

# Mindfulness For Pulmonary Fibrosis

The practice of mindfulness has become a popular approach to coping with stress. Although there is not much research on the use of mindfulness by patients who have pulmonary fibrosis, mindfulness has been used by patients with many different medical conditions. Many benefits of mindfulness have been reported by people with other conditions, such as other lung diseases. Thus, learning to practice mindfulness may be helpful for people coping with the symptoms of pulmonary fibrosis. This handout was created to answer these questions: What is mindfulness? How can learning mindfulness be helpful for patients with pulmonary fibrosis? How can people learn to practice mindfulness?

## What is mindfulness?

Simply put, mindfulness is **paying attention on purpose** in the **current moment**, without **judging or reacting**. The skill or state of mindfulness means being fully present and aware, so that you can observe without getting swept up in what's happening. People live busy stressful lives, and learning to practice mindfulness means learning to “step back” and “get perspective” on what is happening. It is often called “separating” from physical sensations, thoughts, and feelings. This helps people to see that they don't always have to believe or obey their thoughts and feelings. For example, if someone senses themselves becoming frustrated or impatient when waiting in line at the store, they do not have to yell at people or allow anger to simmer all day. This is another benefit of mindfulness: learning to decide how to respond instead of being impulsive. Instead of simply reacting, mindfulness allows people to separate the awareness of sensations, thoughts, and feelings from acting on them. Finally, mindfulness can be used to train your attention. With mindfulness, people learn that they are not “captured” by sensations, thoughts, and feelings. This is helpful when people want to pay attention to what they are doing or fully experience the present moment instead of being preoccupied or distracted.

Mindfulness is most closely associated with the meditation tradition from Buddhism, but mindfulness is not necessarily Buddhist or an Eastern philosophy. Rather, mindfulness is a capacity, state, or skill that anyone can learn. Mindfulness has been called different things by different intellectual traditions because it is common to all people and cultures. Furthermore, being mindful is not always better than being “mindless.” Although people usually learn mindfulness from certain training practices, and then they apply mindfulness skills to everyday life, there are also times that people choose not to be mindful. For example, you can wash the dishes mindfully, or you can use that time to have a conversation with someone. In that case, you're not fully present in the dishwashing experience, because you wanted to have a conversation. Mindfulness is paying attention on *purpose*, which suggests that there is a time and a place for it.

## How can learning mindfulness be helpful for patients with pulmonary fibrosis?

Mindfulness is useful for managing stress. For people with lung diseases, there is a special reason that mindfulness may be useful. Specifically, the most common symptoms of pulmonary fibrosis are coughing and shortness of breath. Being short of breath, or

any difficulty breathing, is naturally scary for most people. Thus, there is a vicious cycle of breathlessness (sensations), worry (thoughts), and anxiety or fear (feelings) that many people with lung diseases describe. In this case, one goal of mindfulness would be to interrupt that shortness of breath - fear cycle. Going back to the definition, paying attention on purpose in the current moment, without judging or reacting could allow people to “step back” and “get perspective” on symptoms like coughing, shortness of breath, or fatigue.

These physical sensations are powerful triggers for certain thoughts and feelings. However, when someone has a lung disease like pulmonary fibrosis, they may need to be aware of sensations without reacting. This could “override” the natural tendency to avoid activities or worry about what the symptoms mean. For example, people might choose to exercise even though they are becoming breathless, or they may want to be able to pay careful attention to a conversation by putting things like coughing and fatigue out of their mind.

## How can people learn to practice mindfulness?

The accompanying webinar demonstrates four mindfulness exercises: Mindful breathing, Mindfulness meditation, the “5-4-3-2-1 grounding technique, and Mindful listening to music. Here is the script used for a three-minute mindful breathing exercise:



**Bring yourself into the present moment by sitting up straight in a chair with both feet flat on the floor. If you are comfortable, close your eyes or partially close your eyes.**

Then ask yourself,

- What is my experience right now...?
- What thoughts are floating through my mind?
- What feelings are attached to those thoughts?
- How does my body feel at this moment?

Acknowledge and accept your experience, even if it is unwanted. Without any judgments, just be in the moment.



**Focus on your breathing.**

Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly.

Direct your full attention to your breathing. Don't fight with your thoughts as you mind wanders, as it surely will; just gently bring the focus back to teach breath.



**As you breathe in, feel your breath circulate throughout your entire body.**

With this breath, feel the sense of the body as a whole, your muscles and joints, your posture, and the expression on your face.

With each breath, we give and receive life. This basic breath is our connection to ourselves and all living things on earth.

This breathing space provides a time for you to reconnect with this present moment.