

MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is a great way to help yourself focus under pressure, because if you are doing something difficult, and while doing it you're busy just imagining all the hundreds of ways it can go wrong or what people are going to think of you, you'll likely lose focus and not perform as well.

If you can stay in the moment, you can often stay much more focused—even under pressure.

To be mindful is to focus 100% (*or as much as you can*) on what you are doing at that exact moment. It's a bit different from meditation, which often asks you to be seated or still and focused on your breathing and your thoughts. Mindfulness aims to connect you to whatever it is you are doing in the moment, and to focus on that—not the past, not the future.

To do this best, we use our five senses.

This is because our five senses are always in the present moment—they can ground us and connect us to exactly what we are doing and can get us out of our heads.



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Let's Try It

Here are a few ways to practice doing different activities mindfully:

- ★ Breathing
- ★ Walking
- ★ Emotion Regulation

Breathing

If you are sitting still, going for a drive, or just generally feeling a little overwhelmed, you can mindfully breathe anywhere you go.

Notice your five senses and try breathing in the “square” pattern—breathe in for four seconds, hold your breath for four seconds, breathe out for four seconds, and hold your breath for four seconds. Or just make sure your exhale is longer than your inhale. For instance, count three seconds inhale, and five seconds exhale to start, and see if you can extend it longer.

1

TOUCH

Notice your lungs expanding and collapsing as you breathe. Notice the feeling of the air through your nose and mouth. Notice temperature and body sensations and your heartbeat. Notice the tension in your body, and work to relax it as you breathe.

2

SIGHT

Focus on one focal point at a time in front of you and note the size, texture, shapes, shadows, colors, and more as you breathe in and out.

4

SOUND

Focus on the sounds of the air moving in and out of your lungs.

3

SMELL

Focus on the smells or light a scented candle to help focus your mind.



TOUCH

What do your feet feel like as they hit the floor? Notice the shift in weight in your body, the muscles tensing and relaxing, and the way your body moves as you walk. Notice your breath and focus on breathing in and out.

SIGHT

What do you see as you are walking? Notice the details—the shadows, textures, shades, and shapes. What details do you maybe normally miss if this is somewhere you walk often? If this a new place you are walking, notice the details and make note of the interesting things around you as you go.

TASTE

(Optional for this exercise)

Notice this if it applies on your walk. Are you carrying a cup of coffee? Or a bottle of cold water? Notice the taste and texture if you are also eating or drinking. Notice the taste of fresh air as you breathe in if you are outside.

Walking

Go for a walk—outside if the weather permits, but otherwise in the building you are in (maybe just down a hallway and back). If possible, a walk in nature is the best for this exercise!

SOUND

What do your feet sound like as they hit the floor or the ground? What other sounds are around you? Stop and take note of the sounds, and then walk forward again and notice if things sound different as you are walking versus standing still.

SMELL

Breathe in the air around you deeply. If it is fresh outdoor air, notice how that air smells different than inside your home or in other buildings.



FOCUS ON THE MOMENT

You can do just about anything during your day mindfully. Slow your mind down and try to focus on the present moment, taking your brain out from future or past thoughts, worries, or even to-do items.

The more you practice this, the easier it gets. And the more you practice, the easier it will be to do under pressure when times get tough. Work to extend your focus and to gently redirect your thoughts if you find your mind wanders, but do this without judgment.

Emotion Regulation

Part of why mindfulness helps you stay focused under pressure is because it regulates your emotions. In therapy, the term “emotion regulation” means the ability to halt an escalating anxiety spike, or to stop a low-mood spiral from continuing downward, or to calm a rising anger outburst before you explode or say something you might regret later.

When we get caught in our thoughts, or if we are spiraling in our mood and emotions, we can apply some mindfulness to help get out of our heads and into our bodies instead.



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Mindfulness

Below, write down a few moments when you found yourself getting upset, anxious, or angry, but were able to keep yourself from escalating and acting, or reacting, in ways you know you didn't want to. What are your success strategies for calming yourself and regulating your emotions?

A time I was getting very upset, sad, angry, etc.

What I did to help calm myself and stay focused...

WITH EACH OF THE EXAMPLES, CONSIDER THESE QUESTIONS AS WELL:

- 1 What might have happened or gone differently if I hadn't moderated my mood?
- 2 What reactions do I most commonly have that I want to continue to work to manage and reduce (for example, getting angry, withdrawing, or giving up), using these calming strategies when I can?
- 3 What other strategies have I learned so far (mindfulness, etc.) that might help me even more in the future that I can try during tough moments like these?

Once you have a few good ideas of how you manage those difficult emotions best, think about cultivating and improving those strategies, and focus on practicing doing them mindfully—in the present moment—even during times when you aren't so upset (such as calm breathing, etc.).

The more you learn to flex those muscles and practice those strategies, the easier they will be to access, and the more helpful they will be to you during times you are most upset in your life.