



How can Mindfulness Help Special Olympics Families and Athletes?

What is Mindfulness?

People often think of mindfulness as sitting absolutely still in meditation but mindfulness is much more than that. Mindfulness is actually about being right here, right now, and about being aware of ourselves and our surroundings. Mindfulness skills are extremely useful for athletes and families.

What is this Snapshot about?

Mindfulness is about increasing our awareness of things inside of us, as well as outside of us. All of us get distracted. Mindfulness is a set of tools that help us focus and be less distracted— whether in our sport, our self-care or our relationships.

Heightening our awareness with mindfulness could include:

Noticing things *inside*- like thoughts or physical sensations or emotions and feelings.

Noticing things *outside* like sights, sounds, and smells, and even other people.

[Research](#) shows that mindfulness is good for our health, and can even help to improve our immune systems. Here are some ways that Special Olympics families can benefit from mindfulness, and help bring it to athletes.



Mindfulness for Athletes

A [research study](#) led out of University of Calgary, together with the CAMH Azrieli Adult Neurodevelopmental Centre and Special Olympics Canada wanted to see if a virtual mindfulness course adapted for Special Olympics Canada Athletes would help them during the pandemic. They held groups for 73 people (44 athletes and 29 caregivers) between 2021-2023, and found that mindfulness benefited people and improved mental health.

4 Tips for Family Members to Bring Mindfulness to Special Olympics Athletes

1. Practice and Model Mindfulness

Often family caregivers are so focused on providing care for others, that we forget we need to make time for ourselves to refuel to be the best we can. Building your own mindfulness practice can help you and your family members. Try building a daily practice that works for you. Even 10 minutes every day is helpful. Some examples of practices that are part of our 6-week mindfulness curriculum for athletes that can be worked into your day are:

- [Lotus Breath](#)
- [Deep Mindful Breathing](#)
- [Compassion Pause](#)

In addition to meditation practice, consider strategies to allow yourself some nourishing moments. While this will be different for everyone. Some examples of nourishing moments include gardening, taking a walk in nature by yourself, or indulging in a television show that helps you “escape” for a brief period of time. These are not fix-all solutions, but they allow for some time to relax and reset.

2. Create Mindful Time Together

Slow down and intentionally spend quality time with the athlete in your life. Rather than rushing through meals to get to floor hockey practice, swim meets, and other routine appointments, try to have time marked in your calendar to just “be”, spending quality time relaxing and focusing on connection. [Here](#) are some mindfulness activities you can do together.

3 ways to embed mindfulness into your family:

- 1) Have a moment at the beginning of meals together to express gratitude. Pause and notice what it feels like in your body.
- 2) Have a bell in your home that anyone can ring when things are feeling a little too fast or intense. When the bell is rung, everyone pauses and takes [just three breaths](#).
- 3) Go for a walk together and pay attention to the beautiful things you see. Can you notice 3 things that make you happy on your walk? Share these with each other. Like a scavenger hunt for joy.

3. Practice Feeling Connected to a Larger Community

In our mindfulness groups for Special Olympics athletes we learned that compassion and connection to each other is an important tool. Practice the kindness tool and feel your connection with others in your community: athletes, coaches and family. Here are two guided meditation videos using the compassion practice.

- [SIP of Compassion](#)
- [Circle of Support Meditation](#)

4. “Come to Your Senses” in Everyday Life

A lot of mindfulness is about “coming to our senses”. It’s fun to discover which senses are most available to us, so that we can deeply focus on them, helping us relax. [New research](#) has found that by concentrating on sensation, we are able to improve our wellbeing and escape the “house of habit” – which is basically being on autopilot, not paying attention to what is in front of us.

Additional Resources

If you want to know more about mental health for people with intellectual disabilities, check out [this accessible website](#) for people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, family members, and professions. You can also look at the resources developed by [Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities](#) (H-CARDD). You can learn more about autism and mental health by downloading the [Autism Mental Health Literacy Project Guide](#).

About the Team

This family snapshot was written by Sue Hutton. This project was led by Dr. Avra Selick from the CAMH, together with Special Olympics Canada athletes, caregivers, coaches, researchers and community partners from across the country.

About H-CARDD

[Health Care Access Research and Developmental Disabilities \(H-CARDD\)](#) is a research program that aims to enhance the overall health and well-being of people with developmental disabilities through improved health care policy and services.

H-CARDD research is conducted by dedicated teams of scientists, policymakers, health care providers, people with disabilities and families working collaboratively.

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