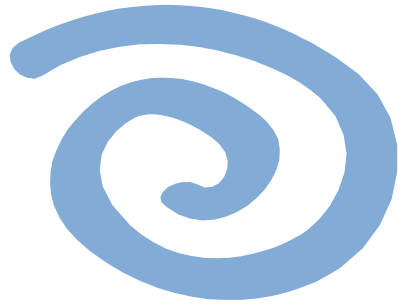


Mindfulness



an introduction



This booklet is for anyone who is interested in finding out more about Mindfulness. You may have heard about it through the media, from health professionals, through friends but - however you first heard, something within you has prompted you to find out more and you have opened this booklet.



What is Mindfulness?

Many of us would like to slow down and be less affected by the buffetings of daily life, we may try to be calmer and more relaxed but find that it is not easy.

Take a moment to stop and notice what is around you, use your senses to hear, touch, feel, see and maybe even taste your surroundings. What can you hear? What can you see? Can you notice the chair under you if you are sitting? Or the floor under you if you are standing, or maybe lying down? And what about you? Are you hot or cold? Can you notice aches or pains?

That is the essence of mindfulness which simply means to be aware of what is happening when it is happening, without judging whether that is good or bad.

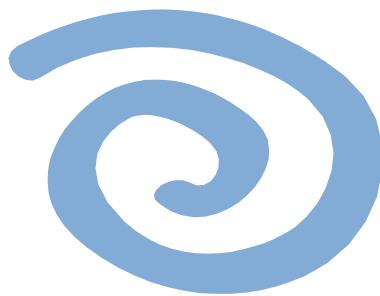
A definition which is often used is that mindfulness is '*paying attention on purpose moment by moment without judging*, (from the book Full Catastrophe Living by Jon Kabat-Zinn). This develops the ability to pay deliberate attention to our experience from moment to moment. We learn to tune in to what is going on in our mind and body day to day without judging our experience.

So - why might that be important?

Have you ever started eating a snack bar, taken a couple of bites, then noticed all you had left was an empty packet in your hand?

Or been driving somewhere and arrived at your destination only to realise you remember nothing about your journey?

Most people have! These are common examples of "mindlessness," or "going on automatic pilot." In our modern, busy lives, we constantly multi task. Its easy to lose awareness of the present moment as when we become lost in our efforts to juggle work, home, finances, and other conflicting demands.



All this can lead to us being "not present" in our own lives. We often fail to notice the good things about our lives, fail to hear what our bodies are telling us, or poison ourselves with toxic self criticism.

Human minds are easily distracted, habitually examining past events and trying to anticipate the future. Becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings and sensations may not sound like an obviously helpful thing to do, however learning to do this in a way that suspends judgment and self-criticism can have an incredibly positive impact on our lives.

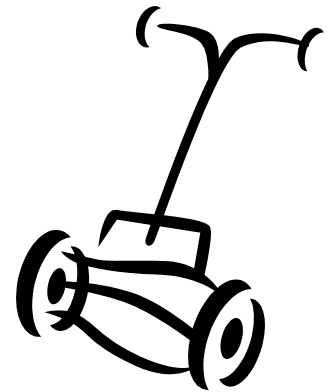
Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to, and seeing clearly whatever is happening in our lives, it is very simple and yet very profound. It will not eliminate life's pressures, but it can help us respond to them in a calmer manner that benefits our heart, head, and body. It helps us recognise and step away from habitual, often unconscious emotional and physiological reactions to everyday events. It provides us with a scientifically researched approach to cultivating clarity, insight, and understanding. Practicing mindfulness allows us to be fully present in our life and work, and therefore improve our quality of life.

Mindfulness does not conflict with any beliefs or tradition, religious, cultural or scientific. When we practice mindfulness, we pay attention to what is happening in the present moment, and notice whatever is happening there, without judgment. We are aware of thoughts, physical sensations, sights, sounds, smells - things we might not normally notice. The actual skills might be simple, but because it is so different to how our minds have learnt to behave, it takes a lot of practice.

It is a natural state of mind, focused and aware, deeply tuned into ourselves, our environment and those around us. As such, it involves being neither in the future nor in the past. It frees us from the constant struggle to either change the way things are that we don't like, or to try to hold on to those things that we do like. It can literally bring us to our senses and allow us to live more fully, day by day.

Here's some examples:

When I was in my garden, looking around, I may think "that grass really needs cutting, and that vegetable patch looks very untidy". My young son on the other hand, would call over excitedly, "Mummy - come and look at this ant!"



Mindfulness involves noticing what we don't normally notice, usually because our heads are too busy in the future or in the past - thinking about what needs to be done, or going over what has already happened.

Mindfulness might simply be described as choosing and learning to control our focus of attention.

Similarly, when washing the dishes each evening, I would be "in my head", thinking about what I had to do, what I'd done earlier in the day, worrying about future events, or regretful thoughts about the past.

Again, my young son came along. "Listen to those bubbles Mummy. They're fun!" He reminded me to be more mindful. Washing up can become a routine (practice of informal) mindful activity. Notice the temperature of the water, the texture of the bubbles and how they feel on the skin. Hear the bubbles as they softly pop continually and the sounds of the water as dishes are taken out and put into the water. Feel the smoothness of the plates and the texture of the sponge. Just noticing what we might not normally notice.

Initially, the more we practice, the more we will notice thoughts. It can seem that this practice is making our minds more active but what is really happening is that we are now noticing just how busy our minds are normally. The only aim of mindful activity is to continually bring our attention back to the activity, noticing thoughts and sensations, those from outside and from within us.



A mindful walk brings new pleasures. Walking is something most of us do at some time each day & we can practice mindful walking, even if only for a couple of minutes. Rather than be "in our heads", we can look around and notice what we see, hear and sense. Notice the sensations and movement of our feet, legs, arms, head and body as we take each step. Notice our breathing. Thoughts will intrude, but we can just notice them, and then bring our attention back to our walking.

How can it help?

Becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings and sensations may not sound like an obviously helpful thing to do, however learning to do this in a way that suspends judgment and self criticism can have surprising results.

Many people report finding inner strengths and resources that help them make wiser decisions about their health and life in general.

Most of us find ourselves frequently 'swept away' by the current of thoughts and feelings, worries, pressures, responsibilities; wanting things to be different from how they are right now.

This can be particularly powerful when we are faced with pain, difficulties and illness that confound our attempts to find a solution or to feel better. Feeling stuck in this way can be draining.

Mindfulness can help us to work directly with the struggle we sometimes have in relating to life's experience and in doing so can really improve the quality of our life.



Let's give it a go.....

Mindful Breathing

One of the main practices of Mindfulness Meditation involves the breathing. The primary aim is to develop a non-judging awareness, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. This takes a while to cultivate but creates calmness and acceptance.

1. Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed, if that is comfortable and your spine reasonably straight.
2. Direct your attention to your breathing.
3. When thoughts, emotions, physical feelings or external sounds occur, simply notice them, giving them the space to come and go without judging or getting involved with them.
4. When you notice that your attention has drifted off and become caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note that the attention has drifted, and then gently bring the attention back to your breathing.

It's ok and natural for thoughts to arise, and for your attention to follow them. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing.

The benefits of Mindfulness include

Helping individuals to:

- Recognise, slow down or stop automatic and habitual reactions.
- Respond more effectively to complex or difficult situations.
- See situations more clearly
- Become more creative
- Achieve balance and resilience at work and at home

Since the late 1970's there have been more than 1000 publications documenting medical and psychological research on mindfulness which demonstrate its validity and breadth of application.

The benefits of mindfulness and meditation are now widely known and the scientific community has found data positively correlating mindfulness and meditation to stress reduction

In the last 30 years, the most widely recognised Mindfulness practices, MBSR & MBCT have been developed and researched in the West. Recent neuroscience & clinical research has helped explain why mindfulness meditation practices work, which has further accelerated its powerful healing effects within traditional medical settings.

Mindfulness is for everyone from all walks of life, young or old. Mindfulness is not a religion and there is no necessary religious component to mindfulness - anyone, with any belief system, can enjoy the benefits of mindfulness.

According to Professor Mark Williams from Oxford University *"Mindfulness is a translation of a word that simply means awareness. It's a direct, intuitive knowing of what you are doing while you are doing it. It's knowing what's going on inside your mind and body, and what's going on in the outside world as well. Most of the time our attention is not in the present moment, it is hijacked by our thoughts and emotions, by our concerns, by our worries for the future, and our regrets and memories of the past. Mindful awareness teaches us to pay attention, in the present moment, and without judgment. It's like training a muscle - training attention to be where you want it to be which reduces our tendency to work on autopilot, allowing us to us choose how we respond & react."*

Interest in mindfulness has been growing steadily in recent years. There are now thousands of research studies into the uses of mindfulness, and professionals are using mindfulness in Boardrooms, Schools, Prisons, Court rooms and hospitals across the world.

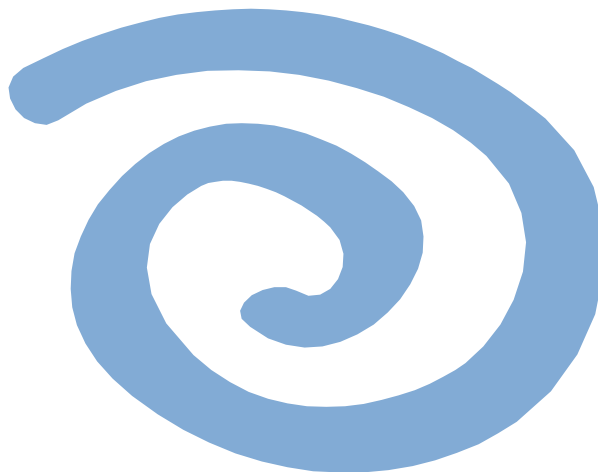
What does mindfulness involve?

Mindfulness practitioners learn to develop this specific type of attention by practicing mindfulness meditation practices & mindful movements. With practice and over time, practitioners learn to slow down brain chatter and automatic or habitual reactions, experiencing the present moment as it really is.

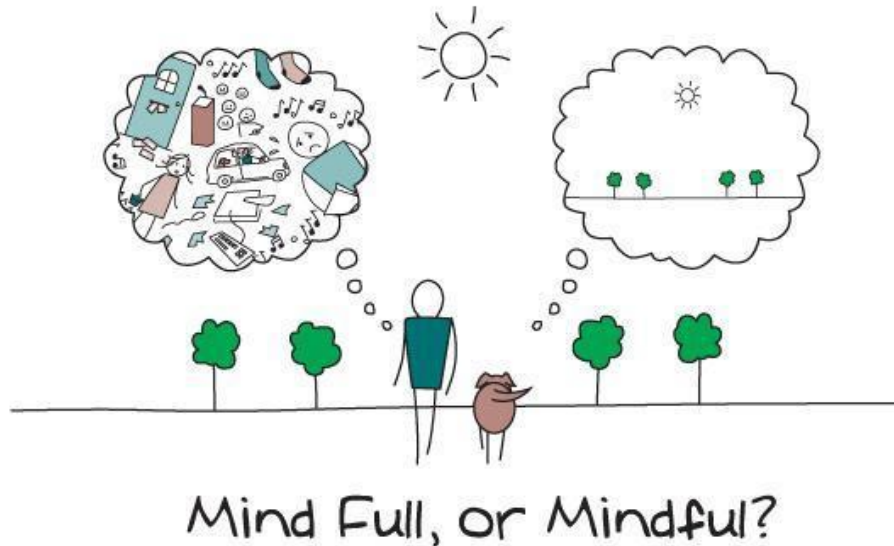
When practicing mindfulness, everyone, however much they practice, will experience thoughts creeping in to their heads uninvited. This is fine - its just what brains do, but how we respond to these thoughts is important.

If we start to think about the thought, or get annoyed with ourselves for not being able to retain our focus, it stops us paying attention and takes us away from the present moment.

If we just acknowledge the thought and let it go without judgment, we retain our focus on being in the present moment.



Image; Clare Goodman



As with all new skills, the more we practice, the easier it becomes. Canadian psychologist, Donald Hebb coined the phrase "neurones that fire together, wire together". In other words, the more we practice mindfulness, the more we develop neuro-pathways in the brain associated with being mindful, which make it easier to be fully in the present moment.

In learning to experience the present moment as it really is, we develop the ability to step back from habitual, often unconscious, emotional & physiological reactions to everyday events. We can then see things as they really are and respond to them wisely.

The origins of the 8-week course in Mindfulness

Mindfulness has its origins in ancient meditation practices. Most of the world religions contain practices which incorporate elements of mindfulness although the 8-week courses are designed for a secular audience.

The course was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn who founded the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in the late 1970's. Since then over 18,000 people have completed the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme. Research has proven it to have a beneficial effect with conditions as diverse as chronic pain, heart disease, anxiety, psoriasis, sleep problems and depression.



In the 1990's Mark Williams, John Teasdale and Zindel Seagal further developed MBSR to help people suffering from depression. Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) combined CBT with Mindfulness. MBCT is clinically approved in the UK by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) as a "treatment of choice" for recurrent depression

The most recognised and researched modern forms of Mindfulness are MBSR & MBCT. These are both normally taught as 8 week programmes with participants meeting for 2-3 hours a week as a group with home practice in-between meetings. Participants are taught a number of specific meditation practices proven to help reduce "brain chatter" and respond more appropriately to thoughts and feelings. Most MBSR / MBCT training include different practices, some involving movement, such as the walking or gentle stretching meditations, whilst others comprise a static posture, standing, lying down or sitting. There is also a three-minute mindfulness meditation which can be used through the day.

Courses at Riverside Wellbeing

All courses are facilitated by Sarah Talbot, an accredited Counsellor and experienced mindfulness trainer. For dates and times, see my website www.growingawareness.net/pages/trainingfutureevents.php

Introductory talk

“A first taste of mindfulness”

Available at specific events ie Open Days

Practice Groups

There are a two practice groups for those who have completed an 8-week course or have some experience of meditation.

Both groups meet monthly, one in the daytime, the other in the evening.

Mindfulness Retreat days

Also for those with some experience of mindfulness practice, the retreat days offer a day of practice including periods of silence during meal breaks. They are held regularly throughout the year

8-week course

This training is not tailored to any particular diagnosis, therefore it is useful for anyone experiencing difficulty whether physical or emotional. Those experiencing stress report finding it particularly helpful.

The 2 hourly sessions are held over 8 weeks. They are run in a workshop style and contain a mixture of Mindfulness practices, group discussion and teaching.

It involves training in mindfulness practices together with discussion on stress & self care. The course content alters slightly dependant on the requirements of the participants. It promotes psychological insights about our experiences and difficulties and aims to develop skills to deal with these differently. You will not be expected to make any personal disclosures nor is there any role play involved.

The training helps participants to be more aware, moment by moment of physical sensations and of thoughts and feelings as mental events. This facilitates a 'decentred' relationship to thoughts and feelings from which we can see them as aspects of experience which move through our awareness and which are not necessarily reality in any given moment.

Other Useful Websites

Information is widely available on the internet, a trusted source of courses is the Mental Health Foundation website; www.bemindful.co.uk/

www.mindfulnet.org/

www.mindfulness-works.com/

www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness/

www.getselfhelp.co.uk/mindfulness.htm

www.oxfordmindfulness.org/





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