

A lit candle in a wooden holder with a rope around it. The candle is lit, and the flame is visible. The holder is made of dark wood and has a rope tied around it. The background is dark and textured.

TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE
FROM THE INSIDE OUT:

The Art of

Mindful Living

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Chapter 1

The Benefits of Mindful Living

Mindful living is about living in the present moment without judging yourself or others. For many people, mindful living is not natural, because they tend to live on autopilot. The problem with living on autopilot mode is it often amps you up.

For example, you're driving to your favorite coffee shop to get a latte. You're excited about treating yourself. As you're driving, you start thinking about the argument you had with your partner a few weeks ago. Before you know it, you're all stressed up again. Instead of living in the current moment and enjoying your latte, you found yourself re-living the past. This makes it hard to move on and can lead you to carrying around anger and other unpleasant emotions.

Mindful Living = Cultivating A Distraction Free Zone

Instead of reacting emotionally to situations like people do on autopilot, you can choose to focus on the current moment without letting your emotions take over.

You might see a distressing story on the news. You feel angry and sad. But instead of reaching for your phone to distract yourself, you stay in the moment. You acknowledge your emotions without judgement. This frees you from losing an hour or even a day of productivity because you were fixated on this one moment.

Mindful Living Makes You More Appreciative

During less enjoyable moments, like while you're cleaning your home or doing an unpleasant task at work, it can be tempting to let your mind wander. But part of mindful living is staying in the moment, even if that moment might be viewed as unpleasant or uncomfortable.

However, just because you're staying aware during an unpleasant moment, you don't have to give into feelings of negativity, like sadness, boredom, or loneliness. Instead, focus on giving thanks. For example, you might say something like, "I'm grateful that I have a job to pay my bills" or "I'm blessed to

have a home to clean". Now, you've managed to stay in the moment without letting yourself focus on the negative.

Mindful Living Improves Your Mood

Few things can improve your mood quite like mindful living. Often, anxious thoughts are the result of worrying about the future, while sad thoughts are related to regretting the past. Mindful living helps because it forces you to stop overthinking. Unless there's something you can do to change your past, you have to accept what's happened in your life. If you do find that you're frequently haunted by regrets or always worrying about tomorrow, it might be smart to speak to a trained counselor who can help you move on.

Mindful living is one simple way to improve your life. Try to spend a week focused on mindful living and see how your thoughts change.

Journal Your Thoughts:

1. What are some regrets from your past that you carry around?
2. What are some worries about the future that you find yourself fixated on? Do you really believe that worrying changes the future? Why or why not?
3. Mindful living sometimes involves acknowledging unpleasant feelings. What do you normally do when you feel strong emotions? Do you get overly angry, overeat, and feel anxious?

Chapter 2

Mindful Living Alert:

4 Warning Signs you're Living Life on Autopilot

Sarah was driving her daughter to a playdate with a friend. She spent most of the drive worried about being fired from her stressful job. When she arrived at her destination, she realized she was actually at the grocery store, not her friend's house. She quickly turned her car around and managed to her friend's house on time.

What Sarah realized at the grocery store was that she had been on "autopilot". In other words, she wasn't fully present in that moment. Researchers say that the average person spends over half their time on autopilot. The problem with living on autopilot is that you aren't actively engaged in the moment so you're missing out on your life! Here are four warning signs that signal you're living on autopilot:

1) Constantly Checking Your Phone

Every time you encounter an idle moment, you check your phone. You check emails at red lights. You respond to text messages when you're in the waiting room. You dictate your to do list into your phone while you're driving. You're constantly connected to your smartphone, but you're disconnected from the world around you.

2) Frequently Complaining

Everyone complains to some degree, whether it's slow service at a restaurant or having to wait in line to buy your groceries. But if you notice that you're frequently complaining about the same things, then you might be living on autopilot.

When you're on autopilot, it's tough to notice the good things in your day like the cashier that asked about your day or the person who smiled at you. You can't enjoy the pleasant things in life if you're always focused on the negative.

3) Eating Mindlessly

You notice your empty plate but you can't remember what your food tasted like or you're surprised to find you've eaten more food than you thought you did.

This type of disconnect between your body and mind can lead you to overeat and to not enjoy your meals.

4) Letting Life *Happen* to You

You might have one or two goals but that's about it. You're letting yourself drift along in life so you spend the majority of your time reacting to life, rather than living it. If you're in a crisis, then this can be a good thing. It means you're focused on survival and that you don't have time to tackle anything else. But if you're not in the middle of a crisis, then you need to disengage autopilot.

Stop accepting what's happening as if you have no control over your life. If you want to stop overeating, get married, or move somewhere else, write those goals down and start taking action. It's true you can't get a new job immediately, but you can focus on sending out 10 resumes a day. You may not be able to completely stop overeating tomorrow, but you can start being more mindful with your food.

Living on autopilot is a habit and truthfully disengaging from it does take effort. Take it one moment at a time and it will get easier!

Journal Your Thoughts:

1. Describe a situation where you had a mix up like Sarah, because you were running on autopilot.
2. List three common activities you do on autopilot. Why do you think you do these tasks on autopilot?
3. How often do you find yourself reaching for your phone to check messages/Facebook or calls during a typical day? How does this lead you to be on autopilot?

Chapter 3

Why You Struggle with Living on Autopilot?

Living mindfully is an attitude that you can cultivate in your life. But first, you have to be willing to let go of autopilot. Many people live on autopilot without realizing it. You find yourself living the same cycle. You wake up, send the kids to school, do your job, eat dinner, and go to bed. Then tomorrow, you do the exact same things again.

If you want to break the cycle of autopilot, you have to understand what causes it. Once you know this, you can change your outlook so you're living in the present. If you're living on autopilot, it's most likely caused by one of these reasons.

1) Too Much Familiarity

When you learn something new, it requires the best of your awareness and energy at first. But the better you master it, the less effort it takes. For example, think of riding a bicycle. When you were first learning, you needed to invest all of your brain power in doing it. Once you learned this skill, you didn't need to pay as much attention. You could ride your bike on autopilot. We can live our lives like this, too.

2) Too Much Information

Have you ever had a computer or laptop overloaded with advertisements? Dozens of them pop up and fill your screen. You try to close one but another five open instead. If you're like most people, you fix this problem by hitting the power button and shutting your computer off.

This is similar to what happens when you have too much information in your brain. There are dozens of things you need to remember and do. But when your brain is overwhelmed with information, it's hard to get anything done, so you start operating on autopilot. Temporarily, this is helpful but let it go on for too long and you'll barely remember what you did today.

3) Too Much Work

The more tasks in our lives that are done by habit, the less alive we feel. This makes it easy to disengage from your daily life and start living on autopilot. While you may not be able to throw away your to do list, try to approach your

routine tasks in a different way. For example, instead of buying groceries from the same store you always do, go to a store where you don't normally shop. Mix up the menu for the week so that you're trying new dishes. Play music while you work on a project.

4) Too Little Passion

After a loved one died from a disease, one man focused on living more mindfully. Everyday tasks like cooking or cleaning the bathroom became enjoyable because he delighted in the fact that he was alive. You don't have to suffer a loss of a love one in order to regain your passion. Just focus on doing everyday tasks slowly and mindfully.

Learning to live in the moment is a process. Don't feel bad if you struggle with it at first. You'll get the hang of it if you keep trying.

Journal Your Thoughts:

1. When was the last time you sat in silence and focused on being present?
2. How does the thought of sitting still in silence make you feel?
3. What's one item you could remove from your to do list in order to spend a few minutes being mindful?

Chapter 4

The Mindful Way to Deal with Frustrations and Problems

An important time to be mindful is when you're encountering a frustration or a problem. But this can typically be the hardest time to be mindful. Maybe a co-worker accidentally deleted your report or your spouse said something insensitive that really hurt you. Whatever the situation, you're feeling a lot of emotions at once.

It's normal to want to blow up and let everything out. While this solution might seem helpful at first, the fact is that this approach is often harmful to your relationships. Instead, it can be helpful to deal with your frustrations and problems by staying mindful.

Start with awareness.

Often, we want our emotions to be heard, so start by acknowledging how you feel. Try saying something simple to yourself like, "I'm angry that (person) did (action)". Take a few deep breaths. Acknowledge other emotions you feel bubbling to the surface like overwhelm, anger, sadness, jealousy, etc.

Analyze your emotions.

Where are these emotions coming from? Are they linked to something that happened recently? It's important to pause and ask yourself if your emotions are in proportion to what happened. Sometimes, we react to a minor incident because we're not acknowledging a problem in another area. For example, someone spills coffee on your desk and you're tempted to yell at them. But you pause and realize you're angry because you received bad news in an email earlier. You just attributed those emotions to the coffee spill.

Think it through.

When your frustration or problem has to do with someone else, think about it carefully before you decide to confront them. Could it be that you've been projecting your emotions onto someone else? Can you explain how they feel? Are you willing to step in their shoes for just a moment to look at this situation from their perspective?

Look for alternatives.

Sometimes, a frustration or problem comes along that can be handled easily. Ask yourself if you can change the situation. For example, getting angry about an invoice mistake that was made six months ago isn't helpful. Ask yourself what your choices are and which one is the best response.

Reach out for feedback.

If you have a coach or mentor you can contact, you should do that. Ask for guidance on how to tackle this problem. Often a coach or mentor can provide a fresh perspective that can help you look at the situation in a new way.

Alternatively, you could reach out to a group or community that you're part of. Your group can give you the benefit of several different perspectives and it can be helpful to know that you're not the only one dealing with these problems.

Don't berate yourself if you don't handle every frustration or problem mindfully. Instead, acknowledge that you could have dealt with the situation differently and move on. Mindful living isn't about getting it right every time or being perfect. It's about living in this moment.

Journal Your Thoughts

1. What happened the last time you dealt with a frustration or problem without being mindful? Are you happy with the results?
2. Thinking back to the above incident, how could you have handled it differently by practicing mindful living?
3. List three people you could reach out to next time you need advice or guidance.

Chapter 5

4 Ways to Start Living Mindfully Right Now

As we have been discussing, mindful living is about staying present in your day to day life. Instead of getting distracted by to do lists or worrying about work, you focus on what you're supposed to be doing in this moment. But for some people, the concept of mindful living is hard. They want to begin living more mindfully. They just don't know where to start. If you're someone that struggles with this, try one of these exercises.

1) Savor Your Drink

What's the first drink you reach for in the morning? It might be coffee, tea, or a refreshing smoothie. Before you take your first sip of the day, pause. Smell your drink. What does it smell like? Taste it. What is the temperature like? What flavors do you taste against your tongue? Notice how the cup feels in your hand as you take another sip. Swallow slowly and concentrate on how your muscles contract as your liquid travels down your esophagus.

2) Go for a walk in nature.

Feel the breeze on your skin and in your hair. Do you hear any birds singing? What birds are they? What flowers do you see? What thoughts are coming up? How do they make you feel? Take ten minutes to notice your environment as you walk.

If you want, take a friend on your nature walk but agree to go in silence. Bring a camera and a notebook. Snap pictures of items that stand out. Write down what made them stand out. Is it the color or the texture that attracted your attention? Did you notice a shape or pattern? Was there a sound or smell that attracted you to this item?

3) Listen to music.

Sit in your most comfortable chair and play some background music that relaxes you. Classical music is a good choice. You can also look for spa music on YouTube.

As you listen, focus on your breath. Inhale through your nose, exhale through your mouth. Take deep belly breaths. Allow the thoughts to come and go without trying to hold too tightly to them. Examine each thought like an observer.

Pay attention to how your body may be going into resistance, by starting to itch and squirm. Adjust your posture or scratch if needed. Notice how the thoughts and experiences that come up influence how you feel.

4) Try coloring.

Choose a coloring page that inspires you. How do the colors you have chosen make you feel? What does it feel like to move the pen, marker or pencil over paper? What thoughts are coming up? How are these thoughts affecting you? You may want to journal some of these emotions. It's OK to alternate between coloring and journaling if it helps you.

Understand that you may feel uncomfortable the first few times that you attempt to practice being mindful. This is completely normal and just means that you're not use to living in the moment. Keep doing exercises like the ones above regularly and you will eventually become comfortable with the concept of living mindfully.

Journal Your Thoughts:

1. When you are attempting to be more mindful, do you find it helpful to have a friend practicing with you? Why or why not?
2. Slow down and savor one of the meals you eat today. Experience the tastes and textures and try describing them to a friend or in your journal.
3. Why style of music helps you focus on the present without distracting you? Make a playlist of this for your car rides and listen to it to help you stay present as you run errands.

About the Author



Kim McLaughlin, M.A. is a licensed therapist, author, blogger, speaker, and motivational coach. She helps people move from struggling with food, weight, and dieting into feeling peaceful with food. She has personal experience with overeating and all the pain that goes with it.

Kim McLaughlin has a Master's Degree in Clinical Psychology, which gives her the knowledge, training, experience, and understanding to really help people move out of frustration and into action.

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