

## Defining Mindfulness

*David S. Black*

Empirical studies have examined the construct of mindfulness for almost 40 years, and a definition of mindfulness has been continuously revised and clarified over this period. What we currently term *mindfulness* and the corresponding techniques of its cultivation, stem from Eastern psychological practices, specifically Buddhist psychology, which referred to the concept of mindfulness over 2,500 years ago. Mindfulness is a term stemming from the Pali language, whereby *Sati* is combined with *Sampajana*, and is translated directly as awareness, circumspection, discernment, and retention [1]. These Pali 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 this concept was gradually introduced to 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, decades of research have defrayed these myths, and mindfulness is now widely known as an inherent characteristic of human consciousness (i.e., it is a capacity of attention and awareness) that varies in degree within and between individuals, can be measured empirically, and is inherently independent of religious, spiritual, or cultural beliefs.

One of the most recognized Western definitions of mindfulness comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the founders of the mindfulness research movement. He defined mindfulness as, "paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgementally" [3]. Similar definitions have followed this line of work and 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) stated simply, waking up from a life-on-automatic pilot [6]. To grasp the definition of mindfulness, the term can be contrasted with experiences of mindlessness that occur when attention is scattered due to a preoccupation by past memories or future plans and worries, in turn, leading to limited awareness and habitual responses to experiences.

Although these definitions proved useful in advancing mindfulness research and practice, studies developing operational definitions were most useful for empirical purposes. Over less than a decade, researchers have dedicated attention to an empirically based operational definition of mindfulness. For example, a series of measurement development studies provided the first valid and reliable psychometric measure of dispositional mindfulness [7]. Additional measures of mindfulness have also been validated since then (e.g., Kentucky Inventory of Mindfulness Skills [8]; Toronto Mindfulness Scale [9]; Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale [10]; Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire [11]; Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory [12]; Philadelphia Mindfulness Scale [13]). These measures have allowed researchers to carefully measure mindfulness in different ways--as a disposition (i.e., a lasting trait), an outcome (i.e., a state of awareness), and as a practice (i.e., a mindfulness meditation practice). The increasing research dedicated to defining and measuring mindfulness has both coincided with and spurred research exploring the psychosocial, cognitive and behavioral health benefits of mindfulness ([link](#) to a comprehensive mindfulness bibliography).

### References

1. Shapiro SL. The integration of mindfulness and psychology. *Journal of clinical psychology*. 2009;65(6):555-560.
2. Shapiro SL, and Carlson LE. *The art and science of mindfulness: Integrating mindfulness into psychology and the helping professions*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association; 2009.
3. Kabat-Zinn J. *Wherever you go, there you are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life*. New York: Hyperion Books; 1994.
4. Brown KW, and Ryan RM. Perils and Promise in Defining and Measuring Mindfulness: Observations From Experience. *Clinical Psychology: Science & Practice*. 2004;11(3):242.
5. Jha AP, Krompinger J, and Baime MJ. Mindfulness training modifies subsystems of attention. *Cogn Affect Behav Neurosci*. 2007;7(2):109-19.
6. Siegel DJ. Mindfulness training and neural integration: differentiation of distinct streams of awareness and the cultivation of well-being. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*. 2007;2(4):259.
7. Brown KW, and Ryan RM. The benefits of being present: mindfulness and its role in psychological well-being. *J Pers Soc Psychol*. 2003;84(4):822-48.
8. Baer RA, Smith GT, and Allen KB. Assessment of mindfulness by self-report: the Kentucky inventory of mindfulness skills. *Assessment*. 2004;11(3):191-206.
9. Lau MA, Bishop SR, Segal ZV, Buis T, Anderson ND, Carlson L, et al. The Toronto Mindfulness Scale: development and validation. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*. 2006;62(12):1445.
10. Feldman G, Hayes A, Kumar S, Greeson J, and Laurenceau JP. Mindfulness and emotion regulation: The development and initial validation of the Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Scale-Revised (CAMS-R). *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment*. 2007;29(3):177-190.
11. Baer RA, Smith GT, Hopkins J, Krietemeyer J, and Toney L. Using self-report assessment methods to explore facets of mindfulness. 2006; 13(1):27-45.
12. Buchheld N, Grossman P, and Walach H. Measuring mindfulness in insight meditation (Vipassana) and meditation-based psychotherapy: The development of the Freiburg Mindfulness Inventory (FMI). *Journal for Meditation and Meditation Research*. 2001;1(1):11-34.
13. Cardaciotto L, Herbert JD, Forman EM, Moitra E, and Farrow V. The assessment of present-moment awareness and acceptance: the Philadelphia Mindfulness Scale. *Assessment*. 2008;15(2):204.

### Recommended citation for this document:

Black, D.S. (2010). Defining mindfulness. *Mindfulness Research Guide*. Accessed from <http://www.mindfulexperience.org/>