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1 Simple Self Care Skill Every Social Worker Should Practice

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1 SIMPLE SELF CARE SKILL
Every
SOCIAL WORKER
SHOULD PRACTICE

I think you'll agree with me when I say: if you are a social worker, self care is one of the most important skills we can develop in our career.

Well, it turns out, you can significantly improve your self care by adding one simple practice to your daily routine . . . a skill that research suggests can improve our physical, mental, and emotional health.

In today's post I'm going to give a brief overview of the skill and how you can add it to your self care toolbox.

How I Stumbled Into Better Self Care

First, let me tell you a quick story.

A couple of years ago I found myself experiencing, for lack of better words, "a funk."

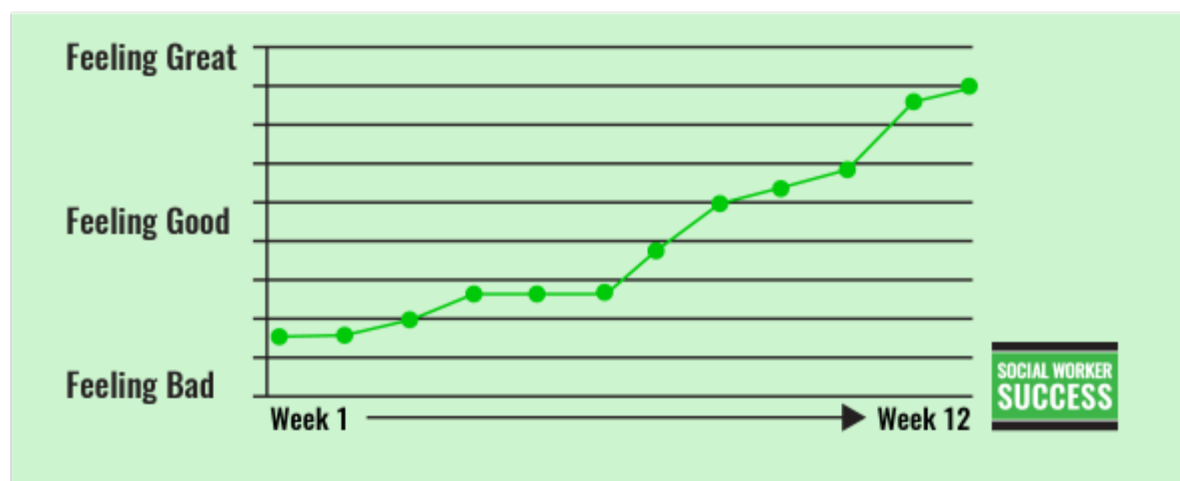
Do any of these descriptions sound familiar:

- low mood
- increased anxiety
- high stress
- irritable
- restless sleep

So I did what any good social worker would do, and I collected some baseline data on myself.

I started tracking my mood, stress and energy levels, and overall outlook on life.

Compare where I was at in week one to where I was at in week twelve:



Here's the thing:

Nothing else had changed in the core areas of my life.

I had the same job, same family, same diet, same exercise routine.

The upward trend of feeling better began when I added one new practice to my daily routine:

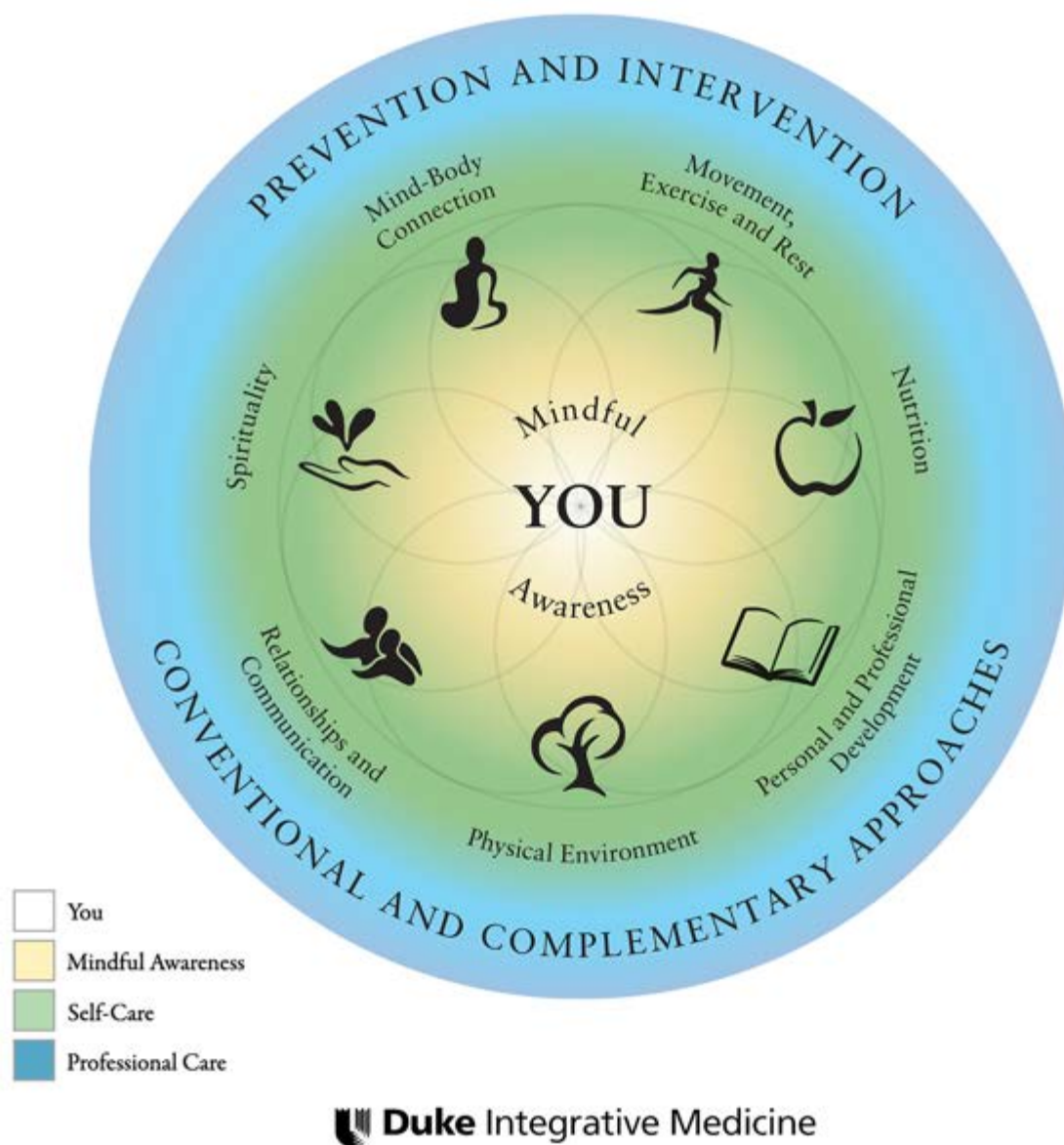
mindful awareness.

Defining Mindful Awareness

The self improvement kicked off when I had the incredible opportunity to attend a training by Duke University's Integrative Medicine Health Coaches. (Shout out to Shelly and Linda . . . y'all rock!)

At the beginning of the training, the concept of the Wheel of Health was introduced:

WHEEL OF HEALTH



The wheel is a graphic that embodies the whole person and the areas that contribute to a complete state of physical, mental, and social well-being:

- Movement, Exercise and Rest
- Nutrition
- Personal and Professional Development
- Physical Environment
- Relationships and Communication
- Spirituality
- Mind and Body Connection

And at the Wheel of Health's core is the practice of mindful awareness, or a shortened way to say it, mindfulness.

Being aware means you know "something" exists.

You may be aware of something that happens outside of you (external):

- situations
- conditions
- problems

You can also be aware of something that happens inside of you (internal):

- sensations
- emotions
- sounds

Mindfulness then is noticing the "somethings" in your life . . . the good, the bad, the neutral, and acknowledging it.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program at University of Massachusetts, is credited with helping bring mindfulness to the Western world.

He defines it this way:

“ *Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.*

— Jon Kabat-Zinn

”

So you may think to yourself, "That sounds simple . . ."

Simple—but not easy.

Or the title of the article would have been: *1 Easy Self Care Skill Every Social Worker Should*

Practice.

Let me briefly address some common misconceptions about mindfulness:

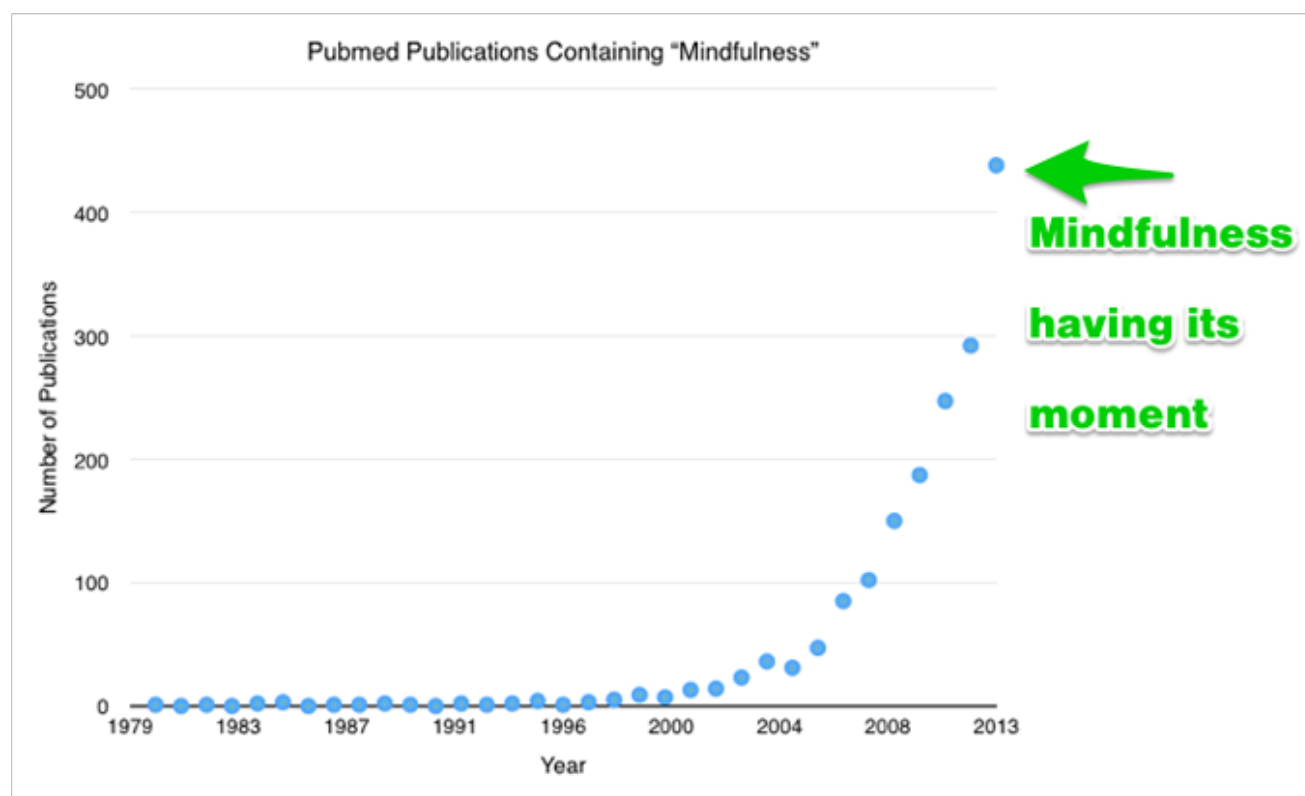
- Mindfulness is not a religion. It is an ancient practice to understand how the mind and heart work.
- Mindfulness is not stopping your thoughts or emotions.
- Mindfulness is not an escape mechanism.

So why is mindfulness so popular?

Growing Popularity of Mindfulness

Mindfulness is no doubt having its moment.

Checkout this graph about peer reviewed journals and the increase in coverage of this topic, specifically in the past fifteen years:



There is good reason for so much research interest: mindfulness works!

Mindfulness can help you improve many areas of your life.

Let's look at a few areas of health:

- Physical: [One study](#) found mindfulness significantly improves your body's immune system.
- Mental: [This study](#) suggests mindfulness helps you be more connected to patients and clients. This research suggests mindfulness-based stressed reduction interventions:
 1. Reduce stress
 2. Increase quality of life
 3. Increase self-compassion
- Emotional: [This study](#) reports mindfulness is as effective as medication in treating depression.

So you get a sense of why mindfulness is so popular . . . but how the heck do you do it?

Starting a Mindfulness Practice

Mindfulness for most people is some form of meditation.

Meditation can be broken into two types of practices: **formal and informal**.

- Formal practice is taking time just to be in the present moment.
- Informal practice is paying attention to what you are already doing.

Let's further unpack these two types of meditation.

Formal Practice

When you think of someone formally meditating, a mental image like this probably comes to mind:



I don't know about you, but I cannot always find a rock and calm water to sit near during the course of my day.

But here's the deal:

You don't have to be sitting near calm, soothing water in lotus pose to meditate.

I'll show you where I do my daily meditation practice (it's very fancy

<http://socialworkersuccess.com/self-care-skill/>[5/14/2018 1:21:27 PM]



Really, you can meditate anywhere.

Let's look at some steps you can take to start a formal meditation practice.

Taking First Steps Towards Mindful Practice

One of the simplest forms of meditation is mindful breathing.

When you start a formal mindful breathing practice, decide on these three factors to set yourself up for success: *location*, *time*, and *guidance*.

Location

See the picture of my chair? I have an appointment with that chair every morning.

Same room, same chair. Try to vary your routine as little as possible.

Time

I get it . . . life is crazy busy. But this investment in your self care is too important to skip.

Find a handful or two of minutes in your day to start your mindful practice.

I've found 10 – 15 minutes work best for me before my workday begins. You can't find 10 – 15 minutes in your day? Start with 5 minutes instead. Can't find 5 minutes? Try 1 minute.

Start so small you cannot fail.

Maybe your time is just after waking, maybe it's at lunch, or maybe it's just before your bedtime routine.

The bottom line: choose a time of day and stick with it.

Guidance

If you have never done a mindful practice, having clear instruction is essential. The Duke University Health Coaches guided me when I first started.

When they left, I practiced for several months on my own using this 5-minute-guided meditation from the [UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center](#).

Take a break and try this short practice:



Several apps exist that also provide free guided meditations. My favorite is [Insight Timer](#).

Informal Practice

Opportunities exist throughout the day to be more present in your daily tasks. Here's a quick analogy: multitasking is to meditation as up is to down. In other words, multitasking is the *exact opposite* of meditation.

You can start an informal practice by narrowing your focus during daily routines. I like to focus on these three:

1. Showering

- A multitasking social worker's mind would wander and would lose track of time washing hair.
- A mindful social worker concentrates on the sensation of water on skin and smell of the soap.

2. Cooking Breakfast

- A multitasking social worker would listen to music and think about lists of things to do for the day.
- A mindful social worker pays attention to subtleties like the smell of coffee or sound of eggs cooking.

3. Brushing Teeth

- A multitasking social worker brushes teeth as quickly as possible and hurries out the door to work.
- A mindful social worker slows to notice the feeling of the toothbrush on teeth and taste of the toothpaste.

Summary

I am in no way the foremost expert or a guru on mindfulness, and I really am just a beginner in my practice.

By the way, it's called a "practice" because the benefits are only realized through thoughtful effort day after day.

Self care is a core competency that every social worker needs if you plan to have a long career.

And you don't need a prescription, lululemon pants, or fancy equipment to start becoming more mindfully aware.

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