



The Athena Wellness Podcast
Episode 005 — How to Develop a Mindfulness Practice
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Welcome to the Athena wellness podcast, the show that invites you to take a seat around the community fire and listen to stories that inspire. I'm your host, Kathy Robinson, author, coach and founder of Athena Wellness, a company that helps women enhance their well-being and reimagine their current stage of life as a time of strength and reconnection with themselves.

Hello, and welcome to Episode Five. Today, I'd like to share some thoughts on mindfulness, a word that has found its way into mainstream vernacular. And as with anything that trends at times, it can almost sound cliché. But as we'll explore today, mindfulness is all about relationship. It's about deepening our experience with ourselves, our lives, the ones we love, our community and our world.

Mindfulness is less about something we do, but rather it's a way of being. Yes, there are practices you can do, for sure, and we'll talk about some of those. But for me, it's about engaging with the precious gift of this life I've been given. And it keeps me focused on taking meaningful action and keeping myself well to be of service. And most importantly, mindfulness keeps me connected to my stillpoint - that place deep within us all, a place of calm, of receptivity, and of openness.

And the great thing is, mindfulness is not a thing we need to add to our list of “to dos.” It's more about building capacity for presence and awareness that can be cultivated. Meaning anyone can



do this and practice in the regular course of life. It's a way of living that elevates our level of care that can be transformational.

Here's how today's episode will flow. First, we'll explore what mindfulness is, along with its positive benefits that are supported by medical and scientific studies. Then we'll take a look at the different types of mindfulness practices. And lastly, I'll give you some suggestions on how to incorporate mindfulness into your day-to-day, including some of my favorite practices. So sit back, take a nice long breath to ground yourself in presence and let's get started.

Let's start with what mindfulness is and why we should even practice it. Mindfulness is commonly defined as “being aware of what you're sensing and feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgment.” It's not about stopping your thoughts and feelings, rather, it's about observing them with curiosity. And you do this by directing your attention. By being fully aware of what you're doing and what's happening around you.

It's the opposite of letting our minds wander and being disconnected from our physical environment. And a good example of this is when we let our emotions take hold and wind up in a swirl of worry, obsessing on someone or something. You know how we can sometimes get caught in mental spirals? Even in those moments, we can learn to come back to the present moment and to what is really happening in our life instead of getting lost in worst case scenarios.

When we allow ourselves to be swept away by worry, we're more likely to feel stressed and overwhelmed. Over time that can lead to being emotionally reactivity and raised levels of anxiety.



Whenever you pause to ground yourself through your senses, by bringing your awareness to what you're experiencing, you're being mindful. Scientific and medical studies have shown that practicing mindfulness can calm the nervous system and positively impact our mind, body and spirit by reducing negative emotions, managing stress and stress related illnesses, decreasing emotional reactivity, increasing self awareness, and stimulating creative flow. Mindful.org publishes a quarterly overview of all the studies that are being done on mindfulness. I'll put a link in the show notes to that as well as a website that lists current mindfulness clinical trials, if you're interested in learning more.

There are such wide ranging benefits and it's been my experience that even with a little practice, you can access feeling calm pretty quickly. Over time as we begin to feel better, our awareness extends beyond ourselves. It's like putting on our own oxygen masks before we can help others. You may also find that once you practice non-judgement and kindness with yourself, that is accepting your thoughts and your emotions without reaction, that extends to others and that warm energy radiates outward.

Personally, mindfulness has become one of the most impactful wellness tools in my toolkit. It's the mental equivalent of swimming in the ocean through crashing waves and remembering I can simply dive to deeper waters where it's calm. And the magic is that by doing so, I get more connected to the present moment while also feeling part of the entirety of the ocean itself, like a multifaceted feeling of belonging.

So how do we practice mindfulness? When I think about mindfulness practice, the word that comes to me is exploration versus the image that many have of a structured meditation practice.



Think of a winding path in nature as opposed to a grid of city streets. I like that sense of discovery. And I found that if I set an initial intention to explore my senses, emotions and thoughts with curiosity, I begin with feelings of ease, warmth and kindness, and allow the experience to unfold naturally.

Mindfulness can be practiced in a number of ways, including focusing on the breath, a sound, a candle flame, a repeated phrase, or through physical movement. It can be practiced formally, such as while sitting on a meditation cushion, or paired with daily activities. We'll be focusing on the latter and I'll share some of my favorite practices shortly.

To set the stage, I bet you can recall times when you have been struck by awe, whether through feats of nature or man: watching a lightning storm, stargazing, marveling at an architectural masterpiece, or a work of art, perhaps a musical performance. When we are fully engaged in the moment, as in the examples I just described, we are being mindful.

If you can bring to mind an example that resonates with you and dissect it a bit, I bet you'll see your mind was not free of thought or distraction. There could be lots of activity all around you. But you connected with the moment so deeply, that all else dropped away. And yet you felt the full experience of the moment, almost as if time slowed. And it's those moments that can arise from your memory when you're reminded by a feeling, a scent, a taste, an image, a song, something that brings you back to the magnitude of that moment.

It's that kind of energy we can connect with during our everyday life. While the goal isn't to stay in a perpetual state of awe, it's the periodic deep descents into mindfulness that reminds us that life is always momentous.



Think of it this way. I love being near the ocean. I marvel at its power and find the rhythmic sight and sound of incoming waves to be meditative. My goal is not to spend my life sitting and staring at the ocean 24/7. But anytime I feel I need to connect with that energy, I drive out to the beach and get my fill. And every time I go, the ocean is there doing its thing, whether I'm watching the waves or not, that energy is always there and accessible.

Remember, the whole point in practicing mindfulness is to help us observe our conditioned responses, in particular, those that are distracted or reactive. When we're mindful, we develop the ability to focus and pause before acting, creating space and calm in our lives.

So now on to some practical advice. I'll outline the basic guidelines for practicing mindfulness, and then give you some examples on how you might incorporate the practices into your day.

Here's the basic technique:

1. Decide where to place your awareness and for how long
2. When your mind wanders, gently invited back to your point of focus
3. Repeat until the time is up

That's it. It sounds so simple, as easy as 1,2,3. But it's quite challenging, and in a good way. Your mind will wander. It's the nature of your mind. And there will be distractions beside your thoughts. There will be noise and sensations and emotions. And it's all part of the practice. Accepting everything in your environment and gently returning your awareness to your point of focus, naming what comes up, and letting it go. Returning to the present moment, over and over. The practice is in the returning and being accepting of your experience in a gentle and kind way during the process.



It's been my experience that as I learned to accept these mindful moments as they were without judgment, this sense of acceptance naturally flowed to other parts of my life, and overall, to enhanced feelings of ease, peace and happiness.

So how do we make this accessible for you? Let's start with the simple reminder that mindfulness is the opposite of multitasking. In fact, it's going deeper into a single task. Here's how you can incorporate these moments into your day, including examples of when we're in motion and when we stop to pause.

Let's start with the activities you do every day. This practice is especially helpful for those listeners who always seem to be in motion and don't have time to add an additional activity to their list. Find an activity you do every day. It can be brushing your teeth, preparing a meal, or doing laundry or yard work, gardening or driving. For a few minutes at the start of that activity, focus your awareness on the task itself. Notice what you're actually doing, how you're feeling and the space that's surrounding you. Try to engage all five senses.

For example, I remember my long commutes driving from New Jersey to New York City when I worked on Wall Street. Many days my commute began before dawn and ended long after sundown. Looking back, I practiced mindfulness during each commute on a specific part of the West Side Highway that runs along the Hudson River. There's a section called Riverside Park that runs for about four miles and ends at a boat marina. Each time I drove through, I would note the passing of the seasons from whether or not the boats were moored or in storage, the color of the grass, the size of the leaves, and the position of the sun or the moon as I drove. Some mornings



inching along in traffic, I could hear the birds. My favorite was catching the scent of jasmine or hyacinth or magnolia on warm days.

I didn't stay in this mindful state for the whole trip. Some of those commutes took more than three hours one way. But when I think of that commute, 20 years later, I'm in that moment. And I still get in that meditative state when I drive on that stretch of highway today as a result of that years-long practice.

So you can try this the next time you're in your car, or maybe you're listening to this as you drive. If you are, put me on pause and give it a try. Settle in, take a breath, feel your hands on the steering wheel, and notice the landscape or cityscape that's around you. What can you sense as you drive along?

So those are examples of being mindful while performing an activity. You can also practice mindfulness in the absence of activity by taking a brief pause for a few mindful breaths, or engaging with your environment through your senses.

I used to find this helpful during my corporate days when I faced a slate of back-to-back meetings. I would try to remember to take a moment midday to breathe deeply on the busiest days, and take a longer route or step outside on days when I had more of a lunch break. When you're in more natural environments, you can pause and connect with your senses with a walk in the woods or park, or watching a mountain stream or flames in a fire pit. Mindfulness can also be incorporated in more vigorous movements such as running, yoga and even walking the dog or playing with the kids.



And lastly, there are specific mindfulness practices, like breathwork meditations, body scans and sitting meditations. And I know some practitioners who like to chant, drum or dance as well, although I can't personally vouch for these activities.

I would also offer another practice option that's become popular in recent years. For those looking for guided meditations, you can explore mobile apps like Headspace, Calm or Insight Timer, and type in "mindfulness" in the apps search bar. I use Insight Timer from time to time, especially if I need to get to sleep early or I'm traveling. I love to practice when I'm flying, makes for a pleasant trip and a refreshed arrival.

Here's an overview of my mindfulness practices. As I reflect on my own mindfulness practice, I see it as a series of meaningful moments I invite throughout the day. It's a practice that was built slowly over time through experimentation. When I first became aware of my desire to be more present during the day, I had to find ways to remind myself, whether it was a note in my calendar, or a post-it note on the mirror, or in later years, a buzz on my phone or watch. Mindfulness is now integrated throughout my days - and some days are more focused than others.

Here are three of my favorite ways to integrate mindfulness throughout my days...

#1 To Calm

In times, when I'm feeling stressed or anxious, I try to pause and create space. For example, in my overscheduled corporate days, I would begin my mornings with a five minute routine where I would just feel what it was like to be in a space of not having to make a decision. That brief time felt like luxury and I looked forward to it every morning. To this day, when I'm feeling a little



overwhelmed, I just pause, place my hand over my heart and take a deep breath or two. If I can, I tried to name the emotion that's prominent. There's something in acknowledging the feeling that helps release it, because our lingering feelings are usually associated with the past, such as a regret, or the future, such as anticipating what may come. When I pause and I breathe in the present moment, I feel calmer every time.

#2 To Feel Gratitude

This is the basis of my daily practice because it's as easy as bringing my awareness to the task I'm doing and just focusing on that task. It could be how the knife is slicing through the vegetables I'm cooking for dinner and being grateful for the food or feeling the energy and blood flow through my muscles as I'm exercising and being grateful for how I'm able to move my body. I like that last example because it focuses me on what I have (an ability) versus what I don't have (a particular level of fitness).

I like having these little moments throughout the day when I'm working, doing laundry, when I wake up, maybe I give myself a little smile as I brush my teeth. And definitely I'm mindful when I take that first sip of coffee in the morning. So grateful for all of these blessings and so many more.

#3 To Connect

The third is using mindfulness to connect. This is my favorite way to practice because it's connected to all the magnificence this world has to offer. We can be mindful when we actively listen to the people we love, we can engage with all of our senses when we spend time outdoors,



and we can connect with the heart when we admire a work of art, be it a poem or a passage, a song or whatever we find beautiful in the world.

When you engage in mindfulness, you find there are wonderful opportunities to connect with something larger than ourselves every day and appreciate those particular moments in time and truly enjoy life's simple pleasures.

I hope you found today's episode helpful. If you haven't tried mindfulness before, experiment with a practice that resonates with you. And if you have an established practice, I hope this gave you some new ideas. Whatever your level of experience, I think you'll agree that mindfulness is a wonderful way to nurture and support yourself.

Honing the ability to welcome yourself in the present moment helps us remain calm in the midst of life. It also reminds us that life unfolds minute by minute. May you be mindful and enjoy Each one.

Thank you so much for joining me today. I know there are many ways you can spend your time. Thank you for choosing to spend it with me. Until next time, be kind to yourself and show your Warrior Spirit some love.

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Until next time, be well!