

Mindfulness, Stress, and Health

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**What is Mindfulness?**

Mindfulness, as I have come to understand and experience it throughout this course, can be defined as an intentional, present-moment awareness characterized by an open, curious, and nonjudgmental attitude toward one's thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations (Feldman & Kuyken, 2019). This practice extends beyond simple attention, requiring a particular quality of awareness that fosters acceptance and compassion toward oneself and others. Core conceptualizations, such as Bishop et al.'s two-component model, describe mindfulness as involving both self-regulation of attention and an orientation to experience marked by curiosity and acceptance (as summarized in Feldman & Kuyken, 2019). Shapiro et al.'s model similarly highlights intention, attention, and attitude as fundamental aspects of mindfulness practice, forming the foundation of mindfulness-based interventions.

Monitor and Acceptance Theory (MAT) further suggests that cultivating both open monitoring and acceptance are essential mechanisms through which mindfulness improves well-being (Dimidjian & Segal, 2015). Reflecting on my own practice, mindful awareness often began as simply paying attention to the present, but deepened as I intentionally cultivated acceptance and non-reactivity to thoughts and feelings. For example, during body scan meditations, my initial tendency was to judge physical discomfort or become frustrated with a wandering mind. Over time, and with guidance from course materials, I learned to shift toward curiosity and acceptance, mirroring the attitudinal qualities outlined in the literature (Chiesa et al., 2014). This experiential shift closely aligns with the theories explored in class, confirming that mindfulness involves both attentional skills and a compassionate orientation toward experience.

### **Learning and Change in Mindfulness-Based Programs**

Throughout this course, I noticed that some aspects of mindfulness practice felt intuitive, while others were more challenging. I found it relatively easy to engage in brief, focused practices such as mindful breathing or short body scans, especially at the start of the day. These accessible practices provided a way to settle my mind and bring clarity before engaging in daily tasks. Crane's features of quality mindfulness-based programs (MBPs) emphasize experiential learning and cultivating attitudinal qualities as central to meaningful engagement (Feldman & Kuyken, 2019). For me, starting with simple practices set a solid foundation for more sustained attention. However, maintaining regular practice over several weeks proved difficult, particularly when faced with competing responsibilities and fluctuating motivation. One major obstacle was my mind's tendency to resist staying with uncomfortable emotions or sensations, such as restlessness during longer meditations. Literature suggests that adherence to mindfulness practice is often challenged by discomfort, and overcoming these barriers is essential for growth (Carmody, 2015).

To address these difficulties, I relied on reminders from course materials and informal peer support. I also intentionally brought mindful awareness to obstacles by labeling resistance or discomfort, practicing self-compassion, and gently returning to the present moment (Farb et al., 2015). A particularly meaningful turning point occurred around week four, during a lovingkindness meditation, where my attitude shifted from effortfully "doing" mindfulness to simply "being" with whatever arose. This "aha"

moment underscored the transformative potential of mindful awareness, as described in both MAT Theory and Crane's features of MBPs, where developing a new relationship to experience and willingness to face discomfort are key (Feldman & Kuyken, 2019; Dimidjian & Segal, 2015).

Several factors contributed to my learning and change. The self-paced online format and shorter sessions made the program accessible, though sometimes at the expense of social accountability. Alternating between sitting, walking, and lovingkindness meditations supported engagement and prevented monotony. I found that practice quality mattered more than quantity—the depth of engagement during practice, rather than time spent, led to the greatest shifts in awareness (Chiesa et al., 2014). Over the weeks, my practice evolved: early weeks focused on basic skills, while later weeks brought greater insight and acceptance, echoing research on the evolving nature of mindfulness-based change (Tang et al., 2015). Overall, these experiences confirm the multidimensional nature of mindfulness learning, shaped by both internal factors (attitude, intention, openness) and external supports (program structure, teacher characteristics, peer encouragement).

### **Mindfulness In Your Professional Life**

Mindfulness began to show up in my professional activities, particularly in my roles as a behavior analyst and clinical director. During a high-stress team meeting, I found myself pausing before responding to a challenging comment. Instead of reacting defensively, I observed my initial emotional response, took a mindful breath, and replied

with greater clarity and composure. This presence aligns with literature linking mindfulness to enhanced emotion regulation, cognitive flexibility, and reduced burnout among professionals (Feldman & Kuyken, 2019). In client sessions, mindful awareness improved my capacity for empathy and attunement. I found myself listening more deeply, suspending judgment, and staying present with both the client's experience and my own reactions. This mirrors research suggesting mindfulness fosters greater self-awareness and empathy in helping roles, benefiting client outcomes (Carmody, 2015; Chiesa et al., 2014).

Reflecting on the science and practice of mindfulness, two core realizations stand out. First, mindfulness is not about eliminating stress or discomfort, but about transforming my relationship to these experiences—an insight supported by MAT Theory and program research (Dimidjian & Segal, 2015). Second, the regular practice of mindful awareness is essential for sustaining benefits, as mindfulness operates as a skill to be cultivated, not a one-time intervention (Tang et al., 2015). These realizations will continue to influence my approach to leadership, client care, and my own well-being, fostering a more compassionate and resilient professional presence.

### **Your Own Practice Going Forward**

If I were to summarize my main takeaway from this mindfulness practice experience in a single word, it would be “presence.” The core insight I will carry forward is that cultivating mindful presence—moment by moment—creates the foundation for growth, resilience, and compassion, both personally and professionally.

Six months from now, I want to remember that the true value of mindfulness lies in how I relate to my experience, not in achieving a particular state. To reconnect with this insight, I plan to schedule periodic “check-ins” where I revisit key practices and journal reflections from the course. To sustain and deepen mindfulness in my daily life, I recognize the need for ongoing structure and support. Specifically, I plan to schedule brief daily practices, join a local or online mindfulness group for accountability, engage with continuing education resources (such as books, podcasts, and refresher courses), and seek social support from colleagues or friends interested in mindfulness. These behavioral, educational, and social resources will provide the scaffold necessary to maintain mindful awareness beyond the course, supporting personal growth and professional excellence.

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