

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program Details



Historical Context of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) Program

The Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program was developed in 1979 at the University of Massachusetts Medical School by Professor of Medicine Jon Kabat-Zinn. The MBSR program is an 8-week evidence-based training that teaches participants mindfulness practices to apply daily in their life for cultivating attention skills, emotional regulation, resilience, and more. Since its inception, the MBSR program has grown exponentially and is now offered throughout the world, including being widely offered in medical arenas. In 2015, close to 80% of medical schools reported offering some element of mindfulness training, and research dedicated to mindfulness continues to proliferate¹.

MBSR Program Logistics

The MBSR program includes 10 sessions: an orientation, eight classes that run 2.5 - 3.5 hours each, and a 7.5-hour retreat class that takes place between classes 6 and 7. Participants engage in mindfulness practices in every class, and whole and small group discussion is also a central part of every class, allowing participants to explore, inquire into, and speak about their experiences of what they're discovering related to mindfulness. Between each class, participants are expected to engage on their own in mindfulness practice for approximately 1 hour every day. Daily practice includes body scanning, mindful movement, and sitting practice, as well as practices inherent in everyday life, such as noticing habits and patterns around speaking and listening, and so on.

The MBSR instructor provides the main resources required to participate in the program, such as audio recordings to guide most of the daily practice. The majority of the course is experientially-based, with mindfulness practice and discussion about discoveries and application of mindfulness practice being forefront. Midway through the program, didactic teaching about the physiological and psychological bases of stress reactivity is offered in the context of what participants are experiencing in their life at this point in the program.

Total in-class contact hours: 30+ hours

Total home assignment hours: 42+ hours

Total group orientation hours: 2.5 hours

What Mindfulness Is and How It Works

Mindfulness is present moment awareness that results from paying attention on purpose, non-judgmentally, in the service of self-understanding and wisdom. Through mindfulness practices (techniques), we strengthen this non-judgmental present-moment awareness (mindfulness), which helps us become more aware of our habitual tendencies and reactivity. This awareness of what is not serving us well is the first step in interrupting cycles of maladaptive coping; reducing worry and rumination that's associated with over-focusing on the past and future; and accessing more choice for how to respond instead of react. Noticing what is not effectively mitigating stress, and being able to choose a different response, increases resilience or "stress hardiness" and improves the ability to self-regulate: recover more quickly after stressful events and return to a state of equilibrium.

¹ Buchholz, Laura. "Exploring the Promise of Mindfulness as Medicine." *JAMA* 314, no. 13 (October 6, 2015): 1327. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2015.7023>.

Contraindications for the MBSR Program

MBSR relies on the creation of a highly motivated, participatory community of learners intent on cultivating and integrating the MBSR practices into their everyday lives—and supporting fellow participants to do the same. There are 3 criteria to consider when deciding if the “time is right” to participate in the MBSR program:

1. **Lifestyle**: If a prospective participant is unable to commit to the amount of time needed to participate fully in the program, postponing participation is called for.
2. **Mental, Emotional, & Physical**: If a prospective participant is currently experiencing mental, emotional, and/or physical issues that would be better served at this time through other means, such as counseling, participation in programs for recovery, and so on, postponing participation in the MBSR program is called for.
3. **Attitudinal**: If a prospective participant is not willing to engage cooperatively in the group process of MBSR, postponing participation in the MBSR program is called for.

Content of the MBSR Program

Orientation

A 2.5-hour session to—

- provide the history of the MBSR program developed at UMass Medical School in 1979
- acquaint participants with what mindfulness is and what it is not
- provide information about risks and benefits associated with practicing mindfulness and participating in the MBSR program
- provide information about what the program entails
- let participants engage in a few mindfulness practices
- let participants meet the teacher and fellow participants
- provide information about the structure and logistics of the program
- provide information about the level of commitment required and the attendance policy
- have time for participants to ask questions

NOTE: If after the orientation a participant feels that the MBSR program is not currently a good fit for their life, they can opt not to proceed with the program. Sometimes the teacher will ask to check in with an individual participant if there is an indication that the program might not be a good fit for that participant.

Class 1

A 3-hour class to—

- explore as a group what will support experiential learning throughout the 8 weeks
- engage in formal practices: body scan, mindful eating, mindful breathing, standing movement
- engage in whole and/or small group discussion about experiences of class 1 practices

Theme: Problems can be worked with. Mindfulness is fundamental in this work since the present moment is the only time we have to perceive, learn, grow, or change. The MBSR program is an opportunity to do that in a supportive environment.

Class 2

A 2-5-hour class to—

- engage in sitting meditation with awareness of breathing as primary object of attention

- continue to engage in body scanning to strengthen body awareness, including physical signals around stress
- discuss participant experiences of their daily practice and from class 2

Theme: Perception and creative responding: How we see things (or don't see them) will determine in large measure how we respond to them. This seeing includes how participants see their participation in the program, and how they see their own pain, stress, pressures, and so on. Focus is on "It's not the stressors per se but how we handle them that influences short- and long-term effects they have on our mind and body."

Class 3

A 2.5-hour class to—

- engage in body-centric mindfulness practices, including mindful movement (lying down movement), sitting, and walking
- explore experiences of "pleasant" in the lives of participants, including what they are finding pleasant during mindfulness practice
- discuss participant experiences of their daily practice and from class 3

Theme: There is pleasure and power in being present. We miss many pleasant moments, perhaps focusing mainly on the unpleasant ones, as well as overlooking that even within unpleasant experiences, there may also be aspects that are pleasant.

Class 4

A 2.5-hour class to—

- engage in longer sitting practice that strengthens the ability to expand attention beyond breath to include body sensations and the body as a whole
- engage in standing movement practice
- explore experiences of "unpleasant" in the lives of participants, including what they are finding unpleasant during mindfulness practice
- learn about typical stress reactivity patterns, as well as their own patterns
- discuss participant experiences of their daily practice and from class 4

Theme: Awareness of being stuck in one's life and possibilities for getting unstuck, meeting "unpleasant" with more wisdom and choice, shifting from mindlessly reacting to mindfully responding. Listening to and trusting one's own inner wisdom. What constitutes stress for us personally, and how our perception of what constitutes stress, causes us to perceive something as pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

Class 5

A 2.5-hour class to—

- engage in sitting practice that focuses on recognizing breath, body, sounds, thoughts, and emotions as "events" in consciousness, distinguishing the event from the content, and exploring "open presence"
- engage in standing movement practice
- explore through reflection and written assessment how it is going for participants at this midway point of the program
- recommit for the upcoming 2nd half of the program
- continue to explore stress reactivity vs responding, in the context of participants' experience
- discuss participant experiences of their daily practice and from class 5

Theme: Consider the role of emotional reactivity in health and wellbeing, and how we might be compounding our problems rather than finding effective solutions—and the role that mindfulness is playing in both. Learning to honor emotions, including challenging emotions such as anger, sadness, hurt, and so on, without being overcome by those emotions.

Class 6

A 2.5-hour class to—

- engage in sitting practice with less guidance from the teacher (more silence)
- engage in various mindfulness practices with a focus on interpersonal mindfulness, especially applying mindfulness during difficult communication
- discuss participant experiences of their daily practice and from class 6
- learn more about the upcoming retreat class, and how to prepare for that

Theme: Knowing what we are feeling emotionally and expressing those feelings effectively in interpersonal relationships; this includes recognizing barriers to effectively communicating in difficult situations.

Retreat Class

A 7.5-hour retreat class on either the Saturday or Sunday between classes 6 & 7, 9am - 4:30pm US Eastern, to—

- help participants explore the experience of mindfulness for an entire day (seamless continuity)
- engage in teacher-guided practice while maintaining silence
- engage in 2 new practices (“loving-kindness” and “mountain”) to strengthen kindheartedness and stability

Theme: Strengthening moment-to-moment awareness in times of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral.

Class 7

A 2.5-hour class to—

- participate in practice guided by both the teacher and the participants
- explore ways to integrate mindfulness into life in practical ways based on individual circumstances, needs, and preferences
- process the retreat class: learnings, challenges, and so on
- discuss participant experiences of their daily practice and from class 7

Theme: Integrating mindfulness practice into daily life more fully, practically, and consistently. Planning your own daily practice. Consider lifestyles choices that are supportive and nourishing and those that are maladaptive and self-limiting.

Class 8

A 3.5-hour class to—

- discuss participant experiences from their individualized daily practice during the past week
- revisit practices from the program, with opportunity to inquire into and clarify any questions about the various practices and their applications in everyday life
- reflect on what has been discovered during the program, and have an opportunity to express honestly what the program has and/or has not offered them
- bring the program to an honorable close, recognizing the effort and commitment of each participant and the group
- explore resources for continuing to practice mindfulness

Theme: Ways to keep up the momentum and discipline developed during the program.