

Lesson 3: Learning to Be Mindful

Grades 3–5

Purpose

Students are introduced to the concepts of being mindful and unmindful and relate them to their own experience.

Concepts

- Being mindful means paying attention in the moment without judging.
- Being unmindful means not paying attention to the present moment.

Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Define and differentiate between being mindful and being unmindful.
- Articulate how experiences in their own lives relate to the concepts of being mindful and unmindful.

Social and Emotional Learning Connections

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social awareness
- Relationship skills
- Responsible decision-making

Materials and Preparation

- ✓ Chalkboard or whiteboard
- ✓ MindUP Brain poster (downloadable from the course module along with this lesson)
- ✓ Mindful Me Portfolio



Estimated Time:
25–30 minutes

Duty of Care = Heart of Caring

The mindful awareness practices that are introduced in this and preceding lessons, in particular the Brain Break, are intended to be presented as an invitation to students. Practicing mindful awareness is an individual choice. At no time should mindful awareness activities be mandated. Students who are not comfortable with participating should have the ability to opt out.

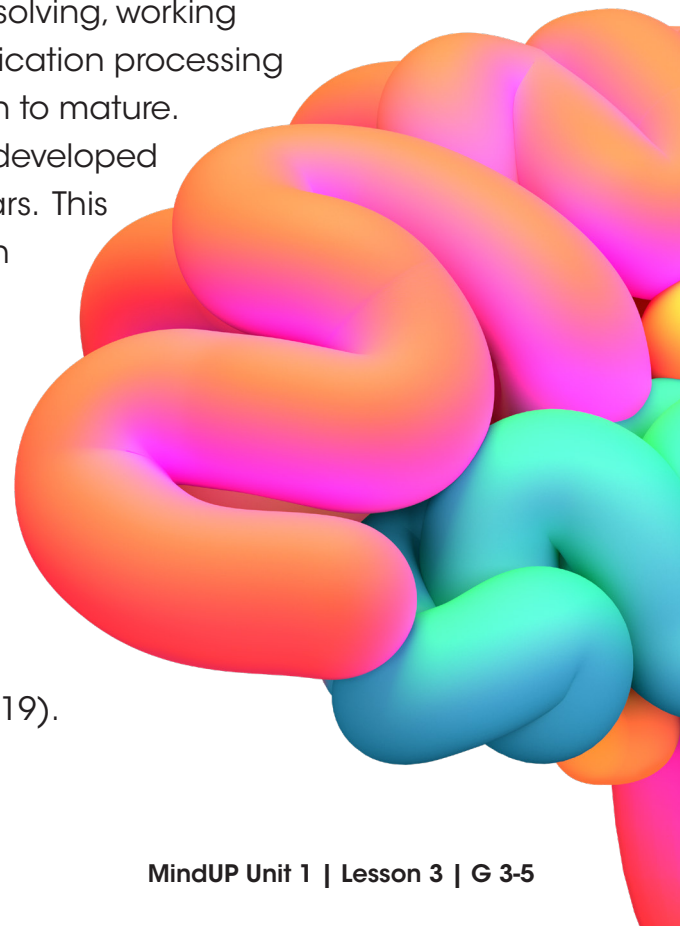
Brain Link

The Prefrontal Cortex

The prefrontal cortex (PFC), through its connections to virtually all other brain regions, serves to guide, direct, integrate, and monitor **goal-directed behavior**. It can be thought of as the “conductor” of a large, complex symphony orchestra.

The PFC is a major participant in the central executive network (CEN), which is involved with planning, flexible problem-solving, working memory, attention, prioritizing, and delayed gratification processing (inhibition)—but it is also the last part of the brain to mature. Children and many teenagers do not have fully developed delayed gratification skills during their school years. This is one reason students from kindergarten through high school need support and encouragement from their teachers to keep their efforts directed toward long-term goal achievement.

Research has also found that “[executive functioning] and the prefrontal cortex are the first to suffer, and suffer disproportionately, if something is not right in your life. They suffer first, and most, if you are stressed, sad, lonely, sleep deprived, or not physically fit” (Diamond, 2013, p. 19).



This highlights the importance of promoting healthy habits in children and youth.

Taking time to process new input from the senses (listening, savoring, describing) helps the brain experience a **time interval between immediate reaction and conscious thinking**. This delay increases children’s ability to react to new sensory input more reflectively.

This lesson introduces students to the concepts of being mindful and unmindful and helps them begin to relate these concepts to their own experience. This lesson will prepare children to begin practicing mindful awareness in subsequent lessons in the remainder of Unit 1 and in Unit 2.

Getting Started with the Lesson

Review the MindUP learning community agreement, and remind the class about your agreed-upon ways of being together to create a safe, kind, and focused learning community.

Then spend a few minutes using the MindUP Brain poster to review what students learned about the brain last time.

Introduction to Mindful Awareness

① Step 1: Experiential Activity

Give each student a journal (or a small piece of paper or index card), and ensure that everyone has something to write with.

Then tell students that they are going to practice focusing on one sense—listening—by closing their eyes and noticing all the sounds they can hear.

If a student is not comfortable closing their eyes, have them focus on one thing, such as their hands in their lap. This will help maintain a private space for all students to practice the activities.

Ask students to sit comfortably, close their eyes or look down at their hands, and listen to the sounds around them in the classroom, the hallway, outside, and in the school.

After 30 seconds, ask students to look up and, without talking, write down the sounds they heard.

Use the following prompts to guide the activity. You may adapt them to suit your context.

Read the script:

- We are going to spend the next few moments practicing listening.
- To get ready, please sit comfortably with enough space between you and your neighbors.
- You may close your eyes if you feel comfortable, or you can look down at your hands.
- Now, with everybody quiet, let's listen to any sounds we can hear in our classroom.

(PAUSE)

- Maybe you can also hear sounds coming from the hallway or outside.

(PAUSE)

- Just notice all the sounds you can hear, and notice when there is silence.

(PAUSE)

Repeat two times. Have students try to notice sounds they would usually miss.

② Step 2: Reflecting on Experience

Invite students to share the sounds they heard. Record the sounds on the board or chart paper. Discuss the variety of sounds and whether they were ones students don't normally hear. Help students make the connection that focusing their attention helped them hear more sounds than they normally do.

Step 3: Understanding Mindful Awareness

Read the script:

When we focus our awareness on what is happening now, in the present moment, we are being **mindful**.

Read the script:

- **Mindful awareness** is moment-to-moment nonjudgmental awareness of our experience.
- **What does that mean?**
It means paying attention to what is happening now, the best way we can.
- **Nonjudgmental awareness** means that we notice our experience, but we do not try to decide if it is good or bad, or if we like or dislike something.
- It might be helpful to think about it this way:
 - Being mindful means to pay attention on purpose.
 - Being mindful means being curious about what's around you.
 - Being mindful is a little bit like being a scientist.



Note:

Nonjudgment can be a tricky concept for students to grasp. It may be helpful to frame it as an open curiosity about experiences.

Ask students for ideas on what qualities a scientist might need to have.

Read the script:

- A scientist is curious. A scientist isn't looking at something to see if they like it. The scientist is just watching with curiosity, noticing and observing what's happening.
- When you pay attention and are nonjudgmental, or curious, you allow experiences, including thoughts and feelings, to come and go without holding on to them.
- We can think of our thoughts and feelings like clouds moving across the sky. We can watch a cloud while it is in our view, let it go as the wind moves it, and pay attention to the next cloud in the sky that comes into our view.

Summarize what mindful awareness means, and then initiate a short reflective discussion:

- **Mindful awareness** means to pay attention to what's happening now, from moment to moment.
- You might become aware of what your senses take in (sight, sound, smell, touch, taste), sensations in your body (hunger, any muscle aches or pains, temperature), and thoughts and feelings.
- You are aware in the moment, but you don't judge it—you are **nonjudgmental**, meaning you don't decide if something is good or bad, or whether you like it or not. It just is. Like a scientist being curious, you take in things as they come.

Invite students to engage in a pair share about a time when they felt they were mindful (for example, while playing a sport or listening closely to a friend).

Suggested prompting questions:

- Do you remember what you were doing? Who you were with?
- What did it feel like to be mindful?

④ Step 4: Class Discussion

Read the script:

What do you think the opposite of **mindful awareness** is?

You can invite students to think, pair, and share.

- ANSWER: Being **unmindful**.

Read the script:

- The opposite is when we aren't paying attention or are just not aware of what we are doing or what is going on around us—this is **unmindful**.
- **Not being mindful** is **not paying attention** to the present moment.
- That might be acting without thinking; for example:
 - When you act before thinking about the consequences.
 - Or when you have a habit (offer examples, like biting nails); you behave in certain ways without realizing it.

5 Step 5: Initiate Class Discussion

Have students share personal examples of being **unmindful**.

Read the script:

- Sometimes when we are bored or uninterested, we can go for hours without paying attention, without really being aware of what we are doing.
- In the same way, we may not be really present, moment by moment—our thoughts can often be miles away without us even knowing it.
- Have you ever daydreamed in class and then realized that you missed what the teacher said? Or did anyone notice their minds wandering when we were doing the classroom listening activity?
- Think about a time you realized you had been unmindful, or done something without really paying attention.

Either think-pair-share or ask for examples from the group. If students are not comfortable sharing, offer an example of your own, such as:

I ate my whole breakfast while watching TV, and when I was finished, I realized that I didn't even know what kind of cereal I ate.

Offer students the following important points about mindful awareness:

- An important thing to know is that we are all **unmindful** sometimes—that's okay!
- Our brain is thinking all the time, and it is important to remember and plan ahead.
- What we want to start doing is noticing when we are not mindful. That is a good place to start.
- From now on, we're going to call not paying attention to what you're doing, feeling, or thinking being **unmindful**.
- We should remember that learning to be **mindful** takes practice, just like learning to play a new instrument or a sport. So, while we will make sure we pay attention to our **mindful** and **unmindful** thoughts and actions, remember to tell yourself it's okay if it's hard sometimes. You're still learning!

⑥ Step 6: Have Students Share Personal Examples of Being Mindful

Read the script:

Who would like to describe a time when they think they acted **mindfully**?

If students are not forthcoming, ask them about how they feel when they are doing something they really like to do (for example, playing a sport or instrument). Encourage students to consider what they are **thinking** and **feeling** when they are mindful. What about their bodies? Are they relaxed, tense, or something else?

How are those feelings, thoughts, and sensations **different** from when they are unmindful?

What part of the brain is working when we are **mindful**? Hint: The **PFC**!

Making Connections (Time: 5 minutes)

① Step 1: Summarize the Key Points

Read the script:

- When we are not aware, we miss out on really paying attention to life.
- When we act without thinking, we can sometimes end up feeling more worried, angry, or sad.
- When we're more aware, we use our PFC, and we can make better choices about how to respond to situations.
- We do that by noticing where our attention is and by learning to focus our attention, over and over again.

② Step 2: Application of New Knowledge to MindUP Learning Community Agreement

Invite students to apply their new knowledge about mindful awareness to their shared MindUP learning community agreement.

Ask:

- How might our new knowledge of mindful awareness help our agreement?
- Where do you see connections?
- Is there anything we wish to add or change to reflect our new learning?

Following Up

Over the next few days, reinforce the ideas learned in the lesson by implementing the following MindUP for Home and Life and Mindful Me Portfolio activities.

MindUP for Home and Life

As a class, brainstorm scenarios in which students can practice being mindful in their daily lives. Remind them that this means paying attention the best way they can and without judgment. Each group of students will bring a variety of ideas to the discussion based on their own experiences.

Discussion topics could include:

- What are times in your life when you feel fully present and aware? What does being fully present and aware look like? Feel like? Sound like?
- Are there moments in your life when you realize you haven't been fully present or have even missed what was happening around you? If so, don't worry! This is normal.
- What are some moments when you feel less present and aware? Why? (This may be a good place to discuss technology use, including benefits and concerns.)

Invite students to spend some moments engaging in activities mindfully during the week. As a class, you may want to brainstorm some scenarios (e.g., doing chores at home, doing self-care activities such as brushing teeth, spending time with family or friends, walking to school, playing sports, or engaging in activities). Suggest students reflect on their experiences. What did they notice? Feel? Think? Was this experience different for them? If so, how?

Mindful Me Portfolio

Mindful Me

Ask students to create an entry for their Mindful Me Portfolio that captures them in a mindful moment. This entry could take the form of a picture, poem, song, paragraph, photograph, etc.—the sky's the limit!