



## Practicing Mindfulness

When Sailors hear the word **mindfulness**, they might think of being mindful of others or aware of their immediate environment. **Mindfulness goes beyond displaying momentary awareness and requires practice to achieve.**

**T**his article will discuss the meaning of mindfulness, the difference between being mindful and practicing mindfulness, how to practice daily mindfulness through different exercises, the benefits of practicing it, and how it relates to Warrior Toughness and the Warrior Mindset.



A Sailor centered in mindful awareness at sea

**The Meaning of Mindfulness**

The mindfulness skill set is based on the practice of cultivating present moment awareness. It is easy to fall into autopilot when performing daily routines like driving home from a long day or executing daily tasks at work. Losing focus is normal and often happens when Sailors are familiar with a routine.

When Sailors practice mindfulness, they learn how to live in the moment and increase awareness of not only themselves, but also their environment. When they lose focus, they are aware of it and can quickly regain it. Think of

it as exercise for the brain that strengthens a Sailor's ability to perform in challenging moments. Just as the body needs physical exercise, the mind must also be conditioned, and practicing mindfulness increases a Sailor's ability to successfully perform daily and critical tasks.

**The Difference Between Being Mindful and Practicing Mindfulness**

When Sailors are mindful, they are momentarily aware and attentive of what is going on around them, such as when asked by a Chief to perform a task. The Sailor is mindful of the Chief's request and begins to perform the requested task. In contrast, when

Sailors practice mindfulness they can achieve and maintain present moment awareness while performing the task. This means the Sailor demonstrates situational and self-awareness, and if distracted while performing the task, quickly recognizes it and regains their focus by reengaging in the task.

Research has found that the mind wanders around 50% of the time when it should be focusing. Being distracted is a normal mental response in today's high-paced society. With so many types of daily distractions all around, it can be difficult to maintain focus.

For example, it is common to see people texting while driving. They become mindful when a vehicle brakes hard in front of them, and they momentarily regain focus. If the driver practices mindfulness, they are aware of themselves and the vehicles around them instead of focusing on their phone. They are also able to regain focus if momentarily distracted. Their ability to demonstrate mindfulness could be the difference between being aware of present moment hazards, and needing to replace their front bumper due to an accident.

## How to Practice Daily Mindfulness

Mindfulness practice consists of two core steps and the first one requires a Sailor's will to focus on something in the present moment. This can be something internal such as the feeling of air flowing in and out of their body as they breathe or a singular thought in their mind on which they can focus. A Sailor's point of focus can also be external like the feeling of sunlight on their face or the sounds or the task they are performing. Sailors can use their point of focus to guide them through the practice.

The second step is for the Sailor to recognize when their mind starts to wander, and it will. This is not a test, so a Sailor should not stress out if they find it difficult to regain focus at first. The important part is realizing they have lost focus, gently regaining it, and not being too hard on themselves for losing it. Every time they return to their point of focus, they are practicing mindfulness and exercising their brain.

It is impossible for a Sailor to maintain their focus 24/7. In fact, research shows that even the most skilled mindfulness practitioners can only maintain their focus for about 7 seconds. Remember, mindfulness is not about Sailors being able to focus longer but rather being able to quickly regain their focus.



It's important to practice mindfulness when we're not under stress. This ensures when we are put in a fight, flight, or freeze response that our body starts to naturally go to that place of having our brain focus and refocus on what is in front of us while under duress.

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A Sailor distracted by competing demands

With practice, mindfulness will become second nature for Sailors.

## Body Scan Exercise

There are many different mindfulness exercises that can be practiced such as body scan, mental scan, and Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) exercises. The body scan exercise is similar to being in an airport where Sailors put their carry-on luggage through an X-ray machine. For this exercise, their brain is the X-ray machine, and the Sailor slowly scans their body.

The Sailor may start on either end of their body, but they should not stop until they reach their head or toes. The exercise takes approximately 10–15 minutes to scan their entire body. They should systematically stop and examine each part of their body to detect feelings or sensations without having predetermined expectations of how they will feel.

It is important for the Sailor to be present in the moment and aware of physical sensations such as tension in their neck, the way their chest rises and falls as they breathe, or soreness in their legs from Physical Training (PT). When they feel their mind start to wander, they simply regain their focus on the last body part they were scanning and start again until they reach their toes or head, depending on where they started the scan.

By taking the time to examine each area of their body they are allowing themselves a chance to focus, feel, and refocus.

The body scan exercise is an effective way to leverage other skill sets, such as energy management and recalibration. As Sailors gain awareness of their body, they can focus on their current energy level and breathing patterns.

A guided walkthrough of the body scan exercise is available on the Mindfulness Coach and Warrior Toughness apps.

### **Mental Scan Exercise**

During the mental scan exercise, the Sailor uses their own thoughts as the focal point. The thoughts can range from moments of frustration to feelings of self-doubt or anything that does not allow the Sailor to focus. The Sailor takes a moment to observe the thought objectively, and then lets it go from their mind. For example, if a Sailor is studying for a promotion, and their thoughts are wrapped up in their inability to qualify previously, a quick mental scan will rid them of negative self-talk or hindering thoughts, allowing them to engage in flexible thinking



An X-ray machine at an airport

and focus on ways to reach their goal.

The goal of the exercise is for the Sailor to declutter their thoughts, allowing them to refocus on whatever is in front of them.

### **PMR Exercise**

To perform the PMR exercise, a Sailor should find a comfortable position and close their eyes or allow their visual focus to soften. The Sailor then takes a few deep breaths in and out before returning to a normal breathing pattern. Once they are breathing normally, they select a part of their body to tighten and hold such as their shoulders or arms. As they tighten their shoulders by lifting them toward

their ears, or their arms by balling their hands up and pulling their arms tightly toward their body, they will hold the position for 4 seconds, and then relax the tension. The Sailor should end the practice with a few deep breaths, and then return to their previous activity. Anxiety is often stored in the body as tension, and this exercise should allow the Sailor to reduce and release that tension.

PMR exercises also strengthen fine motor skills needed for actions such as firing weapons or repairing electrical equipment. If a Sailor is struggling to hit the target on the range, a quick PMR arm exercise might be the



An individual practicing mindfulness in bed

intentional recovery they require to relieve their tension and make it easier to focus on the target.

### **Where and When Mindfulness Can Be Practiced**

Practicing mindfulness exercises does not require a darkened room with soft music playing and scented candles. Sailors can practice mindfulness almost anywhere. In fact, the more they practice the faster it



Practice different types of mindfulness exercises and take note of when you are practicing them. It can make a big difference depending on each individual and which part of the day or night resonates with them to practice.

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becomes second nature. Sailors may find themselves practicing mindfulness without thinking about it, and that is the key to unlocking increased awareness of not only themselves, but also their environment.

Some Sailors may prefer to practice mindfulness exercises before they go to bed, while others practice while getting ready to start their day. It all depends on when they can set aside 10–15 minutes to practice. As Sailors begin practicing mindfulness exercises on a regular basis, they will begin to find ways to incorporate them throughout their day while they are on the move. The goal is to practice 3–4 times a week for 10–15 minutes each time.

### **How Fellow Sailors May React**

Unfortunately, Sailors that do not understand the importance and effectiveness of mindfulness may laugh when they observe other Sailors attempt to practice it, or they may tell them mindfulness exercises are a waste of time. According to GMCM Joey Kiely, “Sailors that tease you about practicing mindfulness

may change their mindsets once they see how calm, clear-headed, and steady you are. Especially in high-stress situations where you're blowing them out of the water and they're having a hard time keeping up. They will begin to realize you're successful because you're always practicing mindfulness and staying focused."

### Benefits of Practicing Mindfulness

Practicing mindfulness equips Sailors with the ability to react with deliberate responses when they are in challenging environments and situations. Emotional control is an everyday struggle for many Sailors and practicing mindfulness helps them observe and manage their emotions. For example, a Sailor may struggle with emotional control when dealing with the frustrations of a fight at home or working long hours at sea. In these moments, practicing mindfulness provides benefits such as reducing stress hormone levels and calming the nervous system. Practicing mindfulness also increases a Sailor's mental flexibility as it heightens their adaptability to solve problems and determines which strategies they should use to manage their stress.

Imagine a Sailor studying for an upcoming training evolution after a challenging day at work. Practicing mindfulness equips the Sailor with the ability to stay engaged while actively reducing distractions in their mind and around them. Their newfound mental clarity can help them reach their goals while increasing their ability to focus and refocus while studying.

### How Practicing Mindfulness Affects the Body

Practicing mindfulness provides a way for Sailors to recover from stressful situations as it triggers a relaxation response in their bodies. It is common for Sailors to put themselves last when they are constantly on the move, and their bodies can break down over



A Sailor on a firing range



There are ways to practice mindfulness where no one knows that you're doing it. If your eyes stay open, most of the time no one will know that you're practicing a mindfulness exercise.

Dr. Leigh Ann Perry

time without proper mental and physical maintenance. Intentional recovery is also necessary if Sailors want their bodies to reach and maintain peak performance.

Lifting weights provides an opportunity for Sailors to practice mindfulness. They should focus on how their arms feel as they raise and lower each weight. As they practice mindfulness, they will become aware of how their muscles contract as they push the weight away from their body. If their attention is pulled away, they can slowly bring it back as they refocus on the tension in their arms and lower the weight.

Through the practice of mindfulness, Sailors can reach new levels of physical recovery and mental readiness that are necessary for their life both at work and at home.



An individual focuses on sketching a portrait

### How Mindfulness Affects the Spirit

Spiritual fitness is just as important as physical fitness. Sailors can practice mindfulness when they are having a quiet moment of personal reflection. If they are sitting, they can focus on the feeling of how their legs are bent and how they feel as they focus on their thoughts. If their focus starts to wander, they can slowly bring it back.

Sailors can practice mindfulness when spending time with their family, for example, by avoiding the urge to look at their phone and really listening to what their family is saying. If the Sailor recognizes they are getting distracted by constant message notifications, they can gently redirect their focus back to the conversation.

Those moments of focus may not only lift the Sailor's spirit, but their family's as well.

A Sailor's spiritual fitness is directly related to their wellness and sense of purpose.

### How Mindfulness Relates to Warrior Toughness

When Sailors practice mindfulness, they are actively building their resilience and optimizing their performance. Mindfulness is directly related to their ability to react and perform in high-pressure environments, such as work life stress or while in combat. Practicing mindfulness gives Sailors the ability to focus, refocus, and stay calm when stress levels start to rise so they can get back in the fight.

If a Sailor's mind wanders during a critical mission

when every second counts, and they are unable to regain focus, it can be the difference between life and death.

### How Does Mindfulness Relate to the Warrior Mindset?

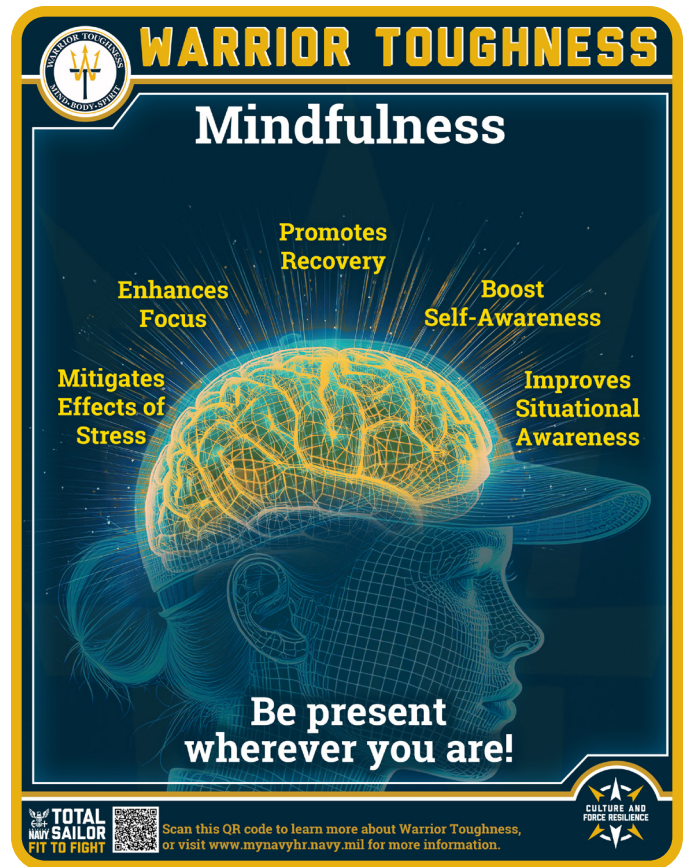
Sailors engage in preparation by practicing mindfulness exercises to increase their present moment awareness and ability to regain focus. The key to preparation is consistency.

Practice during preparation enables Sailors to reap the benefits in the moment of execution because they have trained their brain to stay engaged in the present moment. Sailors that regularly practice mindfulness are able to think on their feet, execute the actions they are trained to perform, and handle any challenge they face.

## Wrap-Up

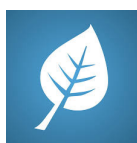
The key to reaching optimal present moment awareness and learning how to refocus is to practice mindfulness consistently. As Sailors practice, they will start to see and feel the results when they are on watch or in the heat of battle. Mindfulness can make all the difference in a Sailor achieving success and victory at work and in their daily life.

This article discussed what mindfulness is, the difference between being mindful and practicing mindfulness, how Sailors can practice daily mindfulness through different exercises, the benefits of practicing it, and how it relates to Warrior Toughness and the Warrior Mindset.



Warrior Toughness Mindfulness infographic

For more information, check out the videos and podcast about Mindfulness and the Mindfulness Coach, Breathe2Relax, Chill Drills, and Warrior Toughness apps.



Mindfulness Coach



Breathe2Relax



Chill Drills



Warrior Toughness



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