

10 Mindfulness Exercises for the Health Care Workplace

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Institute for Healthcare Improvement

For the busy health care worker, it's not always easy to prioritize self-care. But the ability to pause and reset one's focus is almost essential. Studies associate mindfulness — that is, the act of paying deliberate attention to the present moment, with an attitude of non-judgment, acceptance, and awareness — with improvements in empathy, cognitive performance, and health and well-being.

Use the 10 exercises below to begin incorporating mindfulness into your daily life. Each exercise is quick and can be done at work. Try spacing them throughout the day.

1. Pause when you first arrive at your computer. Feel the weight of your legs in the chair and the pressure of your feet as they contact the floor. Take a few calming breaths. Gently deepen your inhale and lengthen your exhale. Try counting to three on the inhale and on the exhale. Adjust the timing so that it feels most calming for your body.
2. As you approach a patient's room, let your attention move to your feet walking down the hallway. Pay attention to each foot as it comes in contact with the floor, one step at a time. Slow down, and let your breath and movement connect. Let your attention rest there. Check in with your overall state of being. Ask yourself, "What does it feel like in my feet right now?" Whatever you notice in your feet or in your body, bring acceptance to that experience. Take a clearing breath: breathing in for four, pausing for two, and exhaling slowly.
3. During hand-washing, stand still and pause. Pay attention to the moment: reaching for the soap, spreading it on your hands; the motion, the feel of the soap, the temperature, the texture. Stay with the experience and not your thoughts. Take a clearing breath, and allow the physical sensations in your hands to remind you to be present for the next interaction.
4. When you first approach someone, notice some details about this person, such as the color of their eyes, the expression on their face, or how they are standing. As you are noticing these details, take a few breaths and feel sensations in your body as you arrive in the connection of the interaction. Then bring your full attention to the interaction. If your mind wanders to another experience, notice that with acceptance, and bring it back to the person or the people you are with and the feelings in your own body.

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5. If there is time before an important interaction, intentionally pause for 30 seconds or so. Take some calming breaths and feel your body. Then establish an intention to come to the interaction with presence and care.
6. When you are doing a focused task for an extended period (e.g., reading, working on the computer, handling samples), look up periodically and allow your peripheral vision to become wide. Take a few calming breaths and notice any feelings of rest in your body.
7. Periodically throughout your day, pause, close your eyes, open your ears, and listen to sounds in the distance. This is like widening your peripheral vision: Just use your hearing instead. Allow the sounds to come and go without engaging in the story of what the sounds are. In particular, notice and enjoy any pleasant experience of spaciousness as you listen to sounds in the distance.
8. When you notice yourself feeling tense, if possible, remove yourself from the situation for a minute or two. (Bathrooms are a great place to do this.) Validate your experience with compassion, telling yourself, "It's understandable that I would feel this way." Place your hand on your heart or in a soothing position, breathe, and repeat your compassionate phrase a few times.
9. Before, during, or after a difficult situation, pause. Feel your feet firmly grounded and repeat this phrase as you link it to your breath. Come up with a calming phrase, such as "Breathing in I calm my body, breathing out I relax."
10. At least once or twice throughout your day, look at something simple that you find beautiful. This could be the sky, a flower, or a picture of a loved one. Intentionally take a few moments to notice this beauty and savor the enjoyment for at least a few moments.

The list above is an excerpt from the one-hour online course PFC 103: Incorporating Mindfulness into Clinical Practice. With more than 30 topics available, IHI Open School online courses are multimedia learning modules that teach practical skills to improve quality and safety in health care. The courses offer continuing education credits for nurses, physicians, and pharmacists as well as a Basic Certificate in Quality and Safety.

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