

The Honest Guide to Mindfulness

Mindfulness has (amazingly, wonderfully) become quite a buzzword in the last decade or so, and for good reason. It's powerful, and can help us to become more present, happier, more focused, and much more.

However, if you're new to mindfulness, it's easy to get the wrong idea from all the marketing you'll find online. Images of people at complete peace with the world and themselves, full of bliss, simply by sitting still and meditating for a few minutes ... they are beautiful images, but they don't tell the whole truth.

Mindfulness is powerful, and you should absolutely do it. But you should do it with your eyes wide open, knowing what's up.

So here's my attempt at an honest guide to mindfulness.

Mindfulness is hard. You can meditate and get antsy, want to get up, want to go do something else, plan your day, dive into your work, answer a few messages, search for some information you're itching to know about.

Mindfulness is hard, which is a good reason to do it.

Mindfulness is messy. You'll get started with meditation, maybe get on a streak of meditating every day, and feel really good about yourself. Then you might fall off, struggle to start again, feel bad about it. You'll do this for years, perhaps. Or maybe you'll meditate regularly but struggle to be mindful throughout the day, especially during certain situations like working online or while you're eating or socializing. You'll get better at being present, but only in spurts and starts, and the learning will be anything but smooth.

Mindfulness is messy, just like life, which is the reason to open up to the messiness instead of our usual desire for things to be orderly and neat. We can learn to accept the messiness of life if we practice with it.

Mindfulness is uncomfortable. Sitting still and facing the sensations of the present moment can feel boring. It can bring up itches that you just need to scratch right now. Urges to go to do something else, to plan and solve and remember, will come up, because they are the old mental habits. And not following those urges can be very uncomfortable.

Mindfulness is uncomfortable because it's so rare for us not to indulge in those old mental patterns. But that's the very reason it's so powerful.

Mindfulness pulls the rug out from under your feet. Let's say you've been practicing

meditation for a few months, and you think you're getting the hang of it. All of a sudden, everything you think you knew about meditation can be upended, as you learn something new, or as a new pattern starts to come up. Now you have to adjust to that. After a few months, you might think you know a thing or two, and then you read a book or listen to a talk from a teacher, and that gets yanked away from you too. Over and over, you get upended, and it can be very jarring each time.

Mindfulness can be jarring when you get upended. And that's part of the magic too — feeling like we are on solid ground is an illusion, and learning to deal with the groundlessness of not knowing is an incredible practice.

Mindfulness takes a metric crap-ton of practice. You'll suck at meditation (or any other mindfulness practice) when you first start. You can't "do it right" or keep your attention on anything for very long. Don't worry, you never really master it! It's all continual practice, without ever feeling like you know exactly what you're doing. You practice and practice, and then practice some more. You might make some progress, only to find out that you still have so much more to learn.

It takes a crapload of practice, and that's a beautiful thing to open up to.

You'll think you're doing it wrong, and fail a lot. You'll start out and continually feel like you're doing it wrong, and that won't feel very good. The good news is that no one knows what the hell they're doing, and it often won't feel very good. The better news is that it's not supposed to feel good, and you learn to accept the idea that you're never very sure of anything. This is what life is always like, but we just usually blame it on the external circumstances (or think there's something wrong with us), rather than accepting this uncertainty about everything as a basic part of our lives that we can open up to and even love.

It'll show you all your "faults." You'll learn through mindfulness practice that you're not as disciplined as you'd like to be. You're not as tough, competent, skilled, exceptional. This will become clear as you practice.

You'll come face-to-face with all of your demons. And then you'll make friends with them.

You'll start to think other people should be more mindful ... and you'll be wrong. As you start to get "better" at mindfulness, and more and more aware of your habits and patterns and thoughts ... as you drop into the present more often ... it will become clearer when other people aren't being mindful. And you might think they should be practicing too, that they should put their phones down and be more present. You'll think you know how others should be mindful, because you've learned a thing or two.

And then you'll realize that judging others and thinking you know how others should

behave is just your mind's old pattern of judging and trying to get control. You'll learn to let that go too, sometimes ... and when you do, that's when you'll become more open to connecting with others vulnerably.

It requires more than mindfulness. As you practice, you'll find that mindfulness by itself isn't the answer to everything. It doesn't magically solve any problems. It's a powerful practice, and can bring wonderful awareness to your life. But sometimes that awareness is of all the terrible things you're feeling, all the harsh thoughts you have about yourself, all the harsh thoughts you have about other people or the world around you. Awareness doesn't always feel good! And it doesn't solve everything.

Mindfulness is only part of the work. The work also requires compassion — for yourself and others. It requires vulnerability and the ability to open your heart. It requires honesty and the willingness to face things. It requires being willing to love things as they are, without needing to control things. It requires letting go of what you think things should be like, letting go of what you think you should have or shouldn't have. The work requires you to be willing to be curious, to be open, to remain in not knowing.

It is beautiful work, and requires courage. I am learning along with you, and am glad to be on this journey with a fellow explorer.