

MINDFUL FITNESS

*Take Care of Your Mind & Body
by Combining Exercise with Mindfulness*

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What Is Mindful Fitness?

There are many different approaches to exercising. There's the long moderate cardio approach. With this approach you put in 20-60 (or more) minutes jogging, cycling, or some other form of cardio at least five days a week. Then there's the HIIT approach. With this approach you work out at 100% intensity for just a few minutes each day. There are boot camps as well.

With all of these approaches there's an absence of something that is vitally important to fitness and health.

We're talking about mindfulness.

Mindfulness is defined as, *"a mental state achieved by focusing one's awareness on the present moment, while calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations, used as a therapeutic technique."* (dictionary.com)

In general terms it means that you're not "putting in time" to achieve a goal or striving for a maximum heart rate to achieve a fitness goal. You're not even performing a certain number of workouts each week. Rather, with mindful fitness you're paying attention to how you feel both before, during, and after your workout.

At its core, mindful fitness is about awareness.



Why It's Growing in Popularity

Mindful fitness isn't anything new. Yoga is a perfect example of a fitness activity that emphasizes mindfulness. And there are other examples. What's happening is that people are learning that following a "program" designed by someone else with different goals, skills, and abilities isn't always a terrific idea. They're starting to look inward and find balance between meeting their health and fitness goals and finding an approach that works for them.

Mindfulness also helps you get the most from your workout. By integrating awareness and "checking in" during your workout, you can tell whether you should go harder, pull back, or stop altogether.

Honestly, most people find that when they take a mindful fitness approach, they improve the quality of their workouts and their results too. You may find that you workout less often, but that your workouts are stronger, better, faster and you make new gains.

Who is Mindful Fitness For?

Mindful fitness is for you if:

- You're not getting the results you want from your workouts
- You are getting bored with your workouts
- You are experiencing injuries from your workouts
- You want to feel more connected to your health, fitness, and body
- You're not sure if you're working out in a way that is supporting you
- You want to take your workouts to the next level, but you're not sure how
- You're looking for a way to combine meditation and working out (hey, you multitaskers out there! This is for you)
- You're looking for more peace of mind
- You'd like to learn how to improve your focus

Before we dive into the many different ways you can add mindful fitness to your lifestyle, let's talk about the benefits, because many of them may surprise you.

The Benefits of Mindful Fitness

Mental Stamina

Mental stamina can be defined as the ability to stay focused and working hard for a long period of time. Many of us have pretty poor mental stamina. We can stick with a problem or focus for about 20 minutes, and then we need a break.

Now there's nothing wrong with needing a mental break. However, consider how much more enjoyable and productive your time would be if you were able to concentrate for longer periods of time. Mindful fitness helps support improved mental stamina.

It teaches you to learn to focus, and be in the moment, for longer periods of time. Like meditation, you probably won't be able to go out for a 30-minute run and be mindful the entire time. It's a practice, and initially you may float in and out of mindfulness and only be aware and present for a few minutes at time.

However, over time you'll strengthen your skills and be able to focus for longer. This ability to focus will transfer over into other areas of your life. You'll feel more focused and present at work, at play, and in your relationships.



Movement Helps with Recovery

How many times have you become injured because of a workout, or too many workouts? Or have you pushed too hard during a workout after an injury and pushed your healing time back? With a mindful fitness approach, you're in a better position to take good care of your body, reduce injury, improve recover, and ultimately improve your health.

Improved Stamina

So many people feel that if they are more mindful when they exercise, and they are paying attention to the signs that their body is giving them, then they won't exercise as hard. It makes sense on the surface. However, the opposite is generally true. When you pay attention to your body, you realize that some of the signals it's sending you aren't important, while others are.

You learn when it is appropriate to push yourself and, quite often, you end up working out much harder than you thought you could. This awareness, as you'll see, transfers to other areas of your life as well – and you'll find that you have more stamina in many other personal and professional ways.

Improved Mobility and Flexibility

Mindful fitness forces you to be aware of your strengths and your limitations, including your own mobility flexibility. What happens when you workout and you're unaware is that you make slight changes in your form. These slight changes can result in injury.



Here's an example; have you ever gone for a long run or bike ride and come home with one knee or hip hurting more than the other?

The reason is probably that you were using one leg more than another and compensating for limited mobility. When you're mindful as you're working out, you notice these changes and compensations. You can then decide if you continue as is, or if you make changes to your form or your workout.

Improved Strength

Just like with stamina, you'll also see increases in strength. In fact, when you're lifting weights or performing strength training movements you'll notice that the ability to go inward and clear your thoughts truly creates amazing moments. Your lifts improve, you feel a sense of calm and focus, and you get stronger.

Improved Longevity

Numerous studies have shown that meditation improves longevity. You live longer. While studies haven't been done on mindful fitness just yet, you can be sure there will be some released in the next few years. You also know that exercise reduces your risk of chronic diseases and improves longevity. Combined, this could be the secret to a long and healthy life.

Meditation

It may be difficult to imagine feeling meditative while you're working out. However, when you apply the practice of mindfulness to your fitness endeavors, that's exactly what you gain. You focus on your breath. You experience all the senses and sensations in your body, and you create a sense of calm during your workout. It doesn't matter if you're running, lifting weights, or on the spin bike with music blaring in the background. You can achieve a meditative state while you're working out.



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Reduced Risk of Chronic Disease

We just mentioned that exercise improves longevity. It reduces the risk of chronic diseases like diabetes, heart disease, cancer, and so on. Meditation can also be an important part of improved health because it reduces cortisol levels and inflammation. It also reduces weight gain and helps restore balance to your hormonal systems.

Improved Self-care

Mindful fitness also supports you to pull back when you need to. You no longer check the box at a workout because it's Wednesday, or today you run on the treadmill for 30 minutes. Instead, you pay attention to what your body wants, needs, and can do on any given day. This in turn supports better self-care. It teaches you to recognize that today may not be a good treadmill day. Maybe today is a swim day, a yoga day, or a rest day.

Teaching You to Say No (and to say Yes to the right things)

We're all motivated by different things.

Some are motivated to exercise because it's on the calendar and that's just what you do. Others are motivated because they have friends waiting for them at the gym. Still others have numeric or data-driven goals, like they must exercise 600 minutes a week or complete five workouts.

All of these motivations are fantastic because they're getting you to exercise and take exceptional care of your health. However, they don't allow you the freedom to say, "not today" or "no." Mindful fitness supports you to listen to your body and to feel confident saying today I'm not going to go 100%, or today I'm going to modify that workout, or today I'm going to rest.

Again, you'll notice that if you embrace mindfulness into your exercise program you'll enjoy the benefits in your everyday life as well. You'll learn to say no to foods that you know your body doesn't want, to activities you don't want to attend, and to situations that you don't want to be a part of.

You'll get better at making the best choices for you.

Appreciating the Moment

Ahhhh, when was the last time you felt grateful for your workout? I'm not talking about those post-workout endorphins that make you grateful for everyone and everything. I'm talking about gratitude for being able to perform the movements and exercises you're asking your body to perform.

I'm talking about true gratitude for every moment of discomfort, for every gasp of breath, and for every muscle fiber that may be screaming. This is not a "no pain, no gain" type of gratitude either. It's an "I am alive" gratitude. Mindful meditation helps you learn to appreciate (not necessarily enjoy) the moments of your life, when you're exercising and when you're not.

Improved Mental and Physical Awareness

Mindfulness is about increased awareness. Rather than disconnecting from your workout as many people do, you will be more connected to it, both physically and mentally. You'll know if it's time to turn it up, if you need to change your form or stride, or if you are in the right mindset to go big today. Awareness means that you're able to tap into all of your senses. You're able to feel what's going on in your body. Perhaps more importantly, it means that you become aware of your thoughts and have clarity about them.

For example, have you ever been on a run and your brain is screaming, *"This is awful, I have to stop, I'm going to die"*?

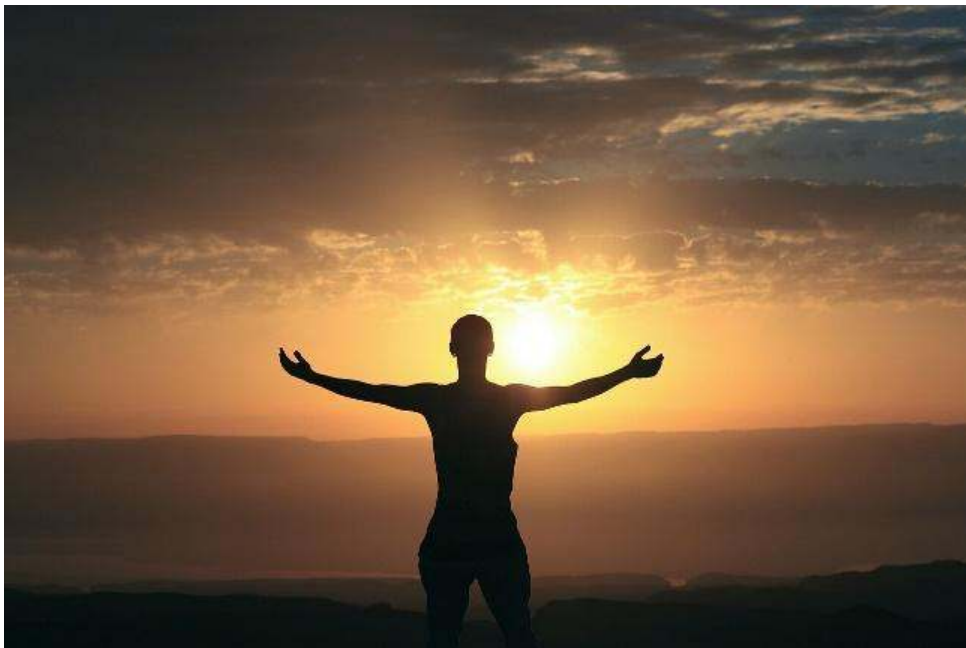
So, you listen to those thoughts and you stop. 30 seconds later you feel perfectly fine. When you have improved mental awareness, you can hear those thoughts, assess them to see if they're valid, and make a decision about what you do next. Do you stop, do you keep going at your current intensity, or do you simply pull back a bit and see what happens?

Knowledge is Power!

Mindfulness gives you knowledge. It supports you to be aware of your thoughts and to be able to assess them logically. Your thoughts can support you or they can get in your way. When you're aware of them, you can make a decision about not only what to listen to, but also how to react to your thoughts.

Mindfulness is the process of letting your thoughts come and go naturally as you take each step or breath. Thoughts come and go. You notice them, but they don't control your behavior. The same is true for the physical sensations that you have. You notice them, you assess them by being mindful and in the moment. And then you make a decision.

Each mindful moment, each mindful workout, leads you to more clarity, better health, and a more enjoyable fitness program. And the great news is that a mindful approach can be integrated into any exercise or fitness program. So that's what we'll look at next.



How You Can Integrate Mindful Fitness into Your Routine

Mindfulness is the quality or state of being aware. It's achieved by staying focused upon the present and one's thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations within this space.

Walking

Walking is one of the best forms of movement and exercise you can do. It's low impact. It gets your heart rate up and your blood flowing. And you can do it just about anywhere. Studies have shown that walking improves major health markers like blood sugar and cholesterol. And it doesn't require any special equipment.

When you're integrating mindfulness into your walking program, leave the phone at home. Head out the door knowing your route. Take a deep breath and feel the breath fill your lungs and body. As you walk, pay attention to your breath. Start scanning your body from head to toe as you walk.

Pay attention to any sensations that you experience in any area. For example, if you feel the cold air in your nose, if you feel your shoulders scrunched up due to stress, if you feel your heart rate picking up, if you feel your stomach growling, and so on. What do you hear, smell, and see?

As thoughts enter your mind, let them slide right through. Don't judge the thoughts. Just let them come and go as you walk. Keep your thoughts on your breath and what you're experiencing in the moment you're experiencing it.

Yoga

Yoga often goes hand-in-hand with awareness. However, if you're like many others, when you are in yoga class you're often thinking about other things. Go back to the instructor's guidance at the beginning of class. Often, instructors give an intention for the class.

If your yoga instructor doesn't, or if the established intention doesn't fit well for you, consider creating your own intention for the session. For example, you might create the intention of mastering a specific pose or of holding a pose for a longer duration.

Pilates

If you've done Pilates before then you're likely familiar with the intense mindset that is required. Pilates is an ideal example of mindful exercise. Holding a Pilates position, maintaining proper technique and breathing all require intense focus.

If you find your mind wandering during Pilates, it's a surefire sign that you've gotten a bit off track. Whether you're using a reformer or you're performing Pilates movements on the floor, it's an exercise in mindfulness.



Barre

Barre or any dance fitness program often requires you to pay so much attention to the instructor and the moves that there's very little time for you to lose focus or to step away from mindfulness. Still, classes like this can be difficult and it's easy for negative thoughts, overwhelm, and frustration to become part of your thoughts.

When you're taking a fitness class like barre, your mindfulness practice may center on becoming aware of your negative thoughts and working to shift them to positive ones, working to stay in the moment.

Resistance Bands and Body Weight Strength Training

Resistance bands and other strength training movements are improved when you're mindful. Focus on the movement, the tension, and what you're feeling in your body. Breathe and control your breath. The more mindful and focused you are with each repetition, the better your reps will be – and the more you'll get from your workout.

Kettlebells

Be deliberate with your kettlebell workouts. Go into each workout with the intention to improve your technique before you add weight or repetitions. This intention requires you to focus on your form and to pay attention. It also requires a clear head. It's a terrific way to build strength and embrace mindfulness.

Martial Arts

There are a large number of martial arts to consider, from karate to jiu-jitsu, and everything in between. One thing that they all have in common is the requirement that you focus. They embrace mindfulness.



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Running

One of the reasons that people enjoy running is that it offers a way to clear your thoughts. However, it can also be a time when you can't run away from them. They swim through your mind as you run. Consider focusing on your breath when you run. It will pull you into the present moment and keep you in tune with your body. You might use your breath to pace yourself.

For example, one breath every four steps. You can also head out on your run with an intention or an affirmation. You can then focus on the affirmation as you run. As other thoughts enter your mind, you can gently set them aside and refocus on your affirmation or intention.

Jump Rope

Jumping rope requires incredibly rhythm and consistency. You might focus on a spot on the floor and keep your eyes on that spot as you jump rope for 20 minutes. Once you get a rhythm down, you may find your thoughts wandering. Bring them back to that focal point and keep jumping.

Weight Training

With weight training it can be pretty easy to lift weights without much focus or concentration. However, you'll achieve much better results if you're tuned in and mindful of your form, your body, and your thoughts. Like with many exercises, set an intention, focus on your breath, and clear your mind before each rep.

Qi Gong/Tai Chi

Both Qi Gong and Tai Chi are considered "energy arts." They are movements or series of movements that embrace intention, as well as focus, mindfulness. This is an ideal practice to embrace on your rest day as it gets your body moving and helps you continue practicing how to focus and quiet your mind.



The truth is that mindfulness can be applied to any type of exercise or fitness program, although it is easier with some than with other.

Start where you are now. What do you enjoy doing for fitness and how can you integrate mindfulness into it? Can you focus on your breath? Can you clear your mind of thoughts of the past and present, and simply stay in the moment? What about your body? Can you find awareness without judgment?

Mindfulness is a practice. That means that it takes time to learn it and to improve your skills. Be patient with yourself and be consistent. While fitness trends come and go, mindful fitness is here to stay because it helps you become a happier, healthier, and more fit person.



8 Tips for Mindful Fitness

Stay present

It's easy to think forward to the future. For example, you might think about what you're going to do when you're done with your workout. Your mind may drift to what you're going to eat or how you're going to "reward" yourself for your effort.

First of all, try to get out of the reward mindset; your good health is your reward. Secondly, work to stay focused on what you're doing, feeling, and experiencing right now, in the moment. When you feel your thoughts drift forward into the future or back into the past, gently bring them back to the moment. Think about each pedal stroke, each footfall, each repetition.

Become aware of your body

We tend to disconnect from our body when we're uncomfortable. This is a mistake because your body is sending you thousands of important signals. It's telling you that your form has changed, that your breathing has changed, and that your muscles are getting tired.

Or it's telling you that you're just fine and can kick it up a notch. While you don't want to dwell in your body or the physical sensations you're experiencing, it's important to be aware of them. Check in with your body every couple of minutes. Do a full body scan from head to toe and see what's going on. Then you can make any adjustments if necessary.

Become aware of your breath

It's amazing how much your breath impacts your workout. Yes, when you're exercising you will have increased respirations. You'll breathe more heavily and you'll breathe faster. However, you are in direct control over this. You control your breathing. Pay attention to it. If you find that you are breathing too quickly, you can pull it back.

Assess and take a deep breath to calm your nerves, and to tune into your body. During a high intensity workout this can make a tremendous difference. And during a more moderate intensity workout, you can use your breath to assess your effort. For example, when you're running are you taking 6 steps with each breath or 2? Experiment with breathing and find the right pace and strategy for yourself.

Engage your senses

Pay attention to what's going on around you when you're working out. Ask yourself what you see, smell, and hear. Like any sensation, mental or physical, don't dwell on it. Just become aware of it. It will enrich your workout experience and it will help you focus on the present moment.

Notice your environment

What's going on around you? As you engage your senses you'll notice people, animals, structures, changes in lighting and so on. You can become aware of your environment and assess it from a detached mindset. Again, by becoming aware of what's going on around you, you pull yourself into the present moment and shift to a state of mindfulness.

Set your intention

What do you want to get out of your workout? What do you want to accomplish? Intentions can be anything from, *"I want to stay present"* to *"I want to get a personal record today."* Set the intention for your workout before you get started. This will help you stay focused and it will help you not only have a more rewarding workout but also reach your health and fitness goals more quickly.

Find focus

Sometimes it helps to find a thought or a word to focus on while you're working out. For example, you might focus on your breath, or you might also focus on a dot on the wall or the beat of the music. Find something to keep in the center of your mind as you work out. It helps you stay in the moment and it is effective for clearing away any thoughts that may disrupt your workout or your flow.

Quiet your inner dialogue

Inner dialogue has its purpose. However, most of the time this mental chatter is a distraction, and it's rarely a positive one. Now, if you're hearing your thoughts say, *"go girl, you got this,"* then grab that thought and run with it.

However, if you're hearing things like, *"this is hard,"* or *"I suck,"* then it's time to work hard to quiet that inner dialogue. And when you're performing something particularly difficult, like a heavy lift or a sprint for time or a difficult yoga or gymnastics move, then the absence of any internal dialogue will help you perform better. Clear your mind, find your focus, and go get it!

Getting Started with Mindful Fitness

If you've never meditated or practiced mindfulness, then it can take a bit of practice to get started with it. One way to get acquainted with mindfulness is to try it at home when you're not exercising. Try focusing on your breath – and only your breath – for a few minutes.

Try doing a body scan and paying attention to what you're feeling. Practice using your senses and becoming aware of what's around you. Experience all of these mindful moments outside of exercise and then you'll be in a better position to apply them to your fitness program.

In addition to that, there are a few other steps you can take to get started with mindful fitness.

Try Something New

Sometimes it's easier to practice mindful fitness if you're learning a new exercise or trying a new program. Consider trying something new. Make a list of the exercises or programs you're curious about and give the first one on the list a try. It may be easier if it's a program that naturally integrates mindfulness, like yoga.

One Day A Week, Then Increase or Modify as Needed

One of the challenges of mindful fitness is that you can end up pushing yourself a bit harder than you normally do. Consider easing into mindful fitness. Apply it to your workout one day a week, and then gradually increase your fitness program as you gain strength, endurance, and confidence.

Don't Neglect Full on Rest Days

Rest. Give your body the time off that it needs. Rest days are days when you don't push yourself. They don't necessarily mean that you sit on the couch all day. What they do mean is that you relax, move your body gently, and rest.

What If You Find Yourself Pushing Too Hard?

Interestingly, you may find that mindful fitness is so enjoyable that you work out too hard, and perhaps too often. It's not uncommon for people to say aloud, "*exercise is my therapy*." When you're practicing mindful fitness, be mindful of your intention as well. Make sure you're not pushing yourself too hard. Pull back and reassess what you're doing and why you're doing it.

Don't Track, Just Be

Finally, consider exercising for the joy of exercising. When you bring mindfulness into your fitness program, each workout doesn't have to be about achieving a personal record or burning a specific number of calories. If you like to track your fitness and your results, consider, occasionally, not tracking. Just experience the workout.

Try embracing mindful fitness into your workouts this week. Relax. Don't put too much pressure on yourself. Simply start experimenting with strategies like focusing on your breath or doing a body scan during your workout.

Practice being in the moment, and not letting negative thoughts or thoughts of the past or future get in the way of you having the best workout you can have at that moment.

