

Think Well, Be Well

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Fall Mindfulness

As the leaves begin to paint the landscape with vibrant shades of red, orange and gold and the air turns crisp, it's the perfect time to embrace the concept of mindfulness, the practice of being fully present in the moment. It offers a way to connect with the beauty and cozy charm of autumn. The benefits of mindfulness are emotional, cognitive, interpersonal, professional and practical.

Building resilience is important all year, but the transitional period of autumn may help the process. The changing of the seasons can help you prioritize your physical, emotional and mental health by presenting the opportunity to start new routines or cut out unhealthy habits. This article explores the importance of being mindful during the fall season and provides ideas on how to fully immerse yourself in the autumn experience.

The American Psychological Association (APA) defines mindfulness as awareness of one's internal states and surroundings. People can practice mindfulness to help avoid destructive or automatic habits and responses by learning to observe their thoughts, emotions and other present-moment experiences without judging or reacting to them.

The Importance of Mindfulness During the Fall

Fall is a season of transition, making it a good time for building resilience and practicing mindfulness. Trees shed their leaves, and the days grow shorter; this natural process mirrors personal lives, where change is inevitable. Some people may struggle emotionally and mentally when faced with seasonal change—and that may be due to the cool, dark weather of the season. According to the APA, seasonal affective disorder (also known as SAD) is a regular seasonal pattern of major depressive episodes during the fall and winter months, with periods of full improvement in the spring and summer. Mindfulness can help people embrace these seasonal transitions and make space for new experiences and personal growth.

Making the Most of the Season

Fall may be stressful with the upcoming holiday season, which can be busy and demanding on personal responsibilities, finances and schedules. While fall is a season of change, you can use that change to reset as you focus on being present. Consider the following ways to work with the energy of fall to amplify your mindfulness practice:

- **Start each day with an intention.** The change of season is a good time to let go of the old and invite something new to your life. Setting intentions can help you align your values with your purpose. Some people like to set goals and intentions seasonally, making fall the perfect time to refocus your time and energy. If you haven't set intentions before, here are some examples:
 - I will eat more seasonal foods.
 - I will take better care of my body.
 - I will be more open to change.
 - I will connect with nature weekly.
 - I will try a new hobby.
 - I will focus on deepening a relationship.
 - I will let go of what I can't control.
 - I will learn how to handle my finances better.
- **Keep a gratitude journal.** Create a gratitude journal and make a daily habit of noting what you're grateful for during the fall. It could be the warmth of a hot drink on a chilly day, the laughter of loved ones around the bonfire or the beauty of the changing leaves. Reflecting on these moments of gratitude can help you appreciate the season more deeply.
- **Practice meditation.** Take a moment each day to meditate and practice deep, mindful breathing. It's as simple as finding a quiet space, closing your eyes and focusing on your breath. Inhale slowly and deeply and exhale, releasing any tension or stress. This simple exercise can help you stay grounded and calm during the busyness of the season.

- **Take a nature walk.** Take hikes or leisurely walks through parks, forests or even your own neighborhood to soak in the beauty of fall. Pay attention to the colors of the leaves, the sound of the wind in the trees, and the feel of the earth beneath your feet. Let go of distractions and immerse yourself in the natural world.
- **Go photowalking.** Take your phone or camera along during a nature walk, capturing the season's sights (e.g., colorful foliage). Not only are you getting movement in, but you can also unleash your creativity and connect with your surroundings. The goal is to achieve deeper meaning in simple pleasures.
- **Try a quiet walk.** For this one, leave the phone at home or set the volume to silent. While many like to listen to music or a podcast while walking, a quiet walk can help you stay in the moment and keep your mind focused on the experience. For example, focus on feeling the ground beneath your feet, listening to the leaves crunch or looking up at the sky. A distraction-free walk can help you recharge and reset.
- **Cook a seasonal recipe.** Savor the seasonal flavors and cook a delicious homemade meal or bake a sweet treat. Fall flavors (e.g., apple, pumpkin, maple, ginger, cinnamon and sage) can add a comforting touch to your cooking and help you connect with the season.

Like any exercise, mindfulness benefits from regular practice, so find ways to incorporate mindful activities or build them into an existing daily or weekly routine.

Summary

Fall is a season of transformation, and practicing mindfulness during this time can help you embrace the change, savor the sensory delights and connect with the essence of autumn. Fall mindfulness is more than a practice; it's a way to embrace change, enrich your life and create memories.

This fall, focus on taking moments to breathe, feel and savor the wonders of the season. Contact a doctor for more information on improving your mindfulness. If you're concerned about your mental health, talk to your doctor or a licensed mental health professional, or contact the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Helpline by calling 800-662-HELP (4357).

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