

Mindfulness

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What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a process that allows the mind to settle and to become calmer. It is based on forms of Buddhist meditation developed many years ago.

Don't be put off if it sounds too 'mystical'; there is a lot of scientific evidence showing how effective mindfulness can be.

When we are 'mindful' we are deliberately paying attention in a particular way, in the present moment, without judging or evaluating.

Who is mindfulness for?

Most people can benefit from mindfulness as the techniques can be quite simple. It's important to remember that mindfulness isn't a 'quick fix', the benefits get stronger over time and come from regular practice.

We encourage you to look up further mindfulness courses or training in your area as one-to-one coaching in the techniques can be very helpful.

Why mindfulness?

Many of us spend time worrying about the future or feeling sad about the past, which affects the way we feel today and can make us react to things without really thinking.

Have you ever had a pain or some discomfort, only to become preoccupied with something else and temporarily 'forget' the pain?

The general rule is, 'what we notice, we intensify'. So we need to be careful what we notice!

Mindfulness allows us to become more aware of where our attention is, so we can change our experience by deliberately placing our attention elsewhere.

Benefits of mindfulness

Mindfulness:

- Helps us worry less about the past and the future
- Allows us to recognise patterns in our life and become more aware of changes in our emotions and moods
- Helps prevent negative thoughts that can lead to relapse
- Helps restore our energy levels
- Helps us regulate our emotions
- Helps us gain perspective
- Helps us avoid being 'stuck' in a mood

Mindfulness helps keep us in the 'here and now'. This is important because the present moment is all we really have.

Sadness about the past and fears about the future can intrude into the present, yet we are not able to alter the past and the future has yet to happen.

Mindfulness allows us to reduce the impact of events we're not able to alter.

Where and when can I practice mindfulness?

We can practice mindfulness anywhere in just a few moments by calling our attention to the present moment. Some mindfulness exercises can be done alone, some with other people. Some take only a few moments, some can take much longer. We can adapt the mindfulness exercises to our situation and circumstances.

The key to mindfulness is practice. Like exercise helps our muscles grow, mindfulness is exercise for the mind.

Much has been written about mindfulness. The practice can be simple, which means some people may discount or trivialise the practice.

Remember physical exercise is 'simple' too, but the benefits are very real.

Like exercise, the benefits of mindfulness come from 'doing', not from thinking about doing.

We will look at some exercises here. Choose those you prefer and practice them regularly.

Mind management

Our minds naturally want to attend to things going on around us. Some things we find more interesting than others, so our attention is drawn to these.

Much of the way our attention works is automatic, like the rate at which we breathe. When we run, our breathing automatically becomes faster and deeper.

Similarly, when we notice something interesting our attention is drawn to it without us having to consciously attend to it.

This happens for 'alert' or 'danger' signals too, such as hunger, thirst or pain.

We don't have to continually scan for signs that we might need something, we just know because our attention automatically goes to our hunger, thirst or discomfort.

However, just as we can alter our breathing, we can alter what we pay attention to.

I might be sitting in the lounge with the TV on, reading a book. I can switch my attention between the book and the TV, though I probably can't attend to both at the same time very well.

Look at Figure 1— do you see two people facing each other or a vase? Most of us can see either, though seeing both at the same time is more difficult.



Figure 1

When I am reading my book, there is another part of me busy thinking about me reading my book.

There's also another part of me scanning the world around me, the part that will pick up on someone calling my name or know if the door knocks or if the 'phone rings.

This state of 'divided attention' is how we live most of the time.

Figure 2 shows how my attention is divided between:

- What I experience around me
- What I am thinking and feeling
- The sense I am making of all this information

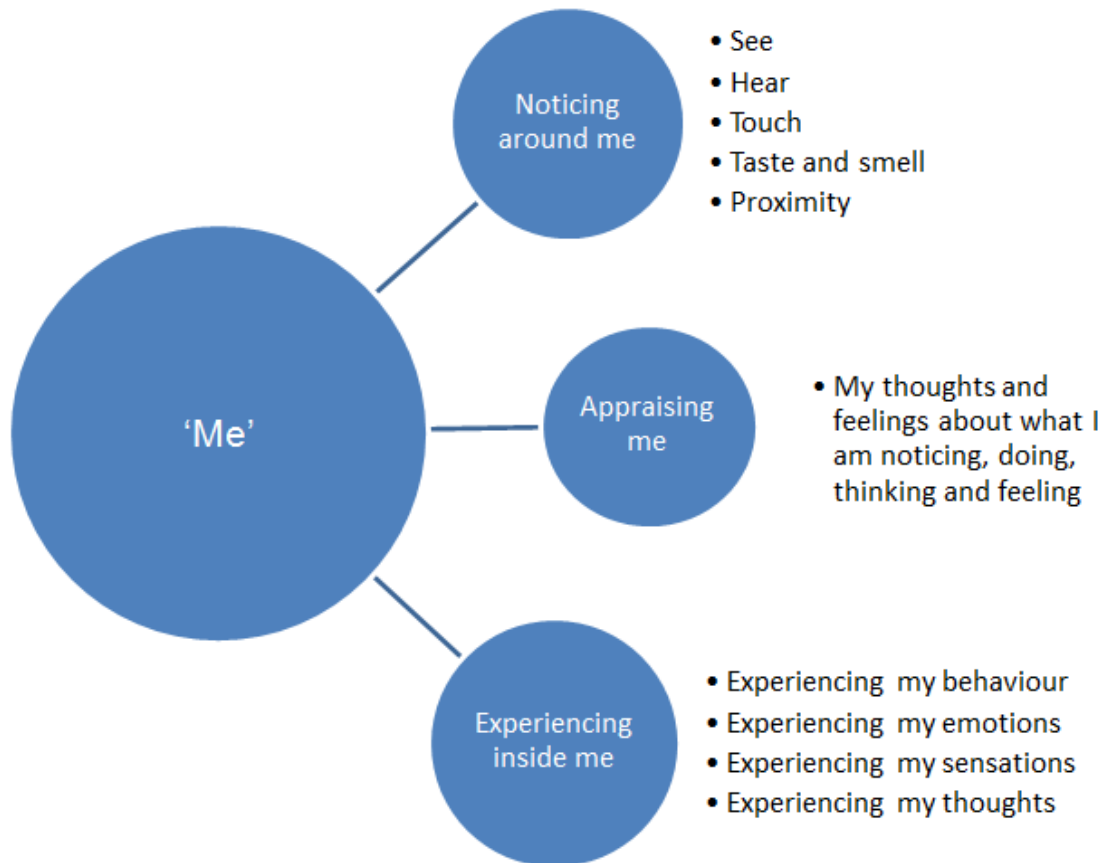


Figure 2

To keep my attention on:

- Things happening around me
- My thoughts and feeling
- Noticing and summing up all this information

uses a lot of energy, so some of it becomes automatic.

Remember how driving was tiring at first, because there was so much to remember? After a while we don't have to think in the same way, driving becomes less 'conscious' and more 'automatic'.

It becomes more of a 'habit' that we don't have to think about.

Mindfulness helps us become aware of ways we think, allowing us to change any 'bad habits' of thinking we might have.

We can practice mindfulness in two basic ways – ‘observing’ and ‘taking part’.

Observing

- Simply notice how you feel
- Don't try to make feelings go away or become stronger or weaker
- Notice how feelings come and go like waves
- Notice your senses of touch, smell, sight, sound and taste

Taking part

- Give your complete attention to what you're doing
- Let go of your sense of time while you are doing something
- Keep bringing your attention back to what you're doing

Mindfulness is a state of non-judging awareness of the current moment. It can be hard not to judge our thoughts and feelings.

Being ‘non-judgemental’

- Simply notice, without judging or evaluating
- Avoid thinking about the ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘why’ and ‘where’ of a situation and simply experience it
- Focus on ‘what is’, not on what is ‘good’, ‘bad’, or on what ‘should’ or ‘should not’ be
- Practice accepting things as they are
- Acknowledge the helpful and the wholesome, but don't judge it
- Acknowledge the harmful and the unwholesome, but don't judge it
- When slip into judging something, we can easily start to ‘judge our judging’ as being bad or unhelpful. To be non-judgemental we need to let go not only of our judgements, but our judgements about our judgements.

Being in the moment

- Do one thing at a time:
 - When you are eating, eat
 - When you are walking, walk
 - When you are working, work
 - When you are talking, talk

- Whether you are talking or listening, focus your attention on the time you are sharing with the other(s)
- Do each and every thing with all of your attention
- If thoughts or feelings distract you, let go of distractions and go back to what you were doing - again and again and again
- If you find you are doing two things at once, stop and return to doing one thing at a time, with all of your attention

The two mindfulness exercises we will do in this module are the 'body scan' and the 'mindful breathing' exercises.

In the body scan we will explore sensations in the body, without trying to change them and without trying to achieve any special state.

The 'mindful breathing' exercise focuses on the sensations of breathing.

It is OK not to do these exercises or to stop if you run into difficulty, but tremendous benefits can come from perseverance so we really encourage you to continue, perhaps after finding some extra support if you struggle with them.

Mindfulness and mindlessness

Table 1 shows some of the differences between a state of 'mindfulness' and one of 'mindlessness'.

	Mindlessness	Mindfulness
1	Judging	Accepting
2	Opinion-based	Fact-based
3	Believing thoughts are real	Thoughts are just for information
4	Believing & engaging with thoughts	Distancing from thoughts
5	Attention on the past and the future	Awareness of the current moment
6	Avoiding thoughts or emotions	Neither approaching nor avoiding
7	Struggling	Letting go
8	Being on 'automatic pilot'	Being attentive
9	Focusing on distress or pain	Focusing on the present moment
10	'Fog' of upsetting thoughts	Clear and alert
11	Reactive or impulsive behaviour	Considered, wise choices
12	Overwhelming, catastrophic ideas	Clear and calm awareness

Table 1

The body scan

The body scan is a way of becoming aware of the sensations from inside our bodies, without judging or becoming preoccupied with them. It helps us experience, and let go of that experience. For most benefit and if you haven't done so already, please read the section on mindfulness before you start.

You may want to lie down in a comfortable place, free from interruptions.

Breathe in slowly and deeply. Feel your abdomen move outwards as you draw air into your lungs. Use your diaphragm to breathe, so your chest should rise only a little. Notice any sensations of touch or of pressure where your body makes contact with whatever you are lying on. Make sure you are comfortable.

Notice that the aim of this exercise is not to feel any different, not necessarily to feel any more relaxed or calm. This may happen, it may not. The aim of the practice is simply to focus your attention on each part of your body in turn.

While breathing slowly, direct your attention to your left foot. Curl your toes a little to draw your attention to it. Then relax.

As you breathe, slowly scan your left leg from your foot to your knee, and up along your leg and through your thigh.

As you breathe out, trace your leg down again to your foot. Do this three times, then take your mind off your breath and place your attention on your foot.

Feel the sensations in your foot. Simply become aware of them. Don't wonder about them, just become aware of them. If your attention wanders elsewhere, simply and gently bring your attention back to your foot.

Scan your left lower leg. Accept any tension or discomfort. Scan slowly, up through your thigh now.

If thoughts appear, that's fine. Gently come back to your breath, and shift your awareness over to your right foot.

Slowly and gently breathe in while scanning through your right calf, your knee, and your thigh. Breathe out and slowly scan back down again. Now keep your attention with your foot.

Scan for any sensation in your foot, your calf, your thigh. Simply notice and accept all sensations.

Now focus on your stomach. Feel it rising as you breathe in and falling as you breathe out.

Remain aware of your stomach and of your breath, your stomach rising and falling as you breathe. Simply notice and accept all sensations, without judging them as good or bad, gently returning your attention when your mind wanders.

Now follow the same process with your left hand and arm as with your legs. You might want to clench your fist at first to help draw your attention to your hand.

Scan along the length of your arm, to your chest, then down your right arm to your right hand. Keep your attention there for a moment. Breathe slowly and deeply. Just sense and scan, notice and move on.

Come back up to your chest. Continue scanning up along your neck and to your face. Gently tighten your jaw muscles and release. Feel the sensations in your jaws and in your throat.

Allow your attention to move over the muscles in your neck and in your face to the top of your head. Notice and move on. Accept any distractions without judgement or criticism and simply gently guide your attention back to your body.

Feel how everything is connected, resting gently. Simply breathe and allow any sensations to come to you. Accept your sensations and your experience as a part of you. Notice how sensations are like emotions are like waves ... they come and go.

Just breathe peacefully for a minute and then sit up slowly. You might want to walk around the room a little, to make sure you are in the 'here and now'.

If you find yourself falling asleep during this exercise, you might find it helpful to lift your head with a pillow, practice with your eyes open or practice sitting up instead of lying down.

Observing the breath

Make sure you're comfortable and have loosened any tight clothing. Close your eyes or lower them to look at a place on the floor.

Now think about the sound of your breath as you breathe slowly in and out.

Focus on the movement of your breathing; between breathing out and breathing in.

Now start to deepen your breath slowly and evenly - keep focused on your breathing, the sound and the movement of your chest and stomach.

Now begin to think about an area of your body which may be particularly tense, identify one or two in your mind by name. Think about how these areas of tension feel.

Now focus on your breathing again, focus on an in-breath at the same time as you locate an area of tension.

Imagine breathing into this area, directing your breath towards the tension. As you breathe out imagine the tension flowing out of your body with your out-breath.

Do that again two or three times, breathing into the area of tension and breathing out and breathing away the tension.

Now, if you wish, move on to another area of tension that you have identified and do the same exercise with that part of the body.

Now focus back on your breathing, bringing it back to normal.

Slowly open your eyes and stay still for a few moments, enjoying the feelings of calmness.

Reflection on the exercises

After these exercises it can be helpful to record how your mind and body feel. Because the benefits of these exercises come with practice, it can be hard to keep doing them over time. Keeping a record of how we feel before and after can help give us the motivation to keep going. After the exercises, ask yourself the following questions:

- Did I feel tension in my body?
- Where was that tension?
- Which parts of my body feel more relaxed now?

Score your overall feelings of comfort or discomfort on a scale of 1 to 10.

A score of 'one' would mean that you feel very good at the moment and 'ten' would indicate that you feel very tense and anxious indeed.

Tension felt in the body before the exercise

Very relaxed ----- Very tense



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Tension felt in the body after the exercise

Very relaxed ----- Very tense



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

After you've completed the exercises, think about whether your previous feelings and sensations have changed.

Continue with this rating process each time you do your exercises.

The Flesch-Kincaid score rates text for 'readability' based on the high school grade level system (i.e. a score of 7.0 would mean a UK 8th year student (age 12 - 13 years) should be able to understand the text). The Flesch Reading Ease Score is based on a 100-point scale; the higher the score, the easier it is to comprehend. The above section has a Flesch score of 7.1 and a FRES of 70.