People spend half of their lives not focused on the present, research says. Here's how to change it

By Rachel Trent, CNN

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A popular way to practice mindfulness while moving is going on a mindful walk, experts told CNN.

Editor's Note: Welcome to our CNN Wellness five-part series on adolescence -- a tough time under any circumstances. As our children head back to school this fall, learn more about helping your tweens and teens understand their developing brains and feel their feelings.

That's what Harvard researchers Matthew A. Killingsworth and Daniel T. Gilbert of Harvard University wrote after their 2010 study found people spend nearly half of their waking hours thinking about something other than what is going on right in front of them.

There is good news, however: We are not doomed to a life of distraction.

By taking up a mindfulness practice, you can strengthen your ability to focus on the task at hand, experts on the form of meditation told CNN.

Mindfulness is about paying attention to the present moment "without a story about it or reacting to it," said Amishi Jha, professor of psychology at the University of Miami and author of the forthcoming "Peak Mind: Find Your Focus, Own Your Attention, Invest 12 Minutes a Day."
Jha said it's very beneficial to embrace a still practice, which she compared to resistance training for attention. The goal is not about controlling the breath but "observing the breath and keeping your attention on the breath and when the mind wanders away to guide it back to the breath," she said.

"When we are still, it is much easier to take this kind of observational stance," Jha added. "We don't have to control our movement. We don't have to monitor where we are in space."

For many people, that stillness associated with mindfulness or meditation can be daunting. Fortunately, you don’t have to sit still on the floor with your eyes closed to cultivate this mental exercise. There are more mobile ways to get mindful, including the following.

**Take a mindful walk**

If sitting still isn’t your style, mindfulness experts recommend incorporating the practice into a walk. It’s not the kind of walk where you let your mind wander. Instead, you focus on the sensations of walking, noticing "the toe touching the ground, then the heel, then the lifting of the foot," Jha said.

If your mind starts to go somewhere else, instead of bringing your attention back to the breath as you would in a stillness practice, you bring your attention back to the sensations of walking.

**Try mindful stretching**

Another common physical practice is stretching, according to Diana Winston, director of mindfulness education at the Mindful Awareness Research Center at the University of California, Los Angeles and author of "The Little Book of Being."

"The difference between stretching versus making it into a formal mindfulness practice is what you do with your mind," she said. "The idea is to stretch and to feel the sensations of your body moving -- so your arms as they move through space, the air, the touch, the physicality."

**Make everyday tasks mindful**

You don’t have to do a formal exercise to practice mindfulness.

"It’s this quality of attention, and you can bring it into any physical practice," Winston said. "Rather than being lost in your worries and thinking about everything you have to do and catastrophizing and all the things we normally do, we turn the physical activity into a mindful practice."

This can be done during tasks as mundane as washing the dishes.

"Feel the sensations of your hands on the water, noticing the rubbing motion. This is all bringing mindfulness into your day," Winston said.

You can even incorporate the practice into your commute, Jha said.

"You could be sitting on the subway. You could be at a stop sign," she said. "At an elevator waiting. You stop, take a breath, observe and proceed."

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Regardless of the form you try, you'll want to have success when you're beginning a mindfulness practice, Jha said, which is why she recommended starting with small goals.

People will also find some practices work better for them than others, said Mallika Chopra, author of "My Body is a Rainbow" and "Just Be You," children's books about emotional awareness.

"It changes at different times and ages and different phases of our own life," Chopra said. She suggested taking on something enjoyable. "People tend to think these exercises are very serious and stoic, and the goal is to make it fun."