THE ATTITUDES OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

Please remember that cultivating the healing power of mindfulness involves more than simply following a set of instructions like a recipe. True learning does not usually occur in such a mechanical manner. Instead, it arises when the mind is open and receptive, allowing real understanding and change to take place. While practicing mindfulness, you will need to bring your entire being into the process. It is not enough to sit in a meditative position and expect that something magical will occur, nor can you rely on a recording alone to create the change you seek.

Your attitude during moments of present-moment awareness is essential. It is like soil that nurtures the ability to calm the mind, relax the body, sustain concentration, and observe with clarity. If your “attitudinal soil” is low in energy and commitment, you may find it difficult to remain calm and relaxed with any consistency. If it is “polluted,” meaning that you force yourself to feel relaxed and demand immediate results, growth may not occur at all. In such cases, it can become easy to conclude prematurely that “meditation does not work.”

Cultivating meditative awareness means approaching the process of learning in a very different way. Often, people are used to deciding what they need and precisely where they want to go, then attempting to control everything to achieve that outcome. However, this is contrary to the work of awareness and healing. Mindful awareness simply asks that you pay attention to things as they are, without insisting on any particular change. Healing involves receptivity and acceptance, a willingness to sense wholeness and connectedness. None of this can be forced, much like a person cannot force themselves to go to sleep. Instead, the right conditions are created, and then they let go. Relaxation follows the same principle; it cannot be obtained through sheer willpower, because that would only lead to tension and frustration.

If you approach meditation thinking, “This probably will not work, but I will try it anyway,” it is likely you will not find it very helpful. Any discomfort or pain that appears may reinforce your belief that the practice is ineffective, prompting you to stop. Conversely, if you begin as an enthusiastic “true believer,” certain that mindfulness alone holds every answer, you may also face disappointment. You may discover that you are still the same person, that growth requires consistent practice and effort, and that a fond idea of meditation is not enough by itself. When that realization sets in, your initial enthusiasm may dissipate.

In clinical and therapeutic settings, people who do best tend to hold a stance that is both skeptical and open-minded: “I am not sure if this will work, but I will give it my best try and see what happens.” This blend of curiosity and caution prevents them from clinging to preconceived ideas and leaves room for genuine exploration and discovery.

Your attitude significantly influences the long-term benefits of mindfulness practice. Therefore, it can be very helpful to intentionally develop certain attitudes in order to get the most out of meditation. Your intentions provide the context for what can unfold. By remembering why you chose to practice in the first place, you can continuously direct your energy and remain aligned with your personal goals. Keeping key attitudes in mind is part of the training itself. It involves knowing where to place effort and how to promote healing and growth in a sustainable way.

Seven attitudinal factors form the foundation of mindfulness practice in many Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs, including: non-judging, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go. These attitudes are best cultivated consciously while practicing. They do not operate in isolation; each supports and enriches the others. Focusing on one will naturally lead to the others, forming a strong base from which you build a personal meditation routine. To provide a grounding in these principles, I am presenting them before you begin formal meditation practices, so that you can become familiar with these attitudes right away. Then, as you engage more fully in mindfulness practice, revisiting these ideas can reinforce and invigorate the "attitudinal soil," ensuring that your practice continues to thrive.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is a program developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn that emphasizes a set of foundational attitudes meant to deepen an individual's practice of mindfulness. These attitudes are described extensively in Kabat-Zinn's book, Full Catastrophe Living, and they serve as guiding principles to help the individual engage more fully with their present moment experience. When practiced consistently, these attitudes can promote stress reduction, emotional regulation, and an enhanced sense of well-being. Below is an introduction and description of each of these attitudes, presented in a way that can be understood by those new to mindfulness and those already familiar with contemplative practices.

Non-Judging. One core attitude is approaching experiences without labeling them as either good or bad. Practicing mindfulness with a non-judging stance involves noticing how the individual's mind tends to categorize thoughts or sensations automatically. Instead of pushing away discomfort or clinging to pleasing experiences, the individual becomes aware that each moment simply is what it is. By remaining curious rather than critical, they can create space for a more balanced understanding of their inner experiences.

Patience. Patience encourages the individual to honor the natural unfolding of processes in their life, without rushing or forcing outcomes. In mindfulness practice, one might notice impatience in the form of restlessness or frustration when a meditation session feels difficult. By cultivating patience, the individual acknowledges that growth and healing happen in their own time. Rather than resisting or trying to speed up results, they learn to coexist peacefully with whatever arises, allowing the mindfulness practice to evolve at its own pace.

Beginner's Mind. Beginner's mind is about approaching each situation as if seeing it for the first time. Jon Kabat-Zinn stresses that although one might become an "expert" at certain practices, keeping a sense of curiosity and openness allows them to truly notice new details and insights. Beginner's mind can be particularly helpful when the individual feels stuck in repetitive patterns of thinking or behavior. By suspending preconceived notions, they remain receptive to new perspectives, solutions, and experiences they might otherwise overlook.

Trust. Trust speaks to having faith in one's own intuition and inner wisdom. While teachers, books, or therapists provide guidance, ultimately, it is the individual's own direct experience that is most instructive. Trusting oneself also includes developing confidence in the body's and mind's capacity for healing and self-regulation. This trust allows them to anchor in the present moment with greater ease, acknowledging that, even when faced with challenges, they have inner resources and resilience to draw upon.

Non-Striving. Non-striving encourages the individual to shift away from the habitual mindset of always trying to get somewhere or achieve something. Instead, they learn to rest in the moment as it is. In many aspects of life, striving is considered a positive trait—people strive to achieve career goals, maintain relationships, or improve health. However, in mindfulness practice, striving can become a barrier to genuine presence if the individual is always fixated on a future outcome (like the perfect meditation session or immediate stress relief). Letting go of constant striving helps them experience each breath, each moment of mindfulness, as complete in itself.

Acceptance. Acceptance in mindfulness goes beyond passive resignation; it entails seeing things clearly for what they are in the present moment. Rather than denying difficult emotions, physical discomfort, or stressful situations, the individual learns to acknowledge and allow their reality to be as it is. Through acceptance, they can respond to challenges with greater clarity and discernment, rather than reacting automatically out of frustration or avoidance. Acceptance forms the basis of compassionate self-care by freeing up the energy that would otherwise go into resisting or denying reality.

Letting Go. Letting go involves releasing the natural human tendency to hold on to specific thoughts, emotions, or experiences. Often, suffering is intensified by clinging to what feels pleasurable or by desperately avoiding what feels unpleasant. In practicing letting go, the individual learns to observe the constant flux of thoughts and sensations without trying to capture them or push them away. This principle can lead to increased flexibility and emotional balance, as the individual becomes less entangled in worries about the future or regrets from the past.

Gratitude and Generosity (sometimes taught as supplementary attitudes). Some MBSR teachers and practitioners, including Kabat-Zinn in various workshops, highlight the importance of gratitude and generosity as additional attitudes. Gratitude involves recognizing the gifts that are already present in everyday life—from the capacity to breathe and move to the presence of loved ones and small daily comforts.

By noticing and appreciating these gifts, the individual fosters a mindset of abundance rather than scarcity. Generosity follows naturally from gratitude by encouraging them to share kindness, attention, and compassion with themselves and others. This broadens the scope of mindfulness practice from a personal pursuit of stress relief to a form of relational and communal well-being.

Throughout Full Catastrophe Living, Jon Kabat-Zinn reiterates that these attitudes are not abstract ideals; they are living principles that become clearer through practice. Rather than approaching them as rules to be followed mechanically, an individual strengthens these attitudes by bringing mindful awareness to everyday situations—whether during meditation, daily chores, or moments of emotional discomfort. By gently reminding themselves to be patient when impatience arises, or to adopt a beginner's mind when they assume they already know how a situation will turn out, they gradually transform how they relate to stress and challenges in life.

Adopting these attitudes can be especially helpful for someone who is dealing with chronic stress, anxiety, or physical pain. While they do not magically erase difficulties, they provide a framework for relating kindly and skillfully to those difficulties. This, in turn, can reduce the mental and emotional exhaustion often associated with resisting or avoiding unpleasant experiences. Over time, the individual may notice greater resilience, insight, and a sense of empowered calm.

Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness attitudes have been integrated into clinical and therapeutic settings worldwide, reflecting a progressive understanding of mental health care that values holistic well-being. By focusing on these attitudes in group programs, individual counseling, or personal practice, one can encourage a sense of community and shared humanity—people recognize that while each person has their own unique experiences, everyone benefits from compassion, patience, and non-judgment. This collective approach aligns with broader social ideals that encourage solidarity and mutual support, reinforcing the notion that healing and growth are enriched when nurtured by community and societal structures.

Conclusion

The mindfulness attitudes of MBSR and Full Catastrophe Living offer a foundational guide to living more fully in the present. Non-judging, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, letting go, and related principles such as gratitude and generosity provide a roadmap for greater clarity, resilience, and compassion. They encourage each individual to approach life, relationships, and the broader community with a spirit of openness and warmth. When internalized and woven into daily life, these attitudes support not only personal well-being but also a more empathetic and supportive social environment.

References:

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness. Bantam.

Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. (n.d.). Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR).

Chat GPT Prompt:

Introduce and describe the mindfulness attitudes outlined in the mindfulness-based stress reduction program and the book full catastrophe living by Jon Kabat-Zinn.