

Introduction

Many of us live in a perpetual state of unconsciousness; i.e., we drift from one responsibility to another and rely on autopilot to get us through the day. Our autopilot mode isn't necessarily a bad thing (it helps us accomplish everyday tasks with relative ease). However, a lack of awareness about the cultural implications surrounding our habits and actions can lead us to act inappropriately in unfamiliar situations. Therefore, in order to avoid these problems, it's important to stay conscious of ourselves and how our behavior affects those around us. One way to do this is to learn how to practice mindfulness.

Mindfulness means awareness of the present moment. When you practice mindfulness, you shift your mind's focus from your to-do list, or any other stressors during your day, to how you're experiencing the world in that moment. Many people equate mindfulness with meditation, but going on a walk or taking a few intentional breaths are other ways that you can practice mindfulness.

Mindfulness can help to facilitate intercultural learning because it teaches us to slow down before reacting, increases self-awareness as well as awareness of others, and cultivates compassion and empathy.

Below, you'll find step-by-step instructions for one mindfulness exercise. Before you begin this exercise with your participants, have them gather in a quiet area where they can get comfortable.

Practicing Mindfulness Exercise

1. Sit or lie down comfortably—whatever that means to you.
2. Close your eyes or relax them, and loosely rest your hands beside you, letting go of the tension in your hands and your fingers.
3. Uncross your legs and breathe. Feel your belly and chest expanding. Breathe. Feel the breathe, and settle into this moment.
4. Mentally retrace your day. Take yourself through each moment. You may notice your mind racing through the activities, bouncing from one thought, one place, one moment to the next.
5. Now, become aware of the fact that you are breathing. Become aware of each breath as it flows into and out of your body. Simply be aware of each flowing in and flowing out; don't manipulate your breathing in any way. Direct your attention to noticing how this feels. When your mind becomes distracted—and it will become distracted—redirect your attention to the breath. What do you hear? Now wiggle your toes, explore the sensations you feel.
6. Allow your attention to gently ride on the sensation of each breath, not thinking about breathing. Simply be aware that your body is moving naturally.
7. After a short time, you may notice that the mind wanders off to other thoughts: anticipation of tomorrow, planning, wishing, or judgements of this exercise. You may find yourself thinking about what you'll do later, or what you could be doing instead.
8. Come back, remove the tension from your legs, your knees, your thighs, now bring your attention to your hips, your lower back, feel how your body makes contact with the chair



9. As soon as you become aware that your attention has moved off the breath, guide it back. Use the awareness of your breath to refocus your attention, to return to the present. It's this redirection that is exercising your brain--retraining it.
10. For the time remaining, let go of your tensions, allowing yourself to simply be here--present in this place and time. Relax your mouth and your jaw. Bring your attention to your shoulder, and release all the tensions. Bring attention to your arms, your hands, your fingers. Wiggle each finger, and let go of the tension. Release all your tensions, notice your face, your neck.
11. Breathe in and now out. Then, slowly open your eyes.