

# DEVELOPING A MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

Aristotle: "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

## FOUR STAGES TO DEVELOPING A GOOD HABIT

**1. CONTEMPLATION:** YOU WANT TO MAKE CHANGES; HOWEVER, YOU ARE UNSURE HOW TO PROCEED.

### TIPS FOR THIS STAGE:

- Visualize your life if you don't make the change and develop a mindfulness practice. What will your life be like in one year?
- Think about your motivation, and set your intention.
- Learn all you can about mindfulness and its benefits.
- Avoid analysing too much, never making the move from thought to deed.

**2. PREPARATION:** IN THIS STAGE, YOU HAVE MADE THE DECISION TO CHANGE, BUT HAVEN'T WORKED OUT ALL THE DETAILS YET.

### TIPS FOR THIS STAGE:

- Write out a list of the benefits that will come from developing a regular mindfulness practice. Carry this list with you and read it often. Know why you're doing it. It will be much easier for you to develop the practice if you're very clear on why you want to make it part of your life. What benefits will you derive? Write them down.
- Realize that once you move into action, you will need the time and energy to carry out your plan. Make any necessary attachments adjustments to your schedule.
- Set a date for when you will begin – and make it sooner rather than later!
- Write out your plan. If it's in writing, you're more likely to follow it. A simple plan will do.
- Do it as a 30-day trial: Although many argue that it takes 21 days to ingrain a new habit, it is worth conducting a 30-day trial.
- Visualize yourself creating a regular practice. Creative visualization is using your imagination to create a clear mental picture of something you want to create in your life. Your imagination is very powerful, and it can be a great aid if you use it correctly. The Mountain and Lake Meditations can help in this.
- But remember, when practicing let go of expectations. They will take care of themselves!
- Set your attitude – unconditional friendliness toward the whole mindfulness process.
- 

**3. ACTION:** MOST PEOPLE EQUATE CHANGE WITH DOING SOMETHING, AND THAT'S WHAT THE ACTION STAGE IS ALL ABOUT. IT INVOLVES THE NUTS AND BOLTS WORK OF MAKING THE PRACTICE REGULAR.

### Tips for this stage:

- Make it daily – consistency is critical if you want to make a habit stick. Sit every day – even if it is just for five minutes at first. Do some mindful movement every day.
- Make it small and simple. If 30 minutes each day is too much of a daunting task, start out with the Emerald – five minute – meditations. Then move to the Sapphire – 10 minute – meditations. Start off by taking small steps, and then increase the amount as you go along.
- The same applies to mindful movement – start small and build up. Best of all, join a class in yoga, pilates, QiGong or TaiChi.
- Remind yourself at the start of each formal practice of your intention.
- Set up your environment to help you. Is there a place you can set out as your meditation spot?

- Chart your progress. Print out a calendar with 30 days on it and every day when you keep to your new habit mark it on the calendar. Follow comedian Jerry Seinfeld's advice: for each day he does his task of writing, he puts a big red X over that day, which—after a few days--creates a chain. He adds that you have to make sure not to break the chain.
- Make it visual. Go back to your list of why you want to create a regular mindfulness practice. Find images that represent the benefits that you associate with adopting this and create a vision board for yourself with those images. Look at them often.
- Look for ways to add informal mindfulness to your life.
- Do a Three Minute Breathing Space every day.
- Have patience. It takes time to develop a regular practice. Be patient and keep trying so this new Automatic Pilot has time to evolve. Don't leave halfway through because of frustration. Remember that hard work is not the key ingredient for developing a new habit; patience and repetition are the most important ingredients.
- Be kind to yourself. Practice self-compassion: try the guided meditations on Self-compassion available on the website. Remember the words in one of the guided meditations: "As best you can, bring a quality of kindness to your awareness, perhaps seeing the repeated wanderings of the mind as opportunities to bring patience and gentle curiosity to your experience." Take this same attitude when you find it difficult to practice.

**4. MAINTENANCE:** IN MAINTENANCE, CHANGES MADE IN THE ACTION STAGE ARE CONSOLIDATED. THE TASK OF THIS STAGE IS TO MAKE SURE CHANGE LASTS. MINDFULNESS IS NOW PART OF YOUR LIFE.

#### TIPS FOR ALL OF THE STAGES:

**Remember, there's no right or wrong timetable – no perfect way to change.** Wherever you are in the process is exactly where you need to be.

**Allow yourself time** to go at your own pace through each of the stages of change.

**Give yourself credit** for the steps you take, regardless of how small they might seem to you. Take a Savouring Vacation, and "Congratulate yourself for taking the time to be present".

**Get support.** Don't try to go it alone. It's good to share your progress, or lack thereof, with people who are going through the same thing you are or have already gone through it.

**You don't have to go in a straight line.** More typically, we cycle through the stages of change several times. You may make significant progress while in the action stage, only to have stress set you back, leaving you in the contemplation stage once again. Remember, this is normal.

**Tell people about your goal.** Tell people around you about the new habit you are going to cultivate. They can help you accomplish your goal. For example, each time you unconsciously break the new habit, they will point out your mistake and you can correct yourself. You also want to be seen as a "person of your word" among others. Therefore, you will subconsciously avoid breaking the new habit in front of them once you have announced your new goal.

**Form a Trigger** – A trigger is a ritual you use right before executing your habit. Use an app on your phone or computer to remind you periodically – perhaps a meditation bell.

**Be Imperfect** – Don't expect all your attempts to change habits to be successful immediately. Try your best, but expect a few bumps along the way. Practice loving kindness toward yourself!

**Use "But"** – When you start to think negative thoughts, use the word "but" to interrupt it. "I'm no good at this, but, if I work at it I might get better later."

**Swish** - A technique from NLP. Visualize yourself being unmindful. Next visualize yourself being mindful. Finally, end that sequence with an image of yourself in a highly positive state, with a regular mindfulness practice. Do this a few times until you automatically go through the pattern before executing the old mindless Automatic Pilot.

John Darwin

October 2014