



**WELLNESS™**  
REVOLUTION

**Mindfulness**  
is *being* rather  
than *doing* and  
*responding*  
rather than  
*reacting*.

Part 6 of our Wellness Revolution series

# A Mindful Life: A Prescription for Wellness

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Mindfulness has taken off recently, with interest generated by blogs, news stories, and even a special edition of *TIME Magazine*. (See **Resource**, page 19.) The word *mindful* is used routinely in everyday conversations, and references to mindfulness can be found in Hollywood movies (eg, *Star Wars*, *Karate Kid*, *Groundhog Day*).

Even though many people may have heard about mindfulness, most might be hard-pressed to define what it means to live a mindful life. Nevertheless, mindfulness has numerous benefits when incorporated into everyday life.

Find our previous Wellness Revolution articles at [brief.vet/veterinary-wellness](http://brief.vet/veterinary-wellness)



Veterinary care providers frequently multitask, dividing their attention between different responsibilities, often simultaneously. They may speak to a client while thinking about someone or something else, rush surgeries to see their first appointment on time, check their phone for messages between appointments, and read emails and Facebook during lunch, all while struggling to focus on the task at hand. The antidote to this multi-tasking culture begins with learning to focus by practicing mindfulness.

### **What is Mindfulness?**

Mindfulness is *being* rather than *doing* and *responding* rather than *reacting*. Mindfulness is many things, including:

- Living in the present moment rather than worrying about the future (eg, *What appointments do I have this afternoon?*) or thinking about the past (eg, *I cannot believe what that client said to me*)
- Putting down the balls being juggled (eg, returning phone calls, checking email, typing records, filling out paperwork) and embracing monotasking (ie, focusing on one thing at a time)
- Remaining cool, calm, and collected while speaking to a difficult client or performing a complicated procedure

### **The Principles**

The term *mindfulness* is of Buddhist origin but is considered ubiquitous (ie, universal, nondenominational, applicable to everyone). Author Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “paying attention, in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally.”<sup>1</sup>

To achieve mindfulness, attention should be consciously self-regulated to focus on the immediate experience and should be driven by curiosity, kindness, and acceptance.

Too often during stressful days the veterinary team is functioning on autopilot, strongly identifying with thoughts or feelings, and reacting impulsively to events, which may lead to conflict and psychological distress. With mindfulness, rather than attempting to assess situations or make changes, team members aim to become aware and accept thoughts, feelings, emotions, and sensations as they arise instead of reacting automatically out of habit.<sup>2</sup> (See **Mindfulness Practice**.)

## **Mindfulness Practice**

Mindfulness practice is intentional awareness of the present moment while incorporating particular attitudes, including<sup>1</sup>:

- **Acceptance:** Seeing things the way they are, even if they are undesirable
- **A beginner’s mind:** Being open to seeing everything as if for the first time
- **Compassion:** Deeply feeling another’s suffering and wanting to alleviate his or her pain
- **Generosity:** Giving unselfishly to others
- **Gratitude:** Feeling intensely thankful
- **Integrity:** Being true to oneself
- **Kindness:** Showing concern for others
- **Letting go:** Decreasing attachment to people, things, or outcomes
- **Nonjudging:** Seeing things as neither good nor bad
- **Nonstriving:** Being, rather than doing or trying
- **Patience:** Understanding and accepting that events unfold in their own time
- **Trust:** Following intuition or gut feelings

# Stress reduction is the most important advantage of mindfulness because of the significant physiologic and psychological benefits.

## How Mindfulness Works

People's minds are busy. They are constantly processing memories, making plans, rehashing past events, using senses to take in surroundings, and dealing with thoughts and emotions. The mind must also respond to the challenges of growing technology and connectedness, which bombard everyone with

information from electronic devices and social media and increase mental distraction and stress.

Neuroscience research shows that practicing mindfulness regularly can enhance the brain's grey matter within the prefrontal cortex, which is responsible for holding attention, making decisions, moderating

behavior, and solving problems. At the same time, mindfulness shrinks the amygdala, which identifies physical threats and emotional triggers.<sup>2</sup>

Research in the medical field demonstrates that mindfulness training helps nurses cope more effectively with stress by improving their ability to think clearly and remain focused and calm during stressful situations. Nurses who complete mindfulness training often demonstrate improvement in their clinical performance,<sup>3</sup> ability to cope with negative emotions, awareness of their thoughts and feelings during stressful events, and their response to patient needs.<sup>4</sup> Mindfulness training also assists medical students, physicians, and nurses by promoting self-awareness and self-care<sup>5-7</sup> while reducing the risk for professional burnout.<sup>8</sup>

## TAKE ACTION ✓

- 1 Practice mindfulness formally by exercising daily at a specific time (eg, performing a body scan, meditating while seated or walking around, practicing yoga).
- 2 Alternatively, practice mindfulness informally throughout the day to heighten awareness and fully experience the moment by focusing on the senses (eg, physical sensations, sounds, visual stimuli, scents) during daily activities (eg, driving, washing dishes, folding laundry, brushing teeth, preparing a meal, taking a shower).
- 3 Use the powerful tool of breathing during the work day to anchor awareness in the present moment. For 2 to 3 minutes between appointments, during breaks, or while commuting, focus on each breath by being aware of the sensations of breathing.
- 4 Instead of rushing from one appointment to the next without a pause, cultivate a mindful presence by taking 3 to 5 slow breaths before entering the examination room. This activates the parasympathetic nervous system and enhances feelings of relaxation and centeredness, which allows being fully present with a client or colleague.
- 5 Notice when the mind wanders to thoughts, judgments, expectations, assumptions, or automatic behaviors, and return to the present moment. A mindful moment can be as simple as the acronym STOP (ie, Stop, Take a deep breath, Observe the moment, Process and proceed).

## Stress Reduction

Stress reduction is the most important advantage of mindfulness because of the significant physiologic and psychological benefits. Stress has numerous personal and professional negative effects, all of which can lead to burnout.

### Personal

- Accelerated cell aging in the body
- Altered prefrontal cortex function



- Immune suppression
- Increased cortisol release with neurotoxic effects<sup>2</sup>

### Professional

- Altered self-regulation
- Compromised memory and decision-making
- Decreased job satisfaction
- Impaired concentration

### Emotional Benefits

Spending a few minutes during a busy day to focus on the sensation of breathing can be refreshing and restoring. Paying attention to the present moment can give a reprieve from anxiety about difficult situations and past or future events. Observing nonjudgmentally allows for curious evaluation of the experience before reacting or exhibiting old thought patterns. Mindfulness forms an emotional buffer that creates space to make choices and adaptive responses during stressful situations. Mindfulness also decreases anxiety and depression,<sup>9</sup> which are common among veterinary professionals.<sup>10</sup>

### Conclusion

Most importantly, mindfulness benefits the veterinary team by increasing awareness and decreasing distraction, which in turn can improve assessment skills and the

performance of complex technical procedures. Mindfulness also enhances client and team member interaction by boosting awareness of others' communication methods. Paying more attention ensures effective communication that leads to better clinical outcomes and fewer medical errors.

A veterinary team that stays in the present and routinely practices mindfulness can better care for themselves and their patients. ■

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**FUN FACT:** Marie is an avid music lover who has played many instruments over the years, including the ukulele, standing bass, and oboe. She also played violin in the Edmonton Youth Orchestra. Now her musical expertise involves shuffling her iPod and putting together playlists for her meditation and yoga classes.

### Resource

- The Editors of TIME. *Mindfulness: The New Science of Health and Happiness*. New York, NY: Time, Inc; 2017.