



Your guide to mindfulness



Introduction

Mindfulness is about living in the present. By becoming more mindful you will increase your awareness of your thoughts and feelings and will notice that your mind is never still - it is constantly thinking and making up stories.

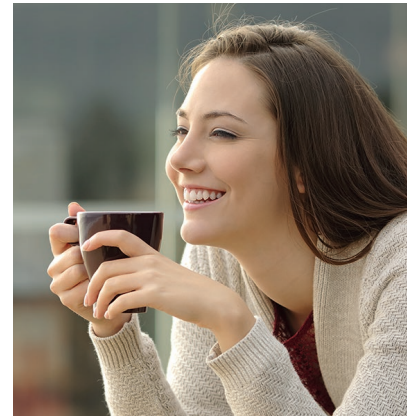
“Mindfulness is an awareness we can cultivate. It is paying attention on purpose and without judgement...We are running on automatic pilot most of the time. This can be good at some points in our life but in a mindful wakefulness, with the ability to notice what is happening around us, we are given a space to make valuable decisions about which course of action to take next.”

*Stephanie Gooding
Counselling Psychologist & Mindfulness Practitioner*

Current research in mindfulness

There are many benefits of mindfulness. Research from the University of Oxford has shown that participants who completed just one month of practice experienced a 58% reduction in anxiety levels, 57% reduction in depression and a 40% reduction in stress. Furthermore, studies have also indicated an average of 28% reduction in rumination, fatigue and the same increase in sleep quality.

Current research through the Oxford Mindfulness Centre is exploring the psychological and physical benefits of mindfulness even further, with studies investigating the use of mindfulness practice to improve symptoms of Irritable Bowel Syndrome, chronic fatigue, bipolar disorder and suicidality (2012, MBCT Implementation Resources).



How can mindfulness help you?

Becoming aware of your own thoughts and feelings allows you to accept them. If you are mindful, you will accept your thoughts and feelings for what they are and not give excessive importance to them. For example, you may think “that person doesn’t like me” or “I didn’t make a good impression” or “everything is getting on top of me”. However, a mindful person will acknowledge these thoughts as just thoughts and let them go.

Negative feelings result from negative thoughts, so if you spend a lot of time mulling over negative past experiences or thinking about negative things that may happen in the future, you may begin to feel angry, sad, guilty, anxious or regretful. Many people believe the past runs their life. However, the past is gone - it is only your thoughts about the past that remain. They are simply memories. This doesn’t mean that you should pretend the past never happened, but rather that you should accept your thoughts about the past as harmless memories travelling through your mind. They don’t need consideration, just acceptance. Understanding your thoughts can give you the freedom to become less preoccupied with, and give less meaning to them.

“Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally”

Jon Kabat-Zinn



Where did it come from?

The roots of mindfulness stem from buddhism and are over 2,500 years old. Despite its religious origins, mindfulness can be practised by anyone and it involves training of the mind rather than encouraging a strict religious following.

Modern mindfulness can be practised and adapted in many different ways, however there are two main approaches that have been developed: mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR).

Mindfulness was popularised by the likes of Jon Kabat-Zinn. He combined mindfulness teachings from the east with western science that significantly increased the popularity of mindfulness practice all over the world and developed MBSR, primarily aimed at combating stress. From this, and using elements of cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), MBCT was more recently developed by Zindel Segal and Mark Williams to provide an effective treatment for mood disorders such as depression and anxiety (Teasdale et al, 2000).

How does it work?

Mindfulness involves a whole range of approaches to combat stress. Mindfulness is concerned with the ability to focus on the present and how you're feeling right now, both internally and externally, on a moment to moment basis. This helps you to stop dwelling on the past or worrying about the future and allows you to bring your nervous system back into balance. Mindfulness often focuses on a repetitive action such as breathing or repeating words/phrases, and can entail following and releasing certain thoughts and sensation. It can also be applied to activities such as walking, exercising, eating or meditation. The following are essential for mindfulness practice:

- **A quiet environment** - anywhere where you can relax without distraction or interruption be it in your home, office, place of worship or the great outdoors.
- **Somewhere comfortable** - find a comfortable position whether that may be sitting up straight in a chair, cross legged on the floor or in the lotus position, but avoid lying down as you may fall asleep.
- **A focus point** - concentrate on something either internal or external, i.e. a feeling/image, an object in your environment, or a meaningful word or phrase that you repeat throughout the session. you can meditate with eyes open or eyes closed.
- **Observation without criticism** - you are bound to have distracting and intrusive thoughts while practising mindfulness but don't chastise yourself for these or try to fight against them. Simply observe them and turn your attention back to your point of focus.

To become more mindful, you should try to be more aware of your thoughts and bring them back to the present moment. Concentrate on your surroundings rather than on what is going on in your head. Once you begin to become more mindful, you will probably notice hundreds of fleeting thoughts relating to the past and future. By consciously returning your focus to the present over a long period, the process will become more natural and automatic to you. You will learn to concentrate on the here and now rather than becoming caught up with thoughts that may result in a bad mood.

When you become annoyed, frustrated, or upset, you will probably find that your mind has wandered from the present. The next time you feel this way, ask yourself what you have been thinking about, then try to refocus on the present.

Example

Stop reading for a moment and think about where you are now. You are sitting comfortably reading a book of your choice. You are not concerned with the past or future worries. You are simply sitting reading. Then think about all the tasks you still have to do this week. As you think, you will notice your peace of mind slipping. The only thing that has changed to make this happen is your thoughts. Nothing else has changed.

The exercise demonstrates how your thoughts can quickly change your mood. You cannot suppress your thoughts, but by being aware of them, you can stop them from developing and bring yourself back to your naturally contented state in the present moment.

It is difficult to try to dismiss thoughts if something significant has happened. However while you are feeling low, it can be helpful to acknowledge that your thoughts are likely to be unhelpful and negative. If you can accept that this period will pass, it will become easier to deal with.

Dr Stephanie Gooding believes that "once you've got a taste for what mindful awareness is then you can start applying it through many areas of your daily activities". Waking up in the morning is a great time to take a moment to do a short mindful check-in. Mindful showering for example (see page 10), is a great opportunity to take time to feel the water on your skin and to take a mindful note of what is happening for you in that moment instead of stressing about your afternoon meeting or dwelling on last night's argument.



Stress and mindfulness

The word 'stress' is a shortening of the word 'distress' and dates back to circa 1300. Stress is often defined as meaning 'hardship, adversity, force, and pressure. In a similar vein, when we talk about stress in terms of mental health, we are talking about the emotional and physical reaction we have to any kind of demand or pressure put upon us.

Stress is a normal reaction that humans face in everyday life. Stress is not always a bad thing, however, when it starts to affect our mental wellbeing in a negative way, it can become overbearing and difficult to control.

Although sharing one's concerns with each other can be a good source of stress relief, people experiencing stress often avoid communication with others. Mindfulness is effective in such instances as it is something that can be easily practised alone in a short space of time. This is great for people with busy schedules.

The problem with stress is effectively the disruption of our equilibrium by external factors. Mindfulness is about giving our minds the opportunity to bring us back to the balance that things such as stress can seem determined to disrupt.

Stressed

Mindful



Gets headaches

Has difficulty sleeping

**Worries about things she
can't change**

Doesn't see the bigger picture

Feels small and worthless

Cannot relax without feeling guilty

**Is easily frustrated and
moody with others**

Survives rather than thrives

Accepts that all things come and go

Laughs at herself

Practises being curious

Doesn't try to avoid or deny emotions

Enjoys every bite when she eats

**Practises compassion and
nurtures connections**

**Is fully present when listening without
trying to control or pass judgement**

Gets outdoors and embraces nature



Practising mindfulness

One of the great things about mindfulness is that there are so many ways and variations on how you can practise it. Take time to discover which approach suits you best by exploring the exercises below, also accessible through the 'pocket mindfulness' app developed by Alfred James so you can stay mindful all day long.

1. Mindful observation

This exercise is simple but incredibly powerful. It is designed to connect us with the beauty of the natural environment, something that is easily missed when we are rushing around in the car or hopping on and off buses, trains, or trams on the way to work.

- Choose a natural object from within your immediate environment and focus on watching it for a minute or two. This could be a flower or an insect, or even the clouds or the moon.
- Don't do anything except notice the thing you are looking at. Simply relax into a harmony for as long as your concentration allows.
- Look at it as if you are seeing it for the first time. Visually explore every aspect of its formation. Allow yourself to be consumed by its presence. Allow yourself to connect with its energy and its role and purpose in the natural world.

2. Mindful listening

This exercise is designed to open your ears to sound in a non-judgmental way. Much of what we see and hear on a daily basis is influenced by our past experiences, but when we listen mindfully, we achieve a neutral, present awareness that lets us hear sound without preconception.

- Select a piece of music you have never heard before. You may have something in your own collection that you have never listened to, or you might choose to turn the radio dial until something catches your ear.
- Close your eyes and put on your headphones. Try not to get drawn into judging the music by its genre, title or artist name before it has begun playing. Instead, ignore any labels and neutrally allow yourself to get lost in the journey of sound for the duration of the song.
- Allow yourself to explore every aspect of the track. Even if the music isn't to your liking at first, let go of your dislike and give your awareness full permission to climb inside the track and dance among the sound waves.
- The idea is to just listen, to become fully entwined with the composition without preconception or judgement of the genre, artist, lyrics or instrumentation.

3. Mindful appreciation

In this last exercise, all you have to do is notice five things in your day that usually go unappreciated. These things can be objects or people - it's up to you. Use a notepad to check off five by the end of the day.

The point of this exercise is to simply give thanks and appreciate the seemingly insignificant things in life; the things that support our existence but rarely get a second thought amidst our desire for bigger and better things.

Example

Electricity powers your kettle, the postman delivers your mail, your clothes provide you with warmth, your nose lets you smell the flowers in the park, your ears let you hear the birds in the tree by the bus stop, but...

- Do you know how these things/processes came to exist, or how they really work?
- Have you ever properly acknowledged how these things benefit your life and the lives of others?
- Have you ever thought about what life may be like without these things?
- Have you ever stopped to notice their finer, more intricate details?
- Have you ever sat down and thought about the relationships between these things and how together they play an interconnected role in the functioning of the earth?

Once you have identified your five things, make it your duty to find out everything you can about their creation and purpose to truly appreciate the way in which they support your life.



Other ways to be mindful

There are many ways in which people may choose to incorporate mindfulness into their lives. Yoga for example is a popular combination of movement/position and breathing exercises that you can practise in a group or individually.

Other examples of movements that incorporate mindfulness into exercise are tai chi and chi kung (also known as qi gong). These ancient Chinese practices are not designed to burn calories but instead aim to restore energy, improve balance, circulation and alignment of the body.

Tai chi and chi kung exercises involve repetitions of seemingly simple sequences of movements which require focus and concentration. As such they engage the mind and, with practice, make space for focused breathing with each move, which aids relaxation and links mind and body. The result is a calmer mind. Both tai chi and chi kung are said to improve general health, reduce stress and compliment wellbeing in general.

Mindfulness and daily life

The practice of mindfulness need not take up much of your time. With many people living extremely full and hectic lives, it can be difficult to allow yourself to take a long amount of time out or to do something you are perhaps not familiar with. For this reason we have compiled a short list of mindfulness-based exercises you can incorporate into those busy lifestyles.

1. Mindful showering

As you undress pay attention to each piece of clothing and treat them and yourself with respect. Consider the cleansing process about to happen for both your body and mind. Feel the water hit your skin, notice the temperature and the sensations that it brings to your body. Notice the smells of the shower gel and how it feels in your hands and as you apply it to your body. Be grateful for the hot water and for this time to yourself. Take the time to focus on the here and now and to indulge in the showering process.

2. Mindful dressing

Consider each individual piece of clothing and the way the material feels against your skin as you put it on. Is the material soft and silky or rough and textured? Does it feel light or heavy, warm or cool? Is your body pleasantly comfortable, slightly warm or slightly cold? Notice any smells, such as washing powder, perfume or fabric smells. Use the time to be in the moment, appreciating your body and your surroundings.

3. Mindful eating

Take a small piece of a food you like. Look at the food. Notice its colour and texture. Place it under your nose. Observe the way it smells. Put it in your mouth and notice the sensation as it hits your tongue. What different flavours do you detect? Is it sweet or savoury, sour, salty, or bitter? Start to chew it and notice how this feels. As you swallow, imagine the food entering your body to provide nourishment and consider how you are feeling in this moment.



4. Mindful waiting

Big queue at the bank this morning? Laptop taking ages to load? Make use of these 'waiting' opportunities to be more mindful. Connect to your breathing and take in your surroundings and the way your body feels right now. Accept that you need to wait and try not to get agitated. Bring any wandering thoughts or worries back to the present and be grateful for this time to be at one with yourself.

5. Mindful cleaning

As you clean, focus on your bodily movements - are you turning, bending, twisting? Is it hard work or a smooth, effortless motion? Take in the sounds and smells around you while staying in the here and now.

6. Mindful technology

Technology can often drag us away from the here and now. Try setting an alarm to go off at various points in the day to remind you to take a 'mindful minute'. Use this time to block out distractions, take time away from your electronic devices and focus on your present surroundings and connections to the real-time physical world rather than your online world. How does your body feel? Are you warm, cold or comfortable? Notice any tension in your body and note the cool air in your nostrils as you breath in and the warm air leaving your body as you breath out. Slowly bring your awareness back to the things going on around you.

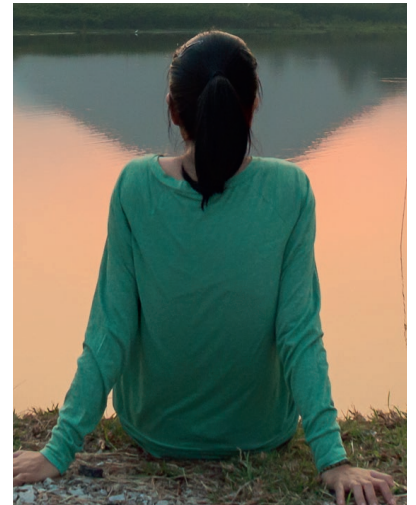
Positive effects of mindfulness

Mindfulness can help reduce stress and aid relaxation, improving an individual's quality of life in the long term. In addition, it can harness inner strengths and resources that help in making decisions about things in the present moment.

Mindfulness and happiness

Happiness is simple - no matter what has happened in the distant or recent past, happiness lies in the present. This can be a hard concept for humans to master, but with practice you will realise that thoughts do not reflect reality. Your present mood is affected by thoughts of things outwith the moment. Once you have grasped this concept, you will be a more peaceful person.

It is, of course, not possible to stop thinking about the past altogether. However, it is best to try and live in the moment as much as possible. For example, when out walking you may be mindful of the sensations in your feet, the beauty of your surroundings, or the sounds of trees rustling in the wind. You may also be mindful of your thoughts at that moment. When we understand the link between our experience and our thoughts, we can change negative perceptions such as "this is boring - I wish I was already home so I can get started on something" to "the sun is beating down - the trees are softly moving in the wind - the architecture is beautiful". In this example, you can see that something simple such as walking does not have to be judged negatively as "boring" or "time wasting" because it is an objective activity which you can subjectively interpret in any way.





Mindfulness and children

Emerging research has shown that mindfulness can improve emotional regulation and cognitive focus in children. Mindfulness has even been found to mitigate the effects of bullying, enhance focus and reduce attention problems in children and young people.

Establishing your own practice of mindfulness is a good way to learn the basics and will allow you to learn and pass on skills to your children. Try to avoid technical terms with children, but using words such as ‘notice’ and questions like ‘what is happening right now?’ may make the benefits more obvious to them.

Simple exercises for children include mindful eating (see *page 10*) or simply taking a walk outside and encouraging them to notice their surroundings. Questions like: “what do the birds sound like?”, “what does this plant smell like?”, or “how many bugs can you see?” are all good ways to engage children in the here and now.

It may also help to use the concept of superheroes to make the practice of mindfulness more appealing. The positive psychology programme suggests introducing ‘Spidey Senses’ to help them focus on their surroundings, or the ‘Superman/Superwoman Stretch’ that can make them feel strong and empowered. Try it!

Mindfulness at work

When getting on with life and all the responsibilities of work, it can be easy to get caught up with everyday thoughts, feelings and responsibilities. These can become overwhelming and cause people to feel bad without an understanding of the real reasons why.

Mindfulness can help as it enables people to become aware of their preoccupation with worries, plans or the past, so they are less likely to react to future circumstances automatically. It can also help free the mind from internal struggles with emotions that are mentally tiring and allow people to tap into their own wisdom.

Mindfulness can be used for both individuals and across teams to improve the wellbeing of staff and subsequently improve the performance of the organisations as a whole. The Mindfulness Initiative group suggests that success in organisations relies on the very things that unhappiness and stress erode - collaboration, creativity, cognitive flexibility, and effective decision making. Because of this, more and more organisational leaders are seeking to implement aspects of mindfulness into the work setting.

Additionally, when it comes to relationships with colleagues, research has shown that mindfulness can reduce the level of conflict and improve communication skills within a working team. Mindful employees create mindful working teams.

First Psychology Assistance provides a range of training options designed to enhance wellbeing in the workplace.

For more information visit:

[www.firstpsychology-assistance.co.uk/
in-house-mindfulness-training-courses.php](http://www.firstpsychology-assistance.co.uk/in-house-mindfulness-training-courses.php)



Becoming more mindful at work

First Psychology Assistance is able to offer a range of training programmes and facilitated sessions in the area of mindfulness, to help employees integrate mindfulness into their day-to-day lives.

Mindfulness has been shown to be a highly effective method for managing stress, increasing alertness and improving general wellbeing. It is used in a diverse range of settings from sports settings to hospitals to businesses and is popular among leaders managing high pressure roles.

Stress and conflict are key issues that can have a huge impact on productivity and staff performance. Training in mindfulness and other areas of wellbeing can help provide a proactive and focused approach to tackling stress and conflict at work.

Find out more about First Psychology Assistance's training options.

Different types of mindfulness-based therapy

There are four main approaches to mindfulness: MBSR, MBCT, DBT, and ACT. These approaches have been used to successfully treat individuals with a wide range of physical and psychological difficulties. Mindfulness is taught as groups of practical skills which can be learned over a given time period. Once the key skills have been learned, mindfulness techniques can be used throughout life.

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

MBSR is used to support people with stress, anxiety, depression and chronic pain. Since it was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn in 1979, research has shown MBSR to change our brains for the better.

MBSR is based on the idea that there is a space between stimulus and response that we can access thus gaining power in choosing our own response and accessing growth and freedom. It is about creating choices by being aware and mindful of our bodies and any reactions that may be occurring. In doing so, those who practise MBSR realise they can break through destructive reactions that may be holding them back from living the life they want to live.

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)

Designed to help prevent relapses of depression, MBCT is based on the idea that when people who have been depressed become distressed or upset, they experience automatic cognitive processes which can cause depression or low mood. MBCT aims to stop these automatic thoughts and therefore prevent depression. MBCT can also help with other issues such as anxiety disorders, insomnia, bipolar disorders, and chronic fatigue syndrome.

Recently, the UK National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE) supported MBCT as an effective treatment for the prevention of depressive relapse. Research suggests that people who have been clinically depressed three or more times may find MBCT helpful. Evidence from some clinical studies has even suggested MBCT can reduce relapse rates by 50% among people who experience recurrent episodes.

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)

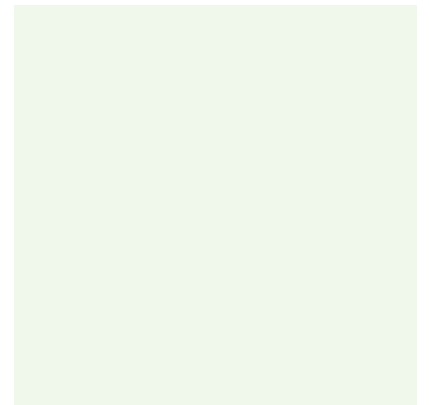
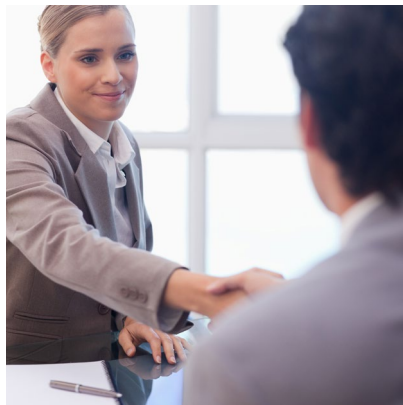
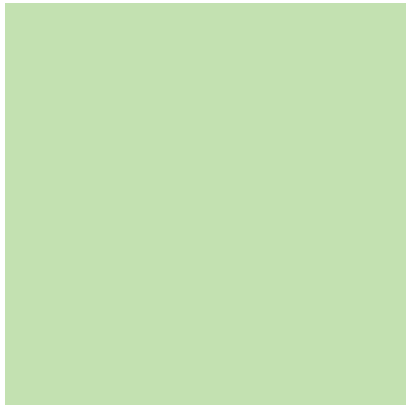
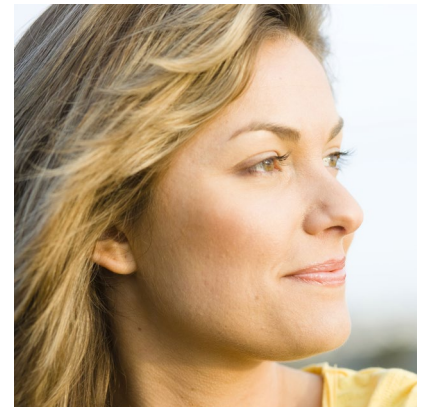
Although it didn't develop from a mindfulness perspective directly, DBT often uses aspects of mindfulness in its approach. This popular therapy has been shown to be effective in helping people with a wide range of difficulties. It can be particularly helpful for emotion control issues and was originally developed for women with borderline personality disorder. DBT has also been adapted for working with adolescents, people with substance misuse issues, and families.

DBT is a cognitive behavioural therapy which balances a focus on change and problem solving with acceptance and validation. The main focus therefore is to balance acceptance and change in terms of how an individual sees themselves, how the therapist treats the person, and how they work together to address the issues they are experiencing.

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

This therapy incorporates mindfulness to help individuals develop psychological flexibility and live in a way that is consistent with their personal values. It is used to help us recognise the ways in which we suppress and control our emotional experiences and the challenges this creates. By then addressing these challenges, we are able to make room for value-based actions.

ACT does not attempt to stop or change unwanted thoughts but instead encourages new and compassionate relationships with these challenging experiences. It allows these experiences to occur instead of fighting or avoiding them. ACT enables cognition to be separated from negative charge by making space for it instead of minimising it.



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