Stress Reduction Module #9:

The Mindful Approach to Stress

### Stakeholder Sign Off

| **Name** | **Role\*** | **Initials** | **Date** |
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### Version Update Management

| **Editor Name** | **Purpose of Revision(s)** | **Stakeholder(s) Notified?** | **Date** |
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By the end of this module, you should have a clear understanding of:

* The principles of mindfulness, as well as the science behind it
* How you can enhance your emotional awareness and reduce stress with a mindfulness practice
* Different mindfulness practices and techniques you can try

#### **Introduction to Mindfulness**

Mindfulness is a simple yet powerful tool that helps you respond to stress thoughtfully rather than reacting impulsively. At its core, mindfulness is the practice of being fully present in the moment– both internally and externally—without judgment.

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As author and journalist Dan Harris explains, “It’s the ability to recognize what’s happening in your mind and body right now…without getting *carried away* by it.”

**Example:**

Imagine you’re heading back to your desk after a long meeting when a colleague stops to chat. You know you have a pile of work waiting, and your mind races: *“I’m so overwhelmed! I don’t have time for this!”*

**Reactive Response:** You worry that rushing the conversation might offend your colleague, but not rushing might cause you to miss deadlines—both add to your stress.

**Mindful Response:** You think, “I’m noticing I’m feeling overwhelmed,” without judgment. You then say, “Jim, I’m a bit distracted by my workload, but I’d love to catch up—could we grab a coffee tomorrow afternoon instead?”

Mindfulness shifts you from reacting to stress to responding with thoughtfulness and intention.

#### **The Science Behind Mindfulness and Stress**

While people may hesitate to slow down and engage in mindfulness, research shows it has a profound positive impact on brain function and stress resilience.

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Clinical studies show that mindfulness can improve focus, enhance empathy, and reduce common stress reactions like irritability and fatigue. Regular mindfulness practice leads to these brain changes:

**Improved Focus and Reduced Anxiety:**Mindfulness increases gray matter in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), which enhances self-regulation and cognitive flexibility. This helps you stay focused and adaptable, helping you stay focused even under pressure.

**Reduced Automatic Stress Reactions:**Mindfulness shrinks the amygdala, the brain’s center for stress and fear, reducing automatic stress responses and strengthening your ability to manage emotions and respond thoughtfully via the ACC.

**Enhanced Problem-Solving:**Mindfulness boosts gray matter in the prefrontal cortex, the area responsible for decision-making, problem-solving, and emotional regulation, allowing for clearer thinking and better decision-making during stressful situations.

#### **Types of Mindfulness Practices**

There are many ways to practice mindfulness (that don’t require sitting on a cushion for hours); simple techniques can fit easily into your day.

Some common mindfulness practices include:

1. Breathing Techniques
2. Body Awareness Techniques
3. Movement-Based Mindfulness
4. Sensory Mindfulness
5. Guided Meditation

⚠️Note: Mindfulness can bring suppressed emotions to the surface This may feel overwhelming for some, such as those with a history of trauma, anxiety, or depression. For those with PTSD, certain practices, such as body awareness meditations, may trigger distressing memories. Trauma-sensitive mindfulness and guidance from a trauma-informed practitioner may be beneficial.

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The key is to find a mindfulness technique that works for you, choose a few below to try:

**Breathing Techniques:**

* + Focused Attention to Breath
  + 4-7-8 Breathing
  + Box Breathing
  + Deep Belly Breathing
  + Alternate Nostril Breathing

**Body Awareness Techniques:**

* + Body Scan Meditation
  + Progressive Muscle Relaxation
  + Somatic Mindfulness

**Movement-Based Mindfulness**

* Walking Meditation
* Yoga
* Tai Chi and Qigong
* Mindful Stretching

**Sensory Mindfulness**

* + Mindful Watching (Nature, Candle Meditation)
  + 5 Senses Meditation
  + Mindful Touch
  + Mindful Smelling
  + Mindful Eating
  + Sound Meditation

**Guided Meditation**

* Guided Imagery
* Mindfulness-Based-Stress-Reduction
* Guided Compassion Meditation (Tonglen)
* Loving-Kindness (Metta) Meditation
* Mantra/Transcendental Meditation
* Guided Self-Inquiry
* Zen Meditation (Zazen)

#### **Integrating Mindfulness into Daily Life**

#### You can weave mindfulness intoeveryday moments like eating, walking, or daily chores in small but meaningful ways. The key is to bring your full attention to the present moment, engaging all of your senses.

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#### **Instructions**:

#### Start small. Begin by practicing mindfulness for just 5 minutes a day during an activity you already do, like brushing your teeth or commuting. Gradually increase the time as you become more comfortable. Here are a few practical ways to incorporate mindfulness into your daily routine:

#### **Mindful Morning**: As you brush your teeth or drink your coffee, focus fully on the sensations—taste, texture, and smell. Engage your senses and allow yourself to be fully present without distractions.

#### **Mindful Commuting**: Whether walking, driving, or taking the bus, bring attention to your surroundings. Notice the feel of your body moving or sitting, the sounds, and the sights around you. If your mind wanders, gently guide it back–this is part of the practice.

#### **Mindful Eating**: Choose one meal or snack to eat mindfully. Slow down, savor each bite, and notice the aromas, flavors, and textures. Avoid distractions like TV or your phone while you eat.

#### **Mindful Breaks**: Take short pauses during your day. Step outside or take a moment at your desk to close your eyes, breathe deeply, and focus on how your body feels. Even 30 seconds can make a big difference.

#### **Mindful Conversations**: When talking to someone, give them your full attention. Listen carefully without planning your next response, and focus on their tone and expressions.

#### **Mindful Chores**: While washing dishes, focus on the warmth of the water, the feel of the dish, and the sound of the faucet. This can turn a routine task into a calming, mindful moment.

#### **Mindful Wind-Down**: At the end of the day, use mindfulness to relax. Focus on your breath, let go of any tension in your body, or do a quick body scan before you get some restorative sleep.

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#### **Overcoming Barriers to Mindfulness**

#### While mindfulness is simple in concept, barriers like time constraints and distraction commonly get in the way of consistent practice. Having tools to overcome these challenges is key.

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#### **Time Constraints:**You don’t need long, uninterrupted stretches of time for mindfulness to be effective. Integrating small moments of mindfulness into your day can be just as beneficial

#### ***Tip***: Try practicing mindfulness during natural pauses in your day (while waiting for your coffee to brew or during a short break between meetings). Take a few deep breaths and focus on the present moment to help reset your mental state.

#### ***Example***: When you’re waiting in line or sitting at a traffic light, instead of reaching for your phone, use that moment to take a few deep breaths, notice your surroundings, and bring yourself fully into the present. These micro-mindfulness practices can help you feel more grounded, even on the busiest days. .~~You don’t need large chunks of time. Even a few minutes of mindfulness can make a difference.~~

#### ~~Tip: Set a reminder on your phone to take a 3-minute mindfulness break in the middle of your workday.~~

#### **Managing Distraction**s: It’s normal for your mind to wander during mindfulness practice. The key is to gently bring your attention back to the present without frustration or judgement.

#### Tip: When distractions arise, acknowledge them as part of the practice rather than a failure. Gently label the distraction (e.g., “thinking” or “planning”) and return your focus back to your breath or the current moment.

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#### **Conclusion: Building Mindfulness into Your Stress Management Toolkit**

#### Mindfulness is a powerful tool that not only reduces stress but also improves emotional regulation and awareness in daily life. It complements many of the other stress-busting toolswe’ve covered in this program, reinforcing your overall resilience.

## Module #9: Activities and Exercises

### **Activity: Find Your Fit – Trying Mindfulness on for Size**

**Objective:** Explore different mindfulness practices and find the ones that resonate with you.

**Instructions:** Select 3 mindfulness practices from the list and try each one over the next week. Reflect on which practice felt most effective and why.

**Activity: Mindfulness and Stress Quiz**

**Objective:** Assess your understanding of mindfulness and its role in stress management.

**Instructions:** Complete the quiz to evaluate how well you grasp the concepts covered in this module.

### **Activity: What Are Your Emotions Trying to Tell You?**

**Objective:** Develop emotional curiosity and learn to accurately label emotions.

**Instructions:** Reflect on a recent personal experience. Notice and name the emotions involved, using the mindfulness tools introduced in this module.