

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Take a moment to stop.
Notice your posture.
Be aware of your breathing.
Can you feel your body?
Do you feel any pain or strain anywhere?
Is your mind racing? Or are you calm?
Are you comfortable? Or a bit tense?
Too hot? Cold? Just right?
Are you hungry or thirsty?
What are you actually feeling this second?
Irritable? Happy? Sad? Bored? Relaxed?

This is what mindfulness is about.

Mindfulness is about being completely **IN THE NOW**. It's about noticing, *this second*, how you feel, what you think, what you want, without criticism or judgement.

It's about learning to notice everything in your body, your mind and your environment: the gurgles in your stomach, the twitches in your back, the clenching of your jaw, the rain on the window, the clouds in the sky, the purring of your cat, the flowers in the garden, the smile of your child, the sound of a far-off train, the traffic on the street, a bird twittering on a branch, the itch on your nose, the whirr of your computer, or the taste of a melting square of chocolate on your tongue.

Mindfulness is about noticing everything in the moment.

It's about learning to focus your attention in the present.

This very second. This millisecond. **NOW**.

It's about **living in present time.**

Paradox lost

This seems a very simple thing to do. And yet it seems quite difficult to master for many of us.

It takes effort. It takes decision. It takes regular practice.

The paradox is: *something very simple can be quite difficult to do.*

But in time, with regular, daily practice, that paradox is lost as you gradually gain the skill.

Mindfully.

Mindfulness is:

- * about being present
- * a way to focus on now
- * a way to calm your thoughts down
- * an effective means of relaxing
- * a way to release your creativity
- * a way to boost physical and emotional health
- * a way to gain compassion and empathy

WHY BE MINDFUL?

There is a growing body of evidence – psychological, physiological, scientific – that our 24/7, chaotic, pressurized, stress-filled lives are doing us immense harm.

Many of us are suffering from mental and physical health issues that can be helped significantly by taking the time to slow down and learn, simply, to breathe.

Mindfulness can help you become calmer, more peaceful and focused.

Mindfulness is not about eliminating stress, as stress is a given in life, but it can help us deal with stress and other challenges more effectively. It has been proven to help relieve stress, anxiety and depression and can even relieve some of the symptoms of ailments such as ME (chronic fatigue syndrome), eating disorders, cancer, chronic pain and sleep disorders.

Mindfulness is now recognized by NICE (the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) as an effective form of therapy for dealing with physical and psychological stress. As a consequence, GPs, hospitals, parenting organizations, schools, social services and other government departments are offering mindfulness training and helping people to learn to meditate. Meditation helps slow the mind down and enables it to focus calmly on the here and now, and therefore is the chief, conscious route to achieving a state of mindfulness.

MINDFULNESS AND COGNITIVE THERAPY

In the East, mindfulness and meditation have been a practice of Buddhism for nearly 3,000 years, and over the past two centuries these ideas have spread to the West. Meditation became associated with the hippy counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s, but its benefits later percolated into mainstream society through New Age and other complementary therapies, such as alternative medicine and yoga practices.

In the West, the rise of ‘talking therapies’ in the early twentieth century, such as the psychoanalysis of Freud and Jung, and later the behaviourism of Skinner and Ellis, offered people a way to make sense of their difficulties and pressures. From these two approaches, the humanistic branch of psychotherapy evolved, with therapies such as gestalt, person-centred and psychosynthesis. This kind of work is usually done with individual therapists or in groups.

A lot of these therapies focus on understanding your past as a way of getting beyond it; in the oft-quoted words of Socrates: ‘The unexamined life is not worth living.’ However, many people now think there is also major value in putting the therapeutic focus on the present, rather than the past, as a way of moving forward effectively.

In the twenty-first century, CBT (Cognitive Behavioural Therapy) has become a popular way of helping people deal with anxiety, depression, stress and addictions. CBT is often seen as a way of developing a forward-looking mental muscle to deal with everyday issues. It combats negative thinking and supports individual responsibility. It also provides shorter,

goal-based solutions, rather than long-term psychotherapeutic ‘talking therapy’. CBT can be available via referral from your GP and there are private practitioners available for most types of psychotherapy and CBT. These can be very effective, especially as a way of solving an immediate and pressing problem, such as an addiction or obsessive thinking.

The evolving fusion of Eastern and Western practices and therapies led to the creation of Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which have been proven to be extremely effective in reducing anxiety, depression, addiction, pain, illness and stress. MBCT is a way of retraining your mind to operate in a different way, drawing on techniques from Buddhism and meditation. MBSR also makes use of yoga techniques. Both of these practices emphasize direct personal experience of specific exercises. These are the exercises you will learn in this book. The more you do the exercises, the more mindful, and relaxed, you will become.

The good news is that you can learn to do this for yourself, from this book, today.

Mindfulness can help you enormously, and practice is totally free.

WHY IS MINDFULNESS GROWING IN POPULARITY?

A key figure in developing this area is Jon Kabat-Zinn, who started a stress-reduction clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. He was a molecular biologist who gave up his scientific career to bring his experience of Zen meditation and yoga practices to help sick patients.

Kabat-Zinn wanted to see if patients could improve, physically and mentally, as a result of teaching them to meditate. He also wanted to bring mindfulness meditation – the tenet of Buddhist practice – to a wider Western audience.

His book *Full Catastrophe Living* describes his pioneering work and the astonishing results he achieved from teaching mindfulness meditation to people with chronic illness, stress and pain.

WHAT PROOF IS THERE THAT IT WORKS?

There is growing scientific evidence of the effectiveness of mindfulness. Studies around the world have shown that with regular meditation:

- * anxiety and depression decrease
- * immunity to colds, flu and other diseases is boosted
- * chronic pain, even from cancer, can be reduced
- * feelings of 'happiness' and 'positivity' increase, and regular meditators are more contented than average
- * stress and stressors leading to hypertension and heart disease can be relieved
- * concentration, memory and physical stamina are increased

Overall, it is thought that the 'positive' effects of mindfulness meditation can lead to a longer and healthier life.

HOW DO I BEGIN?

You can start with just five minutes. You need a timer, a high-backed chair and a quiet space.

Basic meditation

Go to your quiet space and make it clear to others that you don't want to be disturbed. Put a sign on the door. Put your phone on silent. Set a timer for 5 minutes.

Sit comfortably with your back supported and your hands resting on your thighs or comfortably in your lap. Close your eyes. Breathe in slowly and think 'rising' as the air comes in through your nose. Breathe out slowly and think 'falling' as the air goes out through your mouth. Focus your mind's attention just behind the mid-point of your forehead.

Continue breathing in and out, thinking 'rising' on the in, 'falling' on the out. Notice background sounds as you breathe, and just let them go. Continue breathing in and out, thinking 'rising' and 'falling'. If you feel an itch or a twitch, don't scratch – let it go. When your mind wanders, bring it gently back to the central point behind your forehead.

When the timer goes off, gently open your eyes. Take a second to notice how you feel. Stretch your arms and legs, get to your feet and stretch again. Pause for a second. Tune in to your body, your feelings, your mind. How do you feel?

REGULAR DAILY PRACTICE

Start small.

Try this basic meditation five minutes a day for a week. Then move up to ten minutes, and then fifteen minutes. Once the technique becomes more familiar, you may want to practise for half an hour and then an hour.

One of the most important parts of the mindfulness meditation is returning your attention to the mid-point behind your forehead. It is this activity that helps to build new neural pathways in the brain – it literally retrains your mind to be more focused and calm.

This is just one basic meditation exercise to help you get started. As you progress, there are other ways to be mindful through other meditations, visualizations and activities. Eventually, you'll be able to take a five-minute meditation break whenever and wherever you feel the need to focus.

You can increase or decrease the time and choose exercises suited to your situation, whether you're in the car, on the train, walking, having a sleepless night, in a doctor's waiting room, or arriving at work – anywhere you feel under duress and in need of calm. Set aside time, and stick to it.

Know yourself: be realistic about when and how to practise. Set your alarm and get out of bed ten minutes earlier, or meditate in bed before you go to sleep once all your chores are done.

You may feel you haven't got time for it. However, once you get into the habit, you will find the rewards will motivate you to take that little bit of time out of your day to make it go better overall.

If you find it hard to concentrate, don't worry. Don't give up. This is a new skill, and it takes time to get used to it. You didn't ride a bike the minute you sat on it. You had to learn to swim or drive a car. Give yourself time to get used to the process and you'll soon get into the swing of it. Be patient with yourself as you learn.

Just give it a go. Then try it again. And again. Soon you'll be doing it, and enjoying it.

Stick with it

Regularity is essential. All the evidence points to regularity being the key to gaining benefits. It is the accumulative effect of slowing down your mind, and calming anxiety and repetitive or obtrusive thoughts, that is so powerful.

If you miss a day, don't beat yourself up. Approach your mindfulness meditation with a positive and kind attitude towards yourself.

Don't judge or punish or berate yourself for forgetting or finding it difficult. Just start over tomorrow if you forgot to practise today.

Even a two-minute meditation can make a world of difference to your mental well-being.

Remember: Regularity is the key to gaining the full benefit.

THE BENEFITS

There is a great deal of evidence of the benefits of mindfulness meditation based on worldwide psychological and neuroscientific research.

- * **It lowers stress**, altering brainwave activity in a positive way;
- * **It eases pain** by controlling the volume knob on pain and emotions, benefiting those experiencing chronic pain due to conditions such as arthritis, cancer and lupus;
- * **It calms**, so you are better able to focus, deal with difficulty, and control your reactions to challenging situations;
- * **It makes music sound better**, helping you truly enjoy music and sound, enabling you to relax when you hear it;
- * **It makes food taste better**, increasing your ability to savour and enjoy food, and as you slow down, you may even naturally consume less;
- * **It can help you relate better** to yourself and to others, making you more compassionate;
- * **It can help you accept yourself**, making it easier for others to connect with you;
- * **It can improve your mental focus**, helping you to study and raising your performance in cognitive and memory tests;
- * **It can help improve memory**, acting as a protective force for the brain's neural activities and protecting against memory loss;

- * **It can help improve performance**, by boosting concentration and confidence;
- * **It can help you cope with cancer** by making you calmer and reducing the stress of cancer treatments;
- * **It can help with addictive and obsessive thoughts** by short-circuiting repetitive and addictive cycles of obsessional thinking;
- * **It can boost your immunity**, increasing your ability to resist colds, flu and other ailments.

BEING VERSUS DOING

Modern life is all about **DOING**.

‘What are you doing today?’

‘What are you doing tonight?’

‘What are you doing at the weekend?’

‘What are you doing now?’

We rush to work on trains, buses and in cars; and when we are caught in traffic jams or queues, our frustration builds as we cannot get where we are going fast enough.

We save time by eating junk food on the run, at our desks and in cars, even in our homes – there’s little or no time to cook or stop to eat with others socially.

We multi-task to attack our ever-growing to-do lists, checking our phones as we talk with friends, heads down, eyes glued to the screen, instead of making eye contact or fully engaging with our surroundings and other people.

Mindfulness is about learning to **BE**, not **DO**.