

## Improving Our Lives through Mindfulness

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### Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a word which we see more and more frequently in the media and on the Internet. It can seem like it's the latest "in-thing", with information and articles popping up everywhere.

But what is it?

Mindfulness is about focusing and directing your attention to the present moment, with acceptance and without judgement. It is about attending to and being aware of what's happening in the environment around you, as well as what's happening inside you – your thoughts, feelings, sensations, desires, and needs.

While this sounds pretty straightforward, being mindful can take a lot of practice and can feel quite strange and uncomfortable when you first start out. This is because we often learn to be less mindful and aware of feelings and sensations in our bodies as we progress through life. Sometimes we get into the habit of being less mindful in order to reduce or avoid overwhelming feelings or sensations of physical or emotional pain. There are a myriad of strategies which can facilitate mindlessness, for example: eating with limited awareness of the food we are consuming; watching hours of TV without really focusing; constantly playing computer games, or getting on to social media for large

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chunks of time; and using alcohol, tobacco, or other drugs to reduce our awareness of the present moment and current feelings and thoughts.

We can also get into the habit of spending a lot of our time ruminating about the past or worrying about the future, or thinking through dozens of ways we could respond to potential scenarios in our lives.

While these types of strategies can work for us and reduce painful feelings and emotions in the short term, they invariably stop working for us over the longer term. They often cause more problems for us by reducing our energy and capacity to respond to what's happening right now, as well as impacting on our health and well-being in negative ways. We can become depressed or experience chronic anxiety or stress, and we can experience sleep problems which leave us feeling exhausted and drained. Our relationships can suffer and we can struggle to care for ourselves and our loved ones while continuing to meet work expectations.

### Why Practise Mindfulness?

Practising mindfulness on a regular basis can help to reduce our reliance on these unhelpful strategies and reverse some of their negative impacts. In fact, research has shown that this form practice leads to a range of improvements in both mental and physical health, including the following:

- Regular practice can reduce the severity of current depressive symptoms, and reduce the risk of relapse for individuals who have experienced three or more previous depressive episodes. (Strauss, Cavanagh, Oliver & Pettman; 2014)
- There are some indications that it can improve symptoms associated with anxiety across a relatively wide range of symptom severity. That is, it can assist individuals who are experiencing levels of anxiety ranging from mild to severe in intensity. (Hofmann, Sawyer, Witt, & Oh, 2010; Gotink et al, 2015)
- Mindfulness based therapy and practice can help to reduce the intensity of pain and improve depression for individuals living with chronic pain. (Veehof, Oskam, Schreurs, & Bohlmeijer; 2010)
- It can reduce general stress levels and improve your quality of life. (Gotink et al, 2015; de Vibe, Solhaug, Tyssen, Friborg, Rosenvinge, Sorlie, & Bjorndal, 2013)
- It can also be a powerful strategy in helping to reduce problem gambling (de Lisle, Dowling, & Allen, 2012), as well as addictions and dependency on alcohol and cannabis. Along with reducing the level of reliance on these habits and drugs, it can lead to a greater sense of control over drug use and a greater feeling of optimism. (Bowen et al; 2006).
- It may help to improve some of the symptoms associated with a number of potentially debilitating illnesses such as chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia and irritable bowel syndrome. These illnesses are often referred to as 'somatisation disorders' as it is difficult to find a direct, underlying medical explanation for many of the symptoms. (Lakhan & Schofield, 2013; Gotink et al, 2015).
- Mindfulness training strengthens parts of the brain associated with attention, sensory processing and the ability to observe your own emotional and cognitive processing (Lazar, et al, 2005).

- It also improves working memory and helps us to better deal with the cognitive demands and negative emotions associated with highly stressful situations (Jha, Stanley, Kiyonaga, Wong, & Gelfand, 2010).

## How do I Practise Mindfulness?

It can be helpful to think of mindfulness as a type of mental training in focusing your attention on the present moment, and letting go of any attachment to any particular point of view or experience. It is also helpful to undertake your practice from a stance of curiosity, exploration and interest, as though you are a scientist exploring a totally new discovery which no one else has seen or encountered before.

Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) [Linehan, 2014] offers a useful approach to mindfulness by outlining specific clusters of mindfulness skills. These include the following **'What'** skills:

- **Observing:** attending to and just noticing what is happening inside (your emotions, thoughts, etc.) or around you. [Mindfulness of Breathing](#) is one way to practice the observing skill; you can find a guide to this type of practice here
- **Describing:** or applying labels and names to what you have observed; e.g., describing and naming a particular feeling that is rising up in your body, or describing thoughts racing through your mind; and
- **Participating:** this skill involves fully engaging in whatever activity you are currently involved in.

These 'What' skills are practiced one at a time. Wherever possible we want to participate fully in whatever we are doing in the moment, or on whatever is happening right now. When this becomes difficult, we can step back and practice observing what is happening inside or outside ourselves, or describing these experiences and events.

In contrast to the what skills, we strive to engage all of the following 'How' skills at the same time:

- **Being non-judgemental:** or taking a non-judgemental stance. Sometimes this means becoming more aware of the judgements we are making and practising letting go of them. Keep in mind, though, that describing a feeling, such as stating you are feeling sad, or upset, or even angry, is not a judgement.
- **One-mindfully:** which means focusing on the one thing or activity in which you are engaged in the moment; and
- **Being effective:** doing what is needed and what will help you move towards your goals and objectives; this means responding to how things are right now rather than how we would like things to be.

## Initial Problems and Challenges when Practising Mindfulness

Sometimes when we start practising being mindful, we feel more relaxed and better about ourselves. Keep in mind, however, that the goal is not relaxation or feeling good. In fact, becoming more mindful can sometimes increase our awareness of painful internal feelings and states, such as physical pain. At these times, undertaking a specific practice such as [Mindfulness of Emotions](#) or [Observing Through Your Senses](#) can help.

It is also important to ensure that the emotions you are feeling don't become overwhelming. The [SUDS scale](#) is a useful tool for tracking and monitoring the intensity of your feelings.

In order to get the benefits of mindfulness, you need to practice on a regular basis; make it a habit and part of your regular routine. For some people, practising first thing in the morning works well. Others prefer to take some time to practice in the evenings; e.g., before they start dinner or as part of their wind-down routine. What's most important is deciding what works best for you and setting up some form of reminder to engage in the practice. This could be as simple as having a sticky note on your desk at work to remind yourself to practice your Observing skill during your lunch break, or having a guided practice set up on your phone with a daily reminder.

Another obstacle that can get in the way is distraction – it can sometimes feel like your thoughts are constantly taking over and distracting your attention. When this happens, think about the mindfulness exercise as a chance to practice refocusing your attention; e.g., if you are practising observing your breathe, then just practice becoming aware of when you have become distracted, acknowledge the distraction, and gently lead your attention back to the sensations associated with breathing. It doesn't matter how often you need to do this; the more you practice refocusing your attention, the easier it will become.

It can also be helpful to follow a guided practice such as one of the practices available on the [Inner Actions](#)® site.

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