

A Brief Definition of Mindfulness

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Empirical studies have examined the construct of mindfulness for almost 40 years, and a conceptual definition of mindfulness has been continuously revised and clarified over this period. What we currently term *mindfulness* in the area of contemplative science, and the corresponding techniques of its cultivation, stem from Eastern introspective psychological practices, specifically Buddhist psychology, which made reference to the concept over 2,500 years ago. Mindfulness is a term stemming from the Pali language, whereby *Sati* is combined with *Sampajana*, and this term is translated to mean awareness, circumspection, discernment, and retention [1]. These linguistic renderings have been considered by scholars to suggest that mindfulness means to remember to pay attention to what is occurring in one's immediate experience with care and discernment [2]. As the concept of mindfulness was gradually introduced into the realm of Western science, many thought mindfulness and its associated meditation practices -- meditation is one method used to develop mindfulness -- were esoteric, bound to religious beliefs, and a capacity attainable only by certain people. However, several decades of research methodology and scientific discovery have defrayed these myths; mindfulness is now widely considered to be an inherent quality of human consciousness. That is, a capacity of attention and awareness oriented to the present moment that varies in degree within and between individuals, and can be assessed empirically and independent of religious, spiritual, or cultural beliefs.

One of the most well-recognized Western definitions of mindfulness comes from Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the central founders of the field for which I coin the term here -- *mindfulness science*. He defined mindfulness as, "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgementally" [3]. His use of the term mindfulness has become the

landmark definition; however, similar conceptual definitions were soon to follow his work. These definitions include (a) an open and receptive attention to and awareness of what is occurring in the present moment [4]; (b) an awareness that arises through intentionally attending in an open, accepting, and discerning way to whatever is arising in the present moment [2]; (c) an attention that is receptive to the whole field of awareness and remains in an open state so that it can be directed to currently experienced sensations, thoughts, emotions, and memories [5]; and (d) waking up from a life lived on automatic pilot and based in habitual responding [6]. A common theme shared among all these definitions is a general receptivity and full engagement with the present moment. To further grasp the definition of mindfulness, the term can be contrasted with experiences of mindlessness that occur when attention and awareness capacities are scattered due to preoccupation with past memories or future plans and worries; this, in turn, leading to a limited awareness and attention to experiences in the present moment.

Although these definitions have proven vitally useful to help build awareness of mindfulness in the general population and increase its application in healthcare settings, serious attention to mindfulness by the scientific community was not given until more recently when the concept was translated in to measureable terms, or given an operational definition. Major strides have been made in just the last decade to provide a valid operational definition of mindfulness.

In the last decade, researchers have dedicated attention to an empirically based operational definition of mindfulness. For example, in the year 2003, a series of psychometric development studies provided the first valid and reliable measure of dispositional mindfulness called the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) [7]. Other measures of

mindfulness have also been validated since that landmark study. These measures include the Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills (KIMS) [8], Toronto Mindfulness Scale (TMS) [9], Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale (CAMS) [10], Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) [11], Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI) [12], and the Philadelphia Mindfulness Scale (PHLMS) [13]). Each of these measures has contributed to a greater ability to study mindfulness on a scientific level. These measures have also allowed researchers to validly measure mindfulness in a variety of ways -- as a dispositional characteristic (a relatively long-lasting trait), an outcome (a state of awareness resulting from mindfulness training), and as a practice (mindfulness meditation practice itself). These measures have made it possible to examine both the associations and influences of mindfulness on psychological, biological, behavioral and social variables; to date these findings have been promising. In summary, due to the outstanding efforts to define mindfulness both conceptually and operationally, the construct now offers a promising area of scientific inquiry. However, we need to remember that mindfulness science remains in its adolescence and there is much more unknown than known about the concept of mindfulness.

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