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# Mindfulness 101: Taking the Edge Off Anxiety: Research and Practice


By Scott L. Rogers

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We lawyers take on a great deal of responsibility that can elevate the level of anxiety we experience. Paid to plan and problem solve, we find ourselves worrying about potential concerns at various times of the day and night, which can interfere with our productivity and well-being. And while we worry needlessly about things that may never happen, we also worry about things that stand a good chance of happening if we don't do something about them. Understandably, we may resign ourselves to accept that worry and anxiety are part of the job.

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In fact, *anticipating problems* is part of the job. Worrying over them is optional. This is easier said than done, as it can be hard to dial down the worry without also believing we'll be dialing down the ability to anticipate legitimate concerns. And, indeed, the two frequently ride along together, and it can be difficult to tease them apart. Each time worrying is associated with action that leads to a desirable outcome, the pattern is reinforced.

## Research on Mindfulness Practice and Anxiety

Mindfulness practices can help take the edge off anxiety. Research in this area has been growing, and [a recent study](#) involving the randomized clinical trial of 276 adults with anxiety disorders reported that practicing mindfulness was as effective at reducing anxiety as medication. The medication used in the study, Escitalopram, belongs to a class of drugs known as selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs), which help to restore the balance of serotonin in the brain. The mindfulness practices used in the study draw from a standard repertoire of classic mindfulness practices, most notably those focusing attention on the breath, the body, and gentle movement.

The importance of medication for treating anxiety cannot be overstated, and the researchers do not suggest swapping mindfulness meditation for anxiety medication. Rather, practicing mindfulness serves as an additional pathway for working skillfully with anxious thinking and may lead to a further reduction in symptoms and, perhaps, over time, a reduction in the need for medication. Just as it can be fascinating to understand how a pharmacological treatment works, it can be illuminating to understand the mechanism of action for a mindfulness practice and why it may bring about a range of beneficial effects. If the above-

noted research inspires you to practice, re-allocate the time you would spend finishing this article to practicing mindfulness. Listen to a guided practice or keep it really simple by closing your eyes and focusing your attention on the breath, returning attention to the breath when you notice mind wandering. If you're interested in taking a closer look at why the above instruction can be so beneficial, read on.

## How Does Mindfulness Practice Help?

The three mindfulness practices explored in the research noted above—[focused attention on the breath, on the body](#), and on movement—all help develop a crucial mental skill that can meaningfully diminish the impact of worrisome thinking. Take a moment and see if you can identify this skill based on your current understanding of mindfulness, be it through reading about it or practicing it. What capacity might one develop by spending a little time on a regular basis focusing attention on an object such as the breath or body?

The answer is that each of these practices *heightens one's awareness of mental activity*—thoughts and feelings—thereby offering a more comprehensive look at their true nature. More commonly, these practices are understood to help steady attention and diminish the frequency of mind wandering. And while this is certainly true, it frequently gets too much airtime, leaving the *route to these effects* overlooked or misunderstood. It turns out that focusing attention on an object such as the breath or the body is less about avoiding mind wandering than it is about noticing mind wandering. So, what is it about noticing the activity of the mind that can be so helpful?

Left unnoticed, we don't stand much of a chance in the face of reactive and confused thinking. We forget that thoughts are not facts, and they all too quickly become mandates that we blindly (on automatic pilot) accept and act on. Similarly, feelings arise and take hold, coloring our experience, notwithstanding that they otherwise are short-lived and but one aspect of our present-moment experience. This is the unfortunate and all-too-unpleasant consequence of not noticing the arising of thoughts and feelings and being all too quick to act on them. Thoughts (and feelings) make a wonderful servant but a terrible master.

Keep an eye out for thoughts that arise in the coming few hours. A good number of them, left unnoticed, may cascade into a persistent worry or counterproductive rumination. A helpful insight often attributed to Aristotle is that "it is the mark of an educated mind to entertain a thought without accepting it." With awareness of the arising of a thought and the ability to drop in on its content without blindly accepting it, you become more resilient, you realize you have a choice, and you are likely to make better decisions—or perhaps conclude that no action need be taken.

## The Half-Life of a Thought

A look, even if but a glimpse, at the true nature of the activity of the mind offers a more granular understanding of the half-life of thoughts and feelings. As a general rule, it is quite short—a matter of seconds, if that. Thoughts are continually coming and going. So, too, are feelings, though they may appear to linger a bit longer as they agitate the body (and an agitated body feeds feelings and thoughts). By practicing mindfulness, one spends a good deal of time observing the activity of the mind (and body), which largely consists of the arising and passing away of thoughts and feelings (and sensations). Metaphorically, a mental train arrives, and its passengers exit and mill about for a few moments before continuing on their journey, just as another train pulls into the station. It can be exhausting to have one's attention pulled in the direction of so many thoughts—getting caught up in a passenger's story. It is liberating to be able to observe (and even

marvel over) the bustling activity of the train station as a continually changing venue that has much less to do with us than we “think.”

Of course, having access to our internal narrative is not a panacea, and a lightbulb illuminating worrisome thoughts about the future or critical self-judgments will not instantly fix everything. It is a game changer, nonetheless, and practice can help develop two core capacities: (1) the ability to see more clearly the arising of a thought and (2) the knowledge that every thought is inevitably short-lived. It can be useful to know this intellectually by reading these words. It is something altogether different and more potent to know it firsthand through practice.

Those who accepted the above invitation to practice, instead of reading on, may have glimpsed firsthand the insight just shared. Now armed with this insight, see if a little practice might bring it to life for you. The mindfulness journey is one of a lifetime. It begins with the next breath.

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