

# If Clients Say That Mindfulness: 'Doesn't Work', 'Doesn't Help', 'It's Too Hard', 'I Can't Do It'?

Sometimes clients report that they've tried 'mindfulness', but 'it doesn't work' or 'doesn't help'. Almost always, when someone says this, they've fundamentally misunderstood the concept. They've been misinterpreting 'mindfulness' as a relaxation technique, or a distraction technique, or a way to control their emotions and make themselves feel good, or a way to get rid of unwanted thoughts and feelings, or a way to make their mind go silent.

*But none of these outcomes is the primary aim of any mindfulness practice!*

When practising mindfulness in a *safe, non-challenging environment*, while doing *safe, meaningful or pleasurable activities*, people do often feel better and calmer, and difficult thoughts and feelings do often disappear; but such outcomes are 'bonuses' to be enjoyed, not the main aim. (And such outcomes will not occur when practising mindfulness in *unsafe, stressful, or challenging environments*, while doing *stressful, difficult, challenging, or potentially dangerous activities*.)

The two main aims of any mindfulness practice are acceptance and awareness. In other words, we aim to:

- a) open up and make room for our inner experiences (thoughts, feelings, etc.) and allow them to freely come and stay and go in their own good time,
- b) to focus on and engage in what we're doing

When clients say 'mindfulness doesn't work', the easiest option is to simply acknowledge it hasn't helped - and thereafter, be careful to avoid using the term 'mindfulness'. Instead, stick to ACT terms like 'unhooking', 'making room', 'expanding awareness', 'noticing and naming', 'focusing on your breath', 'scanning your body', or the names of specific skills, like 'dropping anchor', 'physicalising', 'kind hands', or 'leaves on a stream'.

However, if it's important to us, for one reason or another, to keep using the term mindfulness with a client - even though they say *it didn't help* or *it didn't work* - then we'll need to do some exploration and clarification. First, we need to find out which mindfulness practices they've tried, and what they expected would happen. We can ask: 'What sort of mindfulness skills did you learn? Can you recall any particular practices or methods?'

Then we can ask: 'And what was the aim of those practices? What were you *hoping* to happen? And what *did* happen?'

Gentle questioning will usually quickly reveal the client's misconceptions: they expected mindfulness to relax them, or distract them, or get rid of their anxiety/pain/stress, or make them feel good, or make unwanted thoughts and feeling go away, or make their mind 'go silent'.

We may then go on to the next step.

# Mindfulness 'Doesn't Work' - Continued

The next step is to say something like this:

"You know, 'mindfulness' is one of the most misunderstood terms in the English language. A lot of people think of it the same way as you - as a way to relax, or get rid of anxiety or pain, or get rid of unwanted thoughts and feelings, or make yourself feel good, or make your mind go silent. But the real aim of mindfulness is *not* to do any of those things. So, it's no wonder you're saying it didn't work."

We can continue:

"You see, basically, 'mindfulness' is a name for a set of psychological skills, that all involve paying attention - in a special way - with an attitude of openness and curiosity to whatever is happening, here and now. And there are many different types of mindfulness practice - but *none* of them is a way to control how you feel or get rid of unwanted thoughts and feelings. Can I take you through a little exercise to help you understand what 'mindfulness' really means?"

We can then take the client through ['hands as thoughts and feelings'](#), or ['pushing away paper'](#), or other metaphors we like that a) convey what mindfulness involves, and b) make it clear that it's *not* a way to avoid or get rid of unwanted thoughts and feelings. [The 'ACT In A Nutshell' metaphor](#) is particularly useful here, as it combines both 'hands as thoughts & feelings' and 'pushing away paper' into one exercise.

## Too Hard! Can't Do It!

What about when clients say mindfulness is 'too hard', 'I can't do it'? Again, we want to explore what they've tried. Gentle questioning usually reveals they've been trying formal mindfulness meditation practices, such as mindfulness of the breath, or mindfully observing the flow of their thoughts.

We may then explain:

"I'm not surprised you found that hard. Most people do. The good news is, those formal meditation practices are just a tiny subset of the many different ways we can learn mindfulness skills. There are literally hundreds of methods for learning mindfulness that are all a lot quicker and easier - and a lot less boring - than meditating."

We may then go on to introduce mindfulness as a concept through metaphors like hands as thoughts, pushing away paper, ACT in a nutshell - and then introduce simple, easy, non-meditative mindfulness skills, like 'dropping anchor' or 'noticing and naming' or 'thanking the mind'.