

Mindfulness



You may remember being told to 'pay attention' by a frustrated school teacher. No doubt you were paying attention to something... the issue was rather that you were not paying attention to the 'right' thing (according to the teacher's perspective at least).

Mindfulness practice concerns developing our ability to become aware of what we are 'paying attention' to and being able to maintain focus and concentration on a subject or object of our choosing. In effect it is a form of mental training. Many of us spend time 'training' our bodies to be fit and healthy... why do so few of us do so with our minds? 'Practice' involves two things – setting aside time to meditate regularly; ideally daily if you can, and secondly making an effort to be present and fully engaged with whatever you

are doing whenever possible. Both practices support each other; they are like two sides of the same coin – taking 'time out' to practice meditating makes being fully present easier, and the more generally 'present' you become the easier it becomes to meditate when you sit down to do so. If you'd like to discuss any of the issues raised in this Helpsheet, the CiC 24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline is available for practical and emotional support.

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What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is an integrative, mind-body based approach that helps people change the way they think and feel about their experiences, especially stressful experiences. This makes it particularly relevant in an age when some of our main health-care challenges are stress-related – mental health problems, psychological impacts of chronic long-term illness and stress-related physical conditions. www.livingmindfully.co.uk

The Government has recently recommended in their NICE guidelines that Mindfulness be a key ingredient in addressing stress related problems which can manifest as depression, impaired performance in the workplace, lack of energy and motivation.

Whilst mindfulness may often be associated with Buddhism, all moral traditions and world religions value being mindful as opposed to 'mindless' and mindfulness is increasingly taught in non-religious settings such as hospitals, schools, companies, and professional sports and is seen as an intensely

practical intervention for those suffering from stress related illness.

Becoming more mindful has been described as 'simple but not easy' but although it takes determination, practice and perseverance can change the way our minds work. And because our happiness is greatly influenced by our 'way of looking at the world' – far more than it is by external conditions – mindfulness can be seen as a foundation for happiness, personal and inter-personal development.

Mindfulness Meditation – first steps in breathing

Meditation can involve visualisation, contemplation and using mantras as well as stabilisation of focus, but all of these depend upon mindfulness and awareness. The instructions that follow are for a basic meditative technique involving paying attention to breathing – also called following the breath or mindful breathing:



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- ▶ Sit still and comfortably on a chair or cushion and allow your back and neck to be in a straight line, hands resting on thighs with arms and shoulders relaxed, chin slightly tucked in and eyelids relaxed.
- ▶ Relax the face, jaw and tongue, with the tongue resting against the upper teeth, mouth very slightly open. (Half-smiling is a great way to relax your face).
- ▶ If sitting in a chair keep both feet firmly on the floor and if on a cushion keep the ankles loosely crossed.
- ▶ Now take your mind away from its current thought and place your attention decisively on the breath. Do not try to change the breath in any way, just focus on it as it is.
- ▶ If this is the first attempt at working with the mind it is not unusual to experience being flooded with thoughts – in fact this is often described as a torrent of thoughts like a waterfall. Or the mind is described as like a 'restless monkey' jumping from place to place or a 'wild horse' yet to be tamed.
- ▶ It is important not to be discouraged by this restless flood of thoughts, we should just be aware of and acknowledge the thoughts coming into the mind and then gently but firmly 'escort our attention' back to the breath. (It can help to imagine your attention as a vast space with thoughts as shooting stars moving across the vastness).
- ▶ The breath itself is soft, rhythmical and soothing, so focussing on it feels natural and peaceful.

- ▶ Now follow a complete cycle of the breath. You can follow this in as much detail as you like, for example feel the sensation of the air leaving the body, the subtle movements of the body as the breath leaves, the slight pause between out-breath and in-breath and the body sensations that accompany the in-breath.

Simply placing the mind on the breath is practicing mindfulness. This strengthens attention. Also, whilst focussing on the breath we are not thinking about other things, which adds to the feeling of peace.

Continue this practice by trying to gently and firmly keep your attention on your breathing. When you become aware that you are thinking, remind yourself and come back to the breath. So, taking your attention away from your thoughts and placing it back on the breath is the focus of the meditation – you learn to become aware when you are thinking and return your attention to the breath.

Stability – the foundation – a little at a time

Continuously re-associating the mind with the breathing creates stability. Becoming more accomplished at keeping the mind on the breath without distraction is a sign that the mind is gradually being 'tamed' – which can be described as establishing the foundation in meditation training.

Because we have trained our mind to be able to focus on one thing we can now have a stronger ability to focus on any object or endeavour. Or put another way; we have tamed the wild horse – now we can ride it wherever we want to go.

As with any form of training, frequency helps to build the foundation. Even if you are unable to meditate for more than a few minutes at a time, try to do so a few times a day and progress to having a longer session daily which might start at 20 minutes and gradually progress to an hour or more.

Clearly mark the beginning and end of the session to acknowledge to yourself that you are making space to work with your mind – you want to engender a general sense of decorum and appreciation without things feeling too rigid or too formal.

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Movement – let's walk

As a means of slowing down the mind and helping to integrate mind and body, walking meditation is helpful.

You can also use this technique to break up periods of sitting meditation: Put the right hand over the left fist, with both hands just below the solar plexus. Walk slowly and gently, taking short steps and focusing on the placement of each foot from heel to toe and the shifting of weight from foot to foot. You can also 'walk mindfully' whenever you are walking normally (do not do this when you need to be mindful of traffic or other threats). Count your steps per

in-breath and out-breath and deliberately focus your attention on how it feels to move; pay attention to all the body movements and sensations that accompany walking.

This practice works for any form of exercise or activity – simply focus your attention deliberately on what you are doing. For example if you like to run, spend some of your run focussing on your 'form'; your body position, how your feet are striking the ground etc. (See 'Running with the mind of meditation' by Sakyong Mipham).

Practising mindfulness – 'I don't have time to meditate'

Many people struggle to set aside the time for formal meditation. Whether you do or not, you can still benefit greatly by committing to being present in the here and now and fully engaging in whatever you are currently doing – this itself then becomes a form of mindfulness practice; the more we do it the more we become it.

For example, what is your attention on when you have a shower in the morning? For many the habit might be to think about the day ahead with its many projects and deadlines. Instead try focussing your attention on the sensation of the hot water on your skin. You can choose to feel gratitude for the clean hot water that miraculously appears when you turn on the tap. By enjoying and engaging fully in what you are doing you are slowing down the rush of time and being really alive – afterall the only time we have to be alive is the present moment. (Notice any immediate reaction you have to this

notion. Reflect on whether it might be a good idea for you to simply enjoy what you are doing for a few minutes more often). If you think about it you can apply this philosophy and approach to just about anything you do. You can use your strengthening mindfulness to help you become progressively better at doing so, ie being better able to be awake in the here and now, appreciating and enjoying the present moment rather than letting your 'untamed' mind steal the show.

Another simple example might be when brushing your teeth. You can use these two minutes to be fully alive – focussing your attention deliberately on the sensations and feeling grateful that you have your teeth and access to clean running water etc. So the practice is to enjoy cleaning your teeth whilst you are cleaning your teeth, to not let habitual thinking carry you off to the past or the future or to your worries or projects – to brush your teeth in a way that gives you ease and happiness for those two minutes.

Movement – let's walk

Imagine this scenario. A good friend is coming to visit whom you have not seen for a while and whom you greatly enjoy spending time with. You have been really busy lately and are in the habit of rushing around, getting lots of things done, always half thinking about the next thing on your to-do list whilst doing the current one. As usual you have lots of things to do before your friend arrives; say the last one is to tidy the kitchen, load the dishwasher and wash up some pots and pans. Your attitude to the washing up might be: 'I hate washing up and I can't wait to get it out of the way so I can enjoy myself with my friend' and you may well be thinking of all sorts of projects, plans, jobs to do etc whilst rushing through the washing up.

A deliberately mindful approach would be to instead practise mindfully washing the dishes in preparation for your friend to arrive; to get your mind used to being here, now – to practise the skill of being present, to enjoy the hot water and to make washing the dishes the most important thing deserving of all your attention right now. Hopefully this will mitigate the risk of your 'habit energy' of rushing and thinking about the next thing carrying over into your precious time with your friend when he or she arrives – surely you want to be fully present with them; not be half there and half somewhere else?

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There are countless examples of simple everyday tasks to which you can apply this approach and in the workplace too. In forming a new habit it is helpful to identify existing habits or rituals and to link the new habit you are trying to develop to these. You could think about your daily routine and choose a few which you could resolve to conduct in full awareness. You could also practice mindful breathing on the train or the bus on your commute.

The trouble with the future and the past

A clear benefit of becoming more mindful is that of becoming more aware of our own thinking habits. Once we become aware of them and accept them we have the option to change them if we wish. For example most of us have the habit of allowing our mind to 'run off' into the future which might mean us being carried away by worries or dreaming, and planning for future conditions or events to occur in order for us to be happy; 'If I can just... then I'll be able to relax, be happy, be content etc'. These plans or worries can keep us from enjoying being here now.

So the practice here is to bring your mind back to the present and to gently and kindly recognise the habit every time it pulls you away from the present. Each time you recognise and acknowledge this habit energy you slightly reduce its power over you – you reduce this thinking habit. This doesn't mean you shouldn't look forward to things and make plans; you can still aim to be fully present when doing so.

Mindful breathing helps remind us that past difficulties or traumas are not happening to us now – we are just replaying old movies in our minds. We are safe right now and we can choose to remember this rather than to replay old movies and re-experience the associated unpleasant feelings. Similarly by practising putting your full attention into brushing your teeth, showering, washing up, struggling with challenging tasks at work, putting the kids to bed, (whatever) you are training yourself to develop the positive habit of dwelling happily in the present, the here and now; the only time we have available in which to be fully alive.

Recommended reading

Wherever you go, there you are

by Jon Kabat-Zinn

The Miracle of Mindfulness by Thich Nhat Hahn Buddha's Brain

by Rick Hanson; note iPhone app also available

Running with the mind of meditation

by Sakyong Mipham

(This helpsheet is intended for informational purposes only and does not represent any form of clinical diagnosis. While every effort has been made to ensure that the content is accurate, relevant and current, CiC accepts no liability for any errors or omissions contained herein. The list of books is provided for interest only and CiC is not responsible for their availability, accuracy, or content.)

