Lesson Objectives

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Illustrate the concept of mindfulness and ways to practice it
- Discuss the connection between spirituality, mindfulness and stress
- Describe how faith, hope, forgiveness, love, social support, meditation, contemplation and prayer affect one's resiliency, meaning, purpose, contentment and happiness in life
Throughout this course, we've explored causes of stress and coping strategies. Hopefully, you've learned a few useful things along the way! You've probably realized that there really is no such thing as a stress-free life...that would be really boring! But, you have no doubt realized that there are things you can do to not only reduce your stress, but also increase your contentment and overall happiness.

Contentment has been called the "foundation of a fulfilling life." So, what's the secret to being happy and content? Contrary to messages you may receive from today's society, the steps you can take to enhance your contentment have very little to do with money, possessions, or status. Happiness and contentment, rather, are more closely related to your thoughts, moods, feelings, understanding of others, and, most of all, your ability to live in the present. At the heart of this philosophy is the notion that "we are producers of our own thinking and what we think determines what we see."

In other words, your thinking shapes your experience of life. Throughout this course, you've been challenged to evaluate how you think about things - stress, priorities, time, relationships, goals, money, and life. You may have found that, at times, you've also been subtly encouraged to change your thinking. This final lesson will focus on the over-arching principle of the course: mindfulness, or living in the present. This sounds quite simple, but the results of doing so can be truly amazing.

Mindfulness... is the state of being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present. People practicing mindfulness immerses themselves fully into the present experience. They attend to all aspects of their situation and strive to be completely and wholly engaged in it. Rather than focusing on the what-ifs and if-onlys, a mindful person focuses on the what-is. The opposite of mindfulness is mindlessness, which means moving through life unaware of the present moment. It’s like going on a trip and focusing so much on your destination that you forget to enjoy the journey along the way.

At the heart of mindfulness is the notion that who we are is more important than what we do. In general, research has shown that mindfulness enhances well-being. Because stress is often associated with preoccupation with the past or nervousness about the future, mindfulness can reduce stress by keeping our focus on the present. Mindfulness appears to be important in helping people to disengage from automatic thoughts or behavior patterns such as pessimism, being overly self-critical, or responding angrily, all of which compromise wellness. When people attempt to practice mindfulness, they are more contemplative and deliberate in their actions, which often yields better choices. It’s also been hypothesized that mindfulness might add clarity and vividness to life experiences, which may contribute to well-being.

Mindfulness takes practice and most of us find we have to overcome a few obstacles throughout our practice. Guilt and rumination about the past, or anxieties and fears about the future can impede mindfulness. Multi-tasking or thinking about other concerns can also steal our attention away from the present. And, as we’ve said, going through life like we’re on autopilot can also prevent us from being mindful. To help you explore the concept of mindfulness, try the exercise on the next slide.

Whenever you find yourself preoccupied by something other than the present or when you catch your mind wandering, thoughtfully contemplate and answer the following questions:

- "What is my purpose in this moment? What am I here for?" Identifying and focusing on your purpose in the moment helps you stay in the present.
- Where is your awareness or attention? When your mind wanders from the present, stop and observe. What do you observe? Are you thinking about the past or future? Worrying or planning?
- What are you feeling? Are your feelings neutral, pleasant or unpleasant? What are you sensing—seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, or touching? What are you experiencing in your body - tension, breath, lightness? Without making any judgments on your thoughts or feelings, just observe them for what they are.

Mindfulness Exercise Audio [http://integrativehealthpartners.org/downloads/Acceptance%20of%20Thoughts%20and%20Feelings-.mp3]
What comes to mind when you hear the word spirituality? The term has been defined in a variety of ways and each of us probably has our own understanding of it. In recent years, there has been a movement to attempt to find a universally accepted definition of spirituality and to come to agreement on how to measure it. Why this interest? Well, one of the driving factors is that there appears to be some sort of connection between well-being, experience of stress, and spirituality.

Spirituality has been defined in numerous ways. These include:

- a belief in a power operating in the universe that is greater than oneself;
- a sense of interconnectedness with all living creatures; and
- an awareness of the purpose and meaning of life and the development of personal, absolute values.

Many people say that spirituality is a source of comfort and hope. In this course, we will assume that spirituality has something to do with a person's spirit—this seems like an obvious conclusion! And, since a person's spirit is often understood as a person's soul, we can utilize the following definition: "Spirituality consists of a person's thoughts, words, and actions that take place with the soul in mind." Of course, we must remember that "spirituality" will always mean different things to different people. How do you define spirituality?

Much of the early research on the connections between spirituality and health actually focused on religious beliefs and health. In general, most of these studies found some sort of positive association between religiosity and physical and mental health. However, spirituality and religion are not one and the same.

We have now come to understand that spirituality actually transcends religion and can be developed outside of religion. Religious beliefs may be a part of one’s spirituality, but you don’t necessarily have to be a member of an organized religion to be spiritual. In fact, recent studies in the U.S. have reported that although levels of religious attendance have experienced some decline in recent decades, some dimensions of spirituality or religiousness outside institutional contexts appear to increasing.

So, what have the studies focusing on spirituality, mindfulness, and health revealed? Well, the results are rather mixed, but we can report some positive outcomes. In general, a strong, consistent relationship has been found between spirituality and reduced mortality. In other words, people who report being more spiritual tend to live longer. Research indicates that this may be because spiritual practices tend to:

- Improve coping skills and social support
- Foster feelings of optimism and hope
- Promote healthy behavior
- Reduce feelings of depression and anxiety
- Encourage a sense of relaxation.

By alleviating stressful feelings and promoting healing ones, spirituality can positively influence immune, cardiovascular (heart and blood vessels), hormonal, and nervous systems. Additionally, studies of adolescent behavior have found that higher levels of spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer, and service are inversely related to alcohol and drug use, smoking, sexual activity, depressive symptoms and suicide risk. Of course, all of these behaviors are related to one’s health. Studies have also found that both Judeo-Christian and Eastern religious practices were associated with reduced blood pressure and improved immune function. Moreover, Zen, yoga, and meditation practices correlated with lower levels of stress hormones and cholesterol and better overall health outcomes in clinical patient populations.

It appears that on the whole, spirituality and mindfulness can be very effective for managing stress. Studies have found that mindfulness practices can reduce perceptions of stress, relieve anxiety, enhance feelings of forgiveness, and even improve self-compassion.\textsuperscript{1,2,3,4} Generally, the tenets of spirituality or mindfulness that appear to be most helpful include: faith, hope, forgiveness, love, social support, meditation, contemplation, and prayer.\textsuperscript{5}


5. Ehrlich, S.D. (2009, September 28), "\textit{Spirituality (http://www.umm.edu/altmed/articles/spirituality-000360.htm)}", (University of Maryland Medical Center)
The first tenet of spirituality is faith, which is a strong belief or complete confidence and trust in someone or something. Faith implies many things, but one of the most important is that it builds a sense of trust. This trust can be in others, in ourselves, that things work out as they should or a belief in a higher power or adherence to a set of beliefs. In any case, people who possess a strong sense of faith often report they can handle the trials and stressors of life. They also tend to view bad times as temporary and problems as ultimately solvable.
Faith is directly related to hope, the second tenet. Hope is a feeling that things will always turn out for the best—a positive attitude in the face of difficulty. People who have hope often look to the future with optimism, even in very difficult circumstances. These individuals ascribe to the notion that "when life gives you lemons, just make lemonade!" They understand that even though their lives may not always unfold as they had dreamed, they can still hope for the best each and every day. This sense of hope helps them believe in the promise of the future.
People with hope tend to also possess a strong sense of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a freedom from resentment or blame of others. People who can readily forgive find that they are able to let go of hostility or anger towards others for past hurts. Forgiving someone does not mean you condone what they've done, excuse what happened, minimize the offense, or forget about it, but you consciously decide to step away from anger and hostility.

Refusing to forgive can cause great stress, as you become mired in bitterness and dwelling on the past. Forgiveness allows you to move forward in life free from the negative feelings of being a victim or needing revenge. In forgiving, you may also find that you're able to view others with empathy and compassion.
An attitude of forgiveness often leads people to give to and seek from others love and support. Love and social support, another tenet, is the physical and emotional comfort given to us by others. As we've already discussed, social support is a very important resource for stress management. It is much easier to cultivate and give social support when you adopt a hopeful and forgiving attitude towards life. Positive energy often yields positive outcomes and this is true of social support. Remember, asking for help or advice from others is never a sign of weakness; rather, it is a sign of resilience and strength.

- Image 1: Carolina Farzon
Another tenet of spiritual strength is meditation, contemplation, and prayer, which include quiet contemplation, devotion, reflection, or spiritual communion. Recent studies have indicated that students who regularly meditate or pray experience reduced stress, enhanced forgiveness, improved mood, better sleep, greater self-compassion, and improved overall well-being.\(^1\,\text{2,3,4,5}\) In other words, taking just a little quiet time for yourself each day can be very therapeutic!

So, you might be wondering just how it is that a focus on living in the present or being mindful actually leads to contentment. Well, it’s kind of like a never-ending cycle, where one thing leads to another, then yet another, and so on and so forth. Mindfulness, as you now know, involves focusing your attention on life as it is. When you’re mindful, you have greater awareness of not only yourself, but also your surroundings and others. Because you aren’t viewing circumstances through a lens from the past or anxiety about the future, you’re able to attend to the here and now. As you become more aware of the present, you will find that you’re more tolerant of and compassionate towards other people because you understand them better!

This heightened compassion often leads to increased concern for the well-being of others and a commitment to the common good. Your concern will then lead you to a sense of social responsibility and a desire to be of service to others. What you’ll then discover, if you haven’t already, is that service to others can be a source of incredible contentment and even enhanced personal well-being. As you help others, you actually help yourself.

You’ll often find that many of your personal concerns are intertwined with public issues, and your personal experiences are influenced by larger social forces. Thus, as you work to make a difference in the lives of others, you benefit as well. Additionally, focusing present attention on serving others will help you get outside of yourself. You begin to realize that we all have issues and problems. Each is unique and some are more daunting than others, but we all experience troubles just the same; not one of us is exempt from the ups and downs of life. This realization is powerful; you’ll come to understand that you’re never completely alone and you’ll realize that your commitment to others also increases their commitment to you. You’ll find that you believe in yourself more and you’ll become more content with your life, as imperfect as it may be. As your contentment increases, your perception of stress will decrease and, in general, you’ll find that more positive things will happen. What goes around comes around.

This cycle leads to yet another realization: you are a resilient and capable person and your life has purpose and meaning.
Resiliency, purpose, meaning, contentment, happiness...they are all related to being mindful and living in the present. Ultimately, the goals of this course have been to help you cultivate resiliency, find meaning and purpose, and experience greater contentment and happiness. As you no doubt have come to realize, each of these is a vital component of managing stress and living the life you want to live. In the book *The Present*, Johnson advises us to:

- Be in the present: When you want to be happier and more effective, focus on what is right now. Respond to what is important now.
- Learn from the past: When you want to make the present better than the past, look at what happened in the past. Learn something valuable from it. Do things differently in the present.
- Plan for the future: When you want to make the future better than the present, see what a wonderful future would look like. Make plans to help it happen. Put your plan into action in the present.
- Realize your purpose. When you live and work in changing times with a sense of purpose, and respond to what is important today, you are more able to befriend, support, love, and lead.

Video Transcript
Subjective Wellbeing (SWB) is simply a person's evaluation of current happiness. SWB is based on both affective and cognitive states. The first is guided by emotions while the second is an appraisal of how life measures up compared to an ideal life. In other words, if you have positive affect and you believe you are living a satisfying life then you have a higher degree of SWB. We would like to share some practical tips on how to increase Subjective Well-Being.

1. Foster relationships and do kind things for others
2. Be physically active and get quality sleep as they serve as emotional regulators
3. Spend discretionary money on experiences rather than material possessions. Experiences become more positive over time when compared to things recently bought.
4. Approach things you want more than you avoid thing you don't want
5. Seek activities that require active engagement in which you are both skilled and challenged.
6. Cultivate gratitude perhaps by writing down things for which you are grateful
7. Try not to engage in social comparisons
8. Consider your goals and motivations and focus on those that are intrinsic rather than extrinsic
9. Discover your strengths and intentionally use them
10. Increase frequency of positive sensory experiences (like those with the natural world) and savor them

We hope that you have found this course helpful. At the very least, we hope that you have learned new insights about yourself and your life.

We also can’t reiterate enough the importance of identifying the sources of stress in your life and using some of the tools and strategies that work best for you to work through your stress so you are healthier, happier, and more productive. Remember, research studies have shown that college students perceive less stress and experience less anxiety if the following are true:

- They cultivate resilience and take time for self-reflection or meditation
- They perceive that they have some control over their time and practice effective time management
- They perceive that they have adequate social support
- They feel they know how to handle conflict in a positive manner
- They feel socially and academically prepared for college
- They have access to coping resources which will assist them in coping with unexpected stressors
- They do not hold unrealistic, excessive expectations for themselves and instead practice self-compassion
- They feel they are capable of setting, managing and achieving realistic goals
- They engage in regular physical activity, practice good nutrition habits, and get adequate sleep
- They can readily identify and access campus services and resources
- They are able to draw support from several sources in their lives including personal, academic or social sources

All of these things make a difference in college students’ experiences of and ability to cope with stress, which in turn, impacts all aspects of college life. In addition to some of the tools and strategies we’ve discussed, don’t forget that your college is very aware of the stresses of college life and have developed many resources to help you with your concerns.


* Image 1: Gavin Spencer
We wish you happiness and leave you with this:

To a happy person, the formula for happiness is quite simple: Regardless of what happened early this morning, last week, or last year - or what may happen later this evening, tomorrow, or three years from now - now is where happiness lies. Happy people understand that life is really nothing more than a series of present moments to experience, one after another. They understand and appreciate the past for what it taught them about living more in the now. And they see the future as more present moments to experience. Mostly they understand that right now, in this very moment, is where life is truly lived.¹

Good Job!
You've reached the end of this course.
We hope this has been an enjoyable and enlightening experience. If you have an idea how we can improve this course or learning platform please contact us.

Mindfulness Exercise Audio (http://integrativehealthpartners.org/downloads/Acceptance%20of%20Thoughts%20and%20Feelings-.mp3)

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