxiety, among other conditions.²

Elements of mindfulness can be integrated into brief interventions. The following 6 simple, practical exercises can be used to help patients develop these skills.

Observation involves noticing internal and external experiences, including thoughts and sensations, without applying words or labels. Guide your patient through the following exercise:

Focus your attention on the ground beneath your feet, feeling the pressure, temperature, and texture of this sensation. Do the same with your seat, your breath, and the sounds, sights, and smells of the room. Be aware of your thoughts and watch them come and go like fish in a fishbowl.

Description entails assigning purely descriptive words to one's observations. To help your patient develop this skill, ask him (her) to describe the sensations he (she) observed in the previous exercise.

Participation entails immersive engagement in an activity. Ask your patient to listen to a song he has never heard before, and then play it again and dance or sing along. Instruct him to engage wholly, conscious of each step or note, without being judgmental or self-conscious. If he feels embarrassed or self-critical, tell him to observe these thoughts and emotions, put them aside, and return to the activity.

A nonjudgmental approach consists of separating out the facts and recognizing emotional responses without clinging to them. To practice this skill, ask your patient to play a song that he likes and one that he dislikes. The patient should listen to each, observing and describing the way they sound without judgment. Tell the patient that if judgmental words or phrases, such as "beautiful," "ugly," "I love..." or "I hate..." appear as thoughts, he should observe them, put them aside, and then return to nonjudgmental description and observation.

Focusing on 1 thing at a time means dedicating complete attention to a single task,



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activity, or thought. Give your patient a short paragraph or poem to read. Instruct him to try not to focus on recent personal events or what he will eat for dinner while reading. If he would like to switch to other tasks, then he should give his whole attention to this other task, and stop reading.

Effectiveness involves focusing on what works to attain one's goals. For this exercise, set up a task for your patient by placing several items in a location that is neither immediately obvious nor readily accessible without an intermediate step. Instruct your

patient to obtain these objects. Then guide them as follows:

What do you have to do to get them?
Ask permission? Borrow a key? Recruit assistance? Determine the location?
Brainstorm ways to obtain the items, and then complete the task.

References

1. Linehan MM. DBT skills training manual. 2nd ed. New York, NY: The Guilford Press; 2015.
2. Gotink RA, Chu P, Busschbach JJ, et al. Standardised mindfulness-based interventions in healthcare: an overview of systematic reviews and meta-analyses of RCTs. *PLoS One*. 2015;10(4):e0124344. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0124344.

Evidence suggests these interventions can be helpful when treating depression, anxiety, and other conditions