



The Tavistock and Portman
NHS Foundation Trust

Mindfulness

A self-help guide

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a type of meditation that is simple, accessible and non-judgemental.

Sometimes, when people hear the word 'meditation', they can become wary. However, it is important to remember that mindfulness is simply a way of training the brain and how we process our thoughts.

Although the roots of meditation do indeed originate from religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, you do not have to be religious to practice mindfulness. In fact, many atheists, as well as those from other religions practice mindfulness without it impacting on their religious or non-religious views.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, who is considered to be one of the founding fathers of mindfulness-based meditation, says that mindfulness is:

“Paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally.”

On purpose: Specifically choosing to focus our attention on a specific experience e.g. breathing, eating, walking, listening to your heartbeat, listening to the wind, or your emotions, thoughts

In the present moment: Focussing on what is happening in the here and now, rather than wondering about the past (which does not exist anymore and so we cannot change) or the future (which does not exist yet and so we also cannot change).

Mindfulness can simply be about noticing what we wouldn't otherwise notice in any normal situation. Most of the time our heads are too busy in the future or in the past – thinking about what we need to do, or going over what we have done. Another way to describe mindfulness might be simply learning how to choose and control our focus of attention.

For example, we get on a train and as we look around, we might think “This train is really old and could do with some new seats”. A young child on the other hand will go straight to the window and watch the world zoom past excitedly.

Why use mindfulness?

Mindfulness can be used as an alternative to challenging unhelpful thoughts/worry as constantly challenging your thoughts can feel exhausting. . It is commonly used to compliment thought challenging, to help us let go of distressing thoughts that we do not currently have any solution to.

Mindfulness improves your mental health and wellbeing. Evidence shows that practising mindfulness results in an improvement in stress, a reduction in ruminating thoughts, and helps people to focus. Being mindful has also been found to boost memory, and to reduce worry and anxiety. Many studies have found that people who practice mindfulness regularly are more likely to feel in better control of their emotions.

Mindfulness improves your physical health and wellbeing. Mindfulness has been found to: reduce stress, lower blood pressure, reduce chronic pain, improve sleep, improve the way you eat, and help to relieve gastrointestinal issues.

Mindfulness improves your general wellbeing. For example, mindfulness has been found to be useful in managing relationships, giving you enhanced self-insight, as well as helping you to become more appreciative of the world you live in.

It is important to remember that mindfulness is a skill. Just like any other skill that you acquire (e.g. learning how to ride a bike or make a favourite recipe) it takes time to learn and perfect the skill. This means that becoming good at mindfulness means that you will need to invest some time, effort, patience and on-going practice into it. This booklet has been designed to help you to make the first steps into practising mindfulness. If you are interested in taking up mindfulness, there is lots of literature available in the library. You may also want to ask your clinician if there are any local mindfulness groups that you would like to attend.

How does mindfulness work?

The practice of mindfulness is thought to work by helping people to learn (or re-learn!) the skill of awareness and acceptance. By doing this, it helps you to stay in the present moment, therefore, you are not worrying about the future or ruminating about past events. You are simply “being”.

Mindfulness is about observing without criticising and therefore, learning to be compassionate with yourself. When we feel uncomfortable emotions such as unhappiness or stress, rather than taking it all personally, mindfulness teaches us to treat them as if they were black clouds in the sky, and to observe them with curiosity as they drift past. This means that mindfulness allows us to become aware of and catch the negative thought patterns before they can start to negatively affect us.

Despite what is said, the key to a happy and healthy life is not just to think positive thoughts all the time and banish all the unhelpful thoughts! The key is to learn to become aware, and accept how we feel in a non-judgemental way without trying to rid ourselves or ignore the thoughts that may make us feel uncomfortable in the short term. This is because if we try to banish all thoughts that make us feel uncomfortable, we are not processing or managing them. Therefore, mindfulness is the art of being in the present moment, and practicing being comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Over time, mindfulness has been found to bring about long-term changes in mood and levels of happiness and wellbeing. Studies have shown that mindfulness not only prevents depression, but it can also positively affect lots of unhelpful emotions that we experience, such as anxiety, stress, and irritability, so that when they do arise, they dissolve again more easily.

However...

Many people are still wary when they hear the term ‘meditation’. Below are some of the most common myths associated with mindfulness.

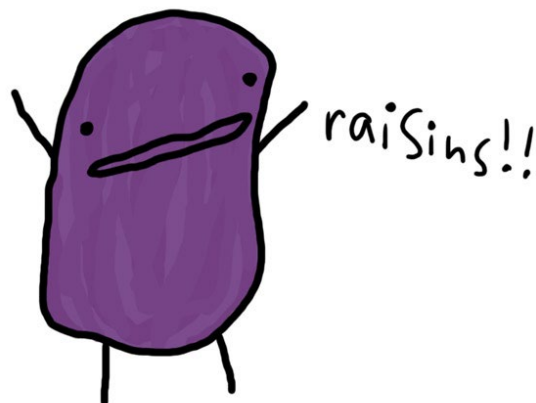
- **Meditation is not a religion.** As mentioned earlier in the booklet, the practice of mindfulness does indeed stem from Buddhism and Hinduism. Nevertheless, many people who practice mindfulness meditation are atheists and agnostics.
- **You do not have to sit cross-legged on the floor and chant.** But you absolutely can if you want to! Mindfulness can be conducted almost everywhere and at any time, as all it requires is for you to pay specific attention to what you are doing in the present moment.
- **Mindfulness practice does not take a lot of time.** However, it is important to try and practice mindfulness for a short part of your day, every day, so that you get used to the concept. Five or 10 minutes will do!
- **Meditation is not complicated.** It is not about ‘winning’ or ‘losing’; even when it feels difficult, you would have learned something valuable about how you work and would therefore benefit from it!

Becoming mindful

There are many ways in which you can practice mindfulness. The most common image that comes to mind are people sitting cross legged on the floor with their eyes closed, but this is certainly not the only way to be mindful!

Mindfulness can be practised through activity, through automatic things that we do as humans (such as breathing and our body sensations), through sensory experiences, as well as 'urge surfing' (where you try to 'ride the wave' of an urge that you might feel – such as if you were trying to quit smoking).

Beginners mindfulness exercise – The Raisin



Grab yourself a raisin (or any other type of food) and pretend that you have never seen it before. Now, you must pay careful attention to:

- The way the raisin looks
- How it feels
- How it responds if you manipulate it between your fingers
- What it smells like

And finally, what it tastes like

Spend about 2-3 minutes doing this, taking time on each of the bullet points above. Once you have eaten it, congratulations! You have just completed your first mindful activity. By focussing on the raisin and making a point to notice everything about it, you are also not focusing or paying attention to other thoughts about other areas in your life that might be causing you anxiety or stress.

Mindful activity

The five senses exercise

Another activity that can help you to understand mindfulness is the 5 senses exercise. This helps people to be mindful quickly in nearly any situation. All that you need to do is to notice something that you are experiencing with each of the five senses.

Step 1: Notice 5 things that you can see. Look around you and bring your attention to five things that you can see. Pick out things that you wouldn't normally notice, like a small object, or the way a plug socket looks.

Step 2: Notice 4 things that you can feel. Try to bring your awareness to 4 things that you can feel. This might be the way that the wind feels against your skin, or how it feels to wear your glasses, or your tshirt.

Step 3: Notice 3 things that you can hear. Listen carefully and notice 3 things that you can hear. This might be children playing outside, or traffic in the distance.

Step 4: Notice 2 things that you can smell. We are quite good at filtering out smells, so bring your attention to things that you can smell. It might be the smell of food cooking, or the smell of your washing powder.

Step 5: Notice 1 thing that you can taste. Focus on one thing that you can taste right now, or just notice the current taste in your mouth.



Mindful breathing exercise

Mindful breathing requires you to breathe, just as you normally do, without changing the way that you are breathing and whilst paying close attention to the way that you breathe.

The goal is to be aware of your breath whilst maintaining focus on it, to allow thoughts, feelings and emotions to come and go without getting caught up in them.

Start by sitting or lying down in a comfortable position. If you are sitting, try to keep your spine straight and allow your shoulders to drop. Feel free to close your eyes if it feels comfortable.

Gently bring your attention to your breathing. Notice the feeling of your breath going in and out, and the feeling of your stomach rising and falling as you breathe. Do not try to change your breathing, simply notice what is happening.

Keep your focus on your breathing, aiming to 'be with' each breath as you breathe in and out. Every time that you notice that your mind starts to wander, recognise that you have noticed it, and gently bring your attention back to your breath, and the feeling of breathing in and out.

Even if your mind wanders a thousand times, just gently notice, and bring your attention back. The goal is to not get angry or frustrated, the mind is something that is made to wander, but it is about gently guiding its focus back to your breathing.

Practice this exercise for a few minutes every day, and gradually build up the time you spend doing this. This activity can be done anywhere that is suitable, for example on a train journey, or whilst having a bath. Be aware of how it feels to spend some time every day just being with your breath without having to *do* anything.



The body scan

The body scan exercise is another mindfulness activity that is suitable for beginners. The exercise itself takes about 15-20 minutes. You can either do the exercise by sitting on a chair, on the floor, or by lying down on the floor, mat or your bed. Please make sure that you are warm and comfortable before starting the exercise, loosening any tight clothing and using a blanket to cover your body if necessary.

The purpose of a body scan is to bring awareness to your physical sensations with gentle curiosity. It is not necessarily about relaxing your body, but it is about bringing your attention to the way you physically feel. If thoughts do crop up, this is normal, just notice the thoughts, notice yourself noticing the thoughts and gently guide your awareness back to your body.

1. Focus on your breathing, allowing your stomach to rise and fall as you inhale and exhale. Breathe deeply for about 2 minutes, keeping your focus on your breath. If you notice your thoughts drifting away, gently guide them back to your breathing.
2. Gently turn your focus of attention to your toes of your right foot. Notice any sensations that you might have while continuing to focus on your breathing. Imagine each deep breath flowing to your toes. Remain focussed on this area for 1-2 minutes.
3. Then move the focus of your attention to the sole of your right foot. Again, tune into any sensations that you might feel in that part of the body and imagine each breath flowing to the sole of your foot.
4. After one or two minutes, focus your attention to your ankle and repeat as above. Move up your right leg, to your calf, knee, thigh, hip and then buttock, before you move to your left leg. Repeat the sequence for your left leg.
5. Then move up your torso, through the lower back and abdomen, your upper back and chest, and your shoulders. Pay close attention to any area of your body that is holding tension or that is causing pain or discomfort.
6. From here, move the focus to your right upper arm and your biceps and triceps. Spend some time focussing here, and then move to your forearm.
7. Move down to your wrist, and notice how that feels. After about a minute, go to the palm of your hand, and then spend some time noticing how your fingers feel. Repeat this process for your left arm and hand.
8. Once that is done, shift your focus to the back of your neck. Notice how your neck feels resting on your upper back and shoulders. Then move your attention to your throat, and then your jaw and chin. Move up your face by body part, so your lips, and then your cheeks, ears, eyes, nose and then forehead, temples and scalp.
9. Finally, let your awareness drift gently and slowly down back your body, until you reach your feet.
10. Open your eyes slowly, and take a moment to gently stretch.



Mindful seeing

For some people, not having something visual to focus on can be challenging. The activity of mindful seeing might be helpful for anyone who feels this way.

Step 1: Find a space where you can sit down and observe. This could be anywhere outdoors, such as a park bench or by looking outside of a window.

Step 2: Consciously notice everything there is to see. Instead of listing objects in your head (e.g. “dog” or “car”) Try to notice the colours, patterns and textures. Try to notice the movement of things and the way they move. Try to notice the way that the sunlight or moonlight hits the object.

Step 3: Pay attention to the way that grass or leaves move and notice the different shapes present in the small part of the world that you can see. Look up at the sky and also look down on the ground. Notice shapes of all sizes. Try to do this as someone who might not be familiar with these sights, very much like you would if you were visiting a new county or place.

Step 4: Try not to judge what you see. The key is to be observant but not critical. Become aware, but try not to fixate on things.

Step 5: If you become distracted, gently bring your focus of attention back onto what you can see. A simple way of doing this is to focus your attention on a colour or shape again. Continue this exercise for 10 minutes.

