

find your own way to

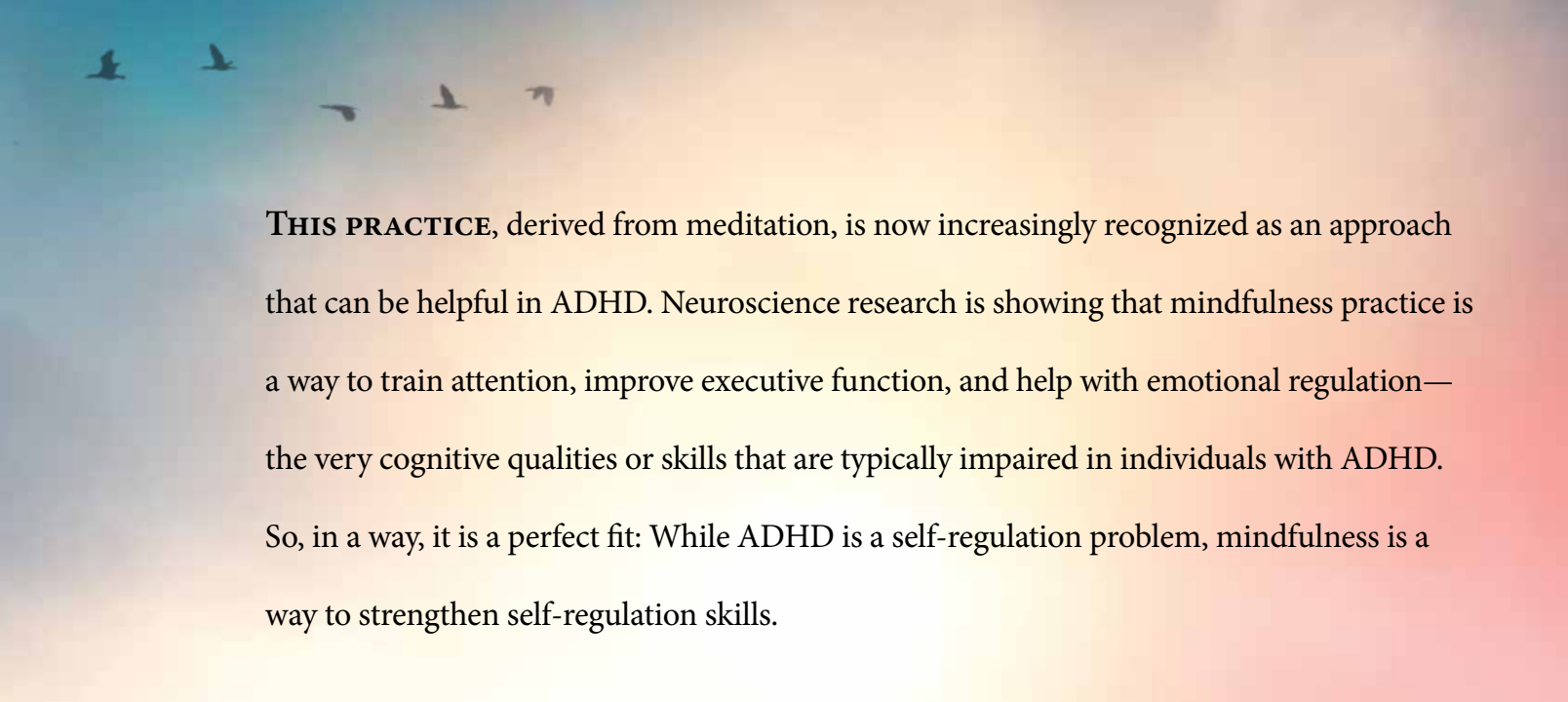
by Lidia Zylowska, MD



practice mindfulness

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS? Mindfulness is a practice of being attentive to, and accepting of, experiences in the present moment, just as they are.





THIS PRACTICE, derived from meditation, is now increasingly recognized as an approach that can be helpful in ADHD. Neuroscience research is showing that mindfulness practice is a way to train attention, improve executive function, and help with emotional regulation—the very cognitive qualities or skills that are typically impaired in individuals with ADHD. So, in a way, it is a perfect fit: While ADHD is a self-regulation problem, mindfulness is a way to strengthen self-regulation skills.

Yet I often see that adults with ADHD have trouble engaging with, or sticking with, the practice of meditation or mindfulness. Mindfulness becomes another task on their already busy to-do list, something to be procrastinated on or avoided. This is a common difficulty whether a person has ADHD or not, because there are so many forces in our environment, or things within us, that take us away from the present moment. We all have a tendency to be engrossed in what we are doing, or in our thinking, and we miss out on things that are happening in front of us in the present moment. We miss out on the opportunities to change how we react or respond to our lives.

So first, it is important to recognize that a mindful state of mind is something that we can all bring on whether we have ever meditated or not. It is a universal quality we can uncover in ourselves, and, through practice, strengthen further. It is a state that requires as much about letting go as doing something. It is letting go of all ways of being stuck in thinking or doing, and learning to drop into awareness; learning to drop into what is happening in the present moment; letting go of any preconceived notions or expectations and just allowing yourself to witness things as they are.

For those new to mindfulness, I like to simplify the practice into two steps. One step has to do with shifting attention and the other step that has to do with shifting attitude.

Once you realize that either or both of these steps, attention and attitude, can be taken or “turned on” intentionally in the midst of any experience, then the opportunities to practice mindfulness in your life are endless. You can bring it into whatever you are doing, at any point.

Paying attention to attention

If you start with the attention step, you can begin by bringing curiosity to the question, “What is your attention like?” What things grab it naturally? How does your

attention shift spontaneously from one thing to another? You can notice the quality of your attention when observing beautiful scenery and compare it to the quality of your attention when you’re engrossed in a movie or working on the computer. So you get to know different types of focus—more diffuse focus, more narrow focus, divided attention, scattered focus, and more stable focus.

This paying attention to attention quality starts to develop the skill of meta-awareness, which is the ability to observe or witness what is happening within you without overly reacting to it and making a choice from that awareness. Once you learn to watch your attention, you can also have opportunities to intentionally change or shape it. You can develop flexibility in attention and train your attention regulation muscle. It is important because our attention can be hijacked or absorbed in strong emotions and habitual behavior, which can lead us to being in an inflexible place that can result in being over-reactive or reducing our ability to see options of how else we can respond to the situation.

Practicing movement of attention, making it more flexible and intentional, can help in these situations. We can start by asking questions as we go through our days, such as, “Am I fully present right now or not?” Or “What can I be more present to right now?” These questions can become playful.

If we remember to practice mindful attention, what can we notice with more with more awareness? Maybe we can notice sounds, maybe we can notice our breathing, or maybe we can notice our body? I like to think of *the sound*, *the breath*, and *the body* as the three anchors to the present moment. They can really help to reign in the attention from busy thinking, from distracted thinking, back to more awareness in the present, more awareness of yourself.

Some activities can help create this shift in awareness more spontaneously. Examples are gardening, being outside in nature, working with your hands, cooking, being with children, yoga, tai chi, or photography. All of these kinds of activities can make us more aware of the present moment. But any activity, if the intention to be more present is there, can become a practice of mindful awareness. For example, when leaving for work in the car in the morning, you can decide that moment will become a practice of mindful awareness. You can check in to your posture and your breathing, notice how your hands feel on the steering wheel and how you are feeling as you are about to head out for the day.

Lateness is often a problem with ADHD, so you may notice a feeling of panic or stress as you are about to leave. You may feel critical of yourself and berate yourself for being late once more. So this mindfulness moment can also become an opportunity to learn from that experience—and notice how to be more kind to yourself, how to be more proactive, and how you can problem solve for next time and help yourself not to be late.

Shifting attitude

The second step is the attitude step. Shifting your attitude to be more open, non-judgmental and accepting of things as they are. That shift in attitude also helps with being more aware; it helps with the attention step. You can practice to bring that shift in attitude into your life and start engaging with the mindfulness practice.

For example, the mindful attitudes of being open and accepting can be expanded on. Letting go of attachment and unnecessary ideas of how things should be, letting go of being perfectionistic; being more open and flexible especially when there are negative emotions such as shame; being kind, compassionate, grateful, and patient—these are also the different qualities of mindfulness.

You can choose one of these qualities and decide this is your mindfulness practice. For example, you can decide that

you can practice being more kind and compassionate to yourself, and when you make a mistake, or ADHD gets in the way, ask yourself, “What if I were more compassionate to myself right now?” See what happens. Does the experience shift for you? Do you notice that you can be in that moment a little differently with yourself?

Other activities that already resonate with you, such as journaling, artistic projects, finding quotes or pictures that really touch on these mindful qualities, or having your own spiritual practice, can be connected with becoming more present and more kind to yourself. All of these different activities can become your own way to practice mindfulness.

The bottom line is to find your own ways to be curious about attention, to pay attention to attention. Find your own ways to become to become more open, curious, accepting and loving and compassionate with yourself. You will see how

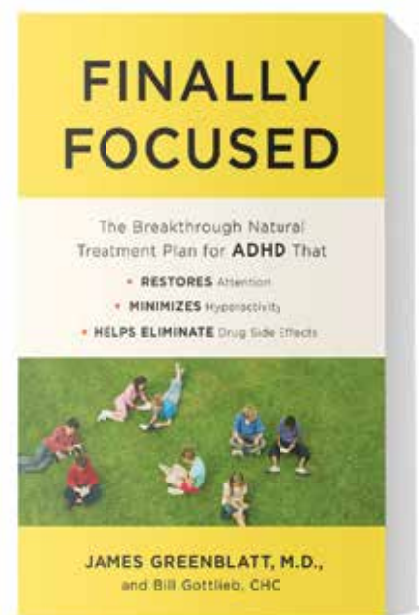
mindfulness can start growing in your life, and transform your relationship with yourself, others, and your ADHD.

The power of mindfulness is that it can both change your ADHD and at the same time help you learn to accept yourself as you are right now in this present moment. 🧘

Lidia Zylowska, MD, is a psychiatrist, an Associate Professor at University of Minnesota, who specializes in integrative and mindfulness-based treatment of adult ADHD. During her prior work at UCLA, she led the first study of mindfulness training in ADHD adults and co-founded the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center. She is also the author of *The Mindfulness Prescription for Adult ADHD: An 8-Step Program for Strengthening Attention, Managing Emotions, and Achieving Your Goals* (Trumpeter, 2012). Dr. Zylowska frequently speaks on the topic of mindfulness for ADHD, and this article is adapted from a talk she gave at the ADDA conference last year. For more information about her work, visit www.lidiazylowska.com or her Facebook page, [Mindfulness/ADD/ADHD](https://www.facebook.com/Mindfulness/ADD/ADHD).

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—**DANIEL G. AMEN, MD**,
founder of Amen Clinics and New York Times bestselling author of *Healing ADD* and *Change Your Brain, Change Your Life*



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