



MINDFULNESS

The Exercise, The Practice and the Benefits

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is defined as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003 p. 145).

Put simply it's about being aware of what's happening, as it's happening ...and not reacting. It involves seeing things how they really are, rather than how we want them to be. The practice also includes and cultivates four **attitudes of mindfulness**: Openness; Curiosity; Acceptance; and Compassion.

Mindfulness is a practice, backed by science, that can be ‘exercised’ readily in work and life. It's been shown to reduce stress, anxiety and depression and boost wellbeing, thinking ability and performance. It's free, discreet, transportable and versatile. It's an inherent human ability – we all have the inbuilt capacity to regulate our own attention. For many, mindfulness is also a way of being, beyond the practice.

Mindfulness is not...

- NOT about clearing the mind
- NOT about controlling the mind
- NOT about striving to feel any different
- NOT about achieving some perfect state
- NOT just a technique to relax or fall asleep
- NOT just a fad

Mindfulness is living in the now. It is essentially about being more aware and awake in every moment of your life. It is about intentionally paying attention to each moment, being fully engaged in whatever is happening around you and within you. It involves bringing an attitude of curiosity, acceptance and friendliness to whatever is experienced, rather than habitual patterns of judgment and criticism.

Research shows that when we are not deliberately paying attention to something, our brain clicks off into Default Mode. This is a type of attention characterised by mental chatter, mind wandering, operating on ‘automatic pilot’, dwelling on the past and worrying about the future, judgment and criticism.

Default mode has been found to activate specific areas of the brain, including the brain's “fear centre” (the amygdala) which becomes overactivated.

However when we pay deliberate attention to what we are doing, we engage different parts of the brain than our worry and reactive centres. We experience things directly, through the senses, and avoid getting caught up in worrying, dwelling, judging and fight/flight reactivity.

For mindfulness to become a practice that reaps benefits – we need to deliberately and intentionally focus our attention on the senses, and bring it back when it wanders off into default mode. Because of the neuroplastic nature of the brain, doing this repeatedly activates the prefrontal brain regions associated with being present, and these areas grow stronger. At the same time, the Default Mode areas become weaker. In this way, we literally rewire our brains to be present – and healthier and happier.

This is sometimes referred to as mindfulness “meditation”. Meditation here refers to attention training, and with mindfulness we are learning to focus on the present moment via engaging with the senses. There is no particular state to be achieved other than being fully present. In addition, it is not necessary (nor possible, for that matter) to rid the mind of thoughts. The brain is an organ and its function is to think, and there is no way to stop this.

However, mindfulness helps us engage fully with the present moment, notice when our attention wanders off, and gently return it to the present once again. So we keep having thoughts but don't get lost in them.

There are many benefits from applying mindfulness exercises regularly over time

- Improved sense of wellbeing, calm and composure
- Reducing stress and frustration
- Increasing health and immune function
- Boosts working memory and concentration
- Increased focus and information processing speed
- Less emotional reactivity, more frustration tolerance
- More cognitive flexibility (adaptive problem-solving)
- Increased compassion, empathy and relationship satisfaction
- Increase self-insight
- More able to be - present, patient and productive

For the workplace, this can translate as

- Awareness: self-insight, generating wisdom
- Wellbeing: healthier immune response, relaxation, peace, serenity
- Productivity: focus, flexibly, getting things done
- Flow on effects: to compassion, communication, relationships and leadership
- Resilience: a buffer to stress, anxiety, depression
- Courage: "The ability to face up to potentially-challenging situations and...stay there, pay attention on purpose and not react. Instead to respond professionally, by being deliberate in one's actions. Then return to a state of composure and readiness"

Becoming calm and wise

Over time, you're likely to cultivate some aspects of wise discernment, including:

1. Being aware of what's happening as it's happening (and remembering what happened – in order to build personal insight and self-awareness).
2. Observing yourself, others and situations more objectively, in a curious and non-judgemental manner.
3. Noticing and disengaging from unhelpful patterns of automatic negative thoughts.
4. Seeing things (and yourself and other people) for how they really are now, rather than how we'd wish them be.
5. An ability to 'turn on' the attitudes of curiosity and openness in order to respond, rather than reaction to situations.
6. A greater sense of self-acceptance and self-compassion, becoming more patient and present in daily life.
7. Understanding that feelings too, not just thoughts and logic, play a significant part in motivation, decision-making and habits.
8. Accepting reality (versus struggling with it) in order to re-focus on wise action.
9. Understanding what might need to happen now, to better serve you, others, and the situation.
10. Clarity and composure of your inner world, in order to respond to, and influence, the outer world, within reasonable limits.

11. You gain a second level of awareness, the awareness of how you're thinking how that impacts you and your life. This is meta-awareness or thinking about how you think.
12. You may begin to see that thoughts are just thoughts. They can be viewed as arising data or information not direction or instructions that must be believed or followed. You can step back from them, examine them and check their usefulness and relevance. This helps to see where you may have bias, errors in logic, self-limiting beliefs or being influenced by old stories about yourself, others and the world.
13. You discover a sense of increased mental control, in terms of checking your automatic assumptions, and deciding on which thoughts and beliefs you will be guided by, rather than acting on autopilot.
14. Ultimately, helping you in the long term, to think clearly, make good decisions and be more STRATEGIC. This is where Tactical Composure, over time, leads to Strategic Composure – maintaining (as much as possible) a state of calm, wise and mindful operation and interaction with the world.

How do I practice Mindfulness?

You can practice mindfulness meditation every day and regularly using simple techniques (exercises), such as those outlined in this program, and just using your surroundings and inner experience at the time. Once familiar with the techniques, you can even practice in noisy and busy environments, at home, play or work – and no one will notice you're practicing.

Explanation and Tips for Beginners

Even very brief mindfulness interventions (e.g., 5-10 minute guided inductions, 3-4 session mindfulness meditation training) can buffer emotional reactivity and reduce impulsive behaviours immediately following training. By contrast, larger doses of mindfulness training, such as the 8-week Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) program, produce moderate to large overall effects/benefits.

There is a wide range of "recommended" daily practice advice, ranging from 10 to 60 minutes per day. There is no one-size-fits-all recommendation for how one should dose their mindfulness practice. Try a number of techniques to see what works best for you and consider using a coach or guided scripts.

What does practice involve

- There are numerous types of mindfulness practices, with variations to instructions, pace and use of metaphors and visualization. However, you'll soon come to recognize the common elements that are used due to their effectiveness and research evidence-base.
- After trying out a number of techniques you may start with a particular guide, coach or app and then practice regularly (even 5 mins at a time, each day will help) and build up the length of practice time (towards 30 mins) and using variation of techniques. Eventually you'll use the techniques, un-guided, during your day and when you need
- Because Mindfulness ***is paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, without making judgements...*** the practice of mindfulness will incorporate actions that build on this desired mental task and state.
- You will be asked to sit or lie down and take some deep breaths or notice your body posture, to help ground you in the here and now and create an anchor point for practice. There are other ways to do this also.
- You will be asked to pay attention to various aspects of your experience, sometimes spending more time on a particular area to zoom in more and notice the detail – including your 5 senses, your sensations, thoughts and emotions/feelings. You will also be asked to shift your attention from aspect to aspect and bring your awareness back to the practice when your mind drifts off.
- While you may experience some immediate effects, the aim is longer term mental and emotional stability through regular practice. Some coaches will say to treat every practice like your first.
- Because mindfulness also builds on the attitudes of openness, curiosity, compassion and acceptance (attitudes that reduce judgement, struggle and stress), some practices (meditations) will include instructions, such as

- Letting go of certain things and being open to whatever is present
 - Compassionate language and thoughts
 - Being curious as if it's the first time you've noticed this aspect of your experience
 - Allow room for this, not trying to fix it right now, just notice it as it comes and goes
- Sitting up in a chair will help keep you alert and closing your eyes can help you focus, however it's completely fine to sit on the floor or lie down in a comfortable position and to open or half-close your eyes (with a soft gaze).

Expectations of Mindfulness Practice

- The first few times can be a bit difficult for some and easier for others.
- This is a new skill that you're learning, so at this stage it's really just about increasing your sense of familiarity and rhythm with the practice. The mind is always changing, so the exercise will always feel a bit different.
- Mindfulness is about **learning to "see things and people how they really are at this time, not how you expect or hope them to be"**. So that means your experience of the practice, however it is, is still valid for helping you to learn, whether your experience be **comfortable, easy and relaxing** or **uncomfortable, difficult or frustrating**.
- Even if your mind wanders a lot or you experience periods of inner criticism, frustration or boredom, the exercise is still working if you can pay attention to what's happening – even if you don't produce a calming effect. It's quite normal for many people to wonder 'will I ever get this, my mind is too busy'... so just be patient with yourself and the exercises, as in time, for those who persist, it will reach a point where you sense that you're 'getting it'. Because mindfulness involves being able to observe things as they are, without reacting, it stands to reason that experiencing impatience or mind wandering serves a natural handy purpose of helping us to 'just notice, allow and let it be' and observing that even those thoughts and feelings pass in time too.
- So these thoughts might help put the perfectionist thoughts or the inner critic at bay:
 - It's okay to experience awkwardness or self-consciousness
 - It's okay to not do it smoothly
 - It's okay for the mind to wander, just notice it and bring it back
 - It's still okay if you don't feel relaxed during or afterward – however if you need to shift your posture to feel more physically comfortable, please do so.

Following instructions

- As you follow the instructions from the coach, therapist or audio/video technique that is guiding you, **your mind will inevitably be distracted or will wander away** from the 'task of following instructions and practicing mindfulness'. This is completely normal. Every time this happened, notice without getting bothered and gently return your attention back to next incoming instruction. The mind is a thought-machine, its job is to think, plan, calculate, imagine future scenarios, judge events as safe or dangerous and more – so it can't and shouldn't be stopped, just noticed and allowed. However, we can shift our attention on purpose to present moments – what is real and happening now (this is a neutral/default state).
- Don't try too hard, just follow the instructions as best you can.
- Allow yourself to experience whatever it is you experience. Allow the process of the practice to just unfold.
- Let go of any expectation of how you might feel and notice how you actually feel instead.
- As you practice and observe, allow whatever is there to be there, because it's already there.
- Don't try to fix or change anything, simply observe it and allow it to be there, and to come and go as it pleases.
- Accept distractions as normal and gently return your attention back to paying attention.
- *Follow the instructions as best you can, without pressure on how well you stay on track or perform, and however you make sense of the instruction at the time*

and

- *Remind yourself of the intention of this practice. Its aim is not to feel any different, relaxed, or calm; this may happen or it may not. Instead, the intention of the practice is, as best you can, to bring awareness to any sensations, sounds, thoughts or feelings you detect, as you focus your attention on selected parts of your inner (eg sensations and thoughts) or outer (eg sounds around you) experience.*