

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS WEEK 2020

MINDFULNESS



Mindfulness practise concerns developing our ability to become aware of what we are ‘paying attention’ to and being able to maintain focus and concentration on a subject or object of our choosing. In effect it is a form of mental training. Many of us spend time ‘training’ our bodies to be fit and healthy... why do so few of us do so with our minds?

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is an integrative, mind-body based approach that helps people change the way they think and feel about their experiences, especially stressful experiences. This makes it particularly relevant in an age when some of our main health-care challenges are stress-related – mental health problems, psychological impacts of chronic long-term illness and stress-related physical conditions.

The Government has recently recommended in their NICE guidelines that Mindfulness be a key ingredient in addressing

stress related problems which can manifest as depression, impaired performance in the workplace, lack of energy and motivation.

Becoming more mindful has been described as ‘simple but not easy’ but although it takes determination, practise and perseverance can change the way our minds work. And because our happiness is greatly influenced by our ‘way of looking at the world’ – far more than it is by external conditions – mindfulness can be seen as a foundation for happiness, personal and interpersonal development.

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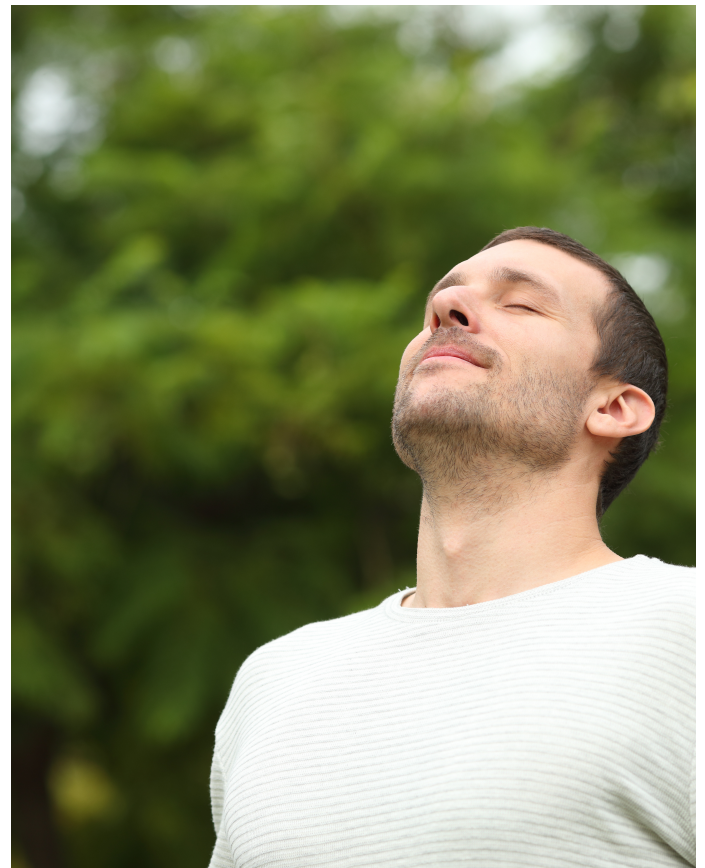
Mindfulness Meditation – first steps in breathing

Meditation can involve visualisation, contemplation and using mantras as well as stabilisation of focus, but all of these depend upon mindfulness and awareness. The instructions that follow are for a basic meditative technique involving paying attention to breathing – also called following the breath or mindful breathing:

- Sit still and comfortably on a chair or cushion and allow your back and neck to be in a straight line, hands resting on thighs with arms and shoulders relaxed, chin slightly tucked in and eyelids relaxed.
- Relax the face, jaw and tongue, with the tongue resting against the upper teeth, mouth very slightly open. (Half-smiling is a great way to relax your face).
- If sitting in a chair keep both feet firmly on the floor and if on a cushion keep the ankles loosely crossed.
- Now take your mind away from its current thought and place your attention decisively on the breath. Do not try to change the breath in any way, just focus on it as it is.
- If this is the first attempt at working with the mind it is not unusual to experience being flooded with thoughts – in fact this is often described as a torrent of thoughts like a waterfall. Or the mind is described as like a 'restless monkey' jumping from place to place or a 'wild horse' yet to be tamed.
- It is important not to be discouraged by this restless flood of thoughts, we should just be aware of and acknowledge the thoughts coming into the mind and then gently but firmly 'escort our attention' back to the breath. (It can help to imagine your attention as a vast space with thoughts as shooting stars moving across the vastness).
- The breath itself is soft, rhythmical and soothing, so focussing on it feels natural and peaceful.
- Now follow a complete cycle of the breath. You can follow this in as much detail as you like, for example feel the sensation of the air leaving the body, the subtle movements of the body as the breath leaves, the slight pause between out-breath and in-breath and the body sensations that accompany the in-breath.

Simply placing the mind on the breath is practising mindfulness. This strengthens attention. Also, whilst focussing on the breath we are not thinking about other things, which adds to the feeling of peace.

Continue this practise by trying to gently and firmly keep your attention on your breathing. When you become aware that you are thinking, remind yourself and come back to the breath. So, taking your attention away from your thoughts and placing it back on the breath is the focus of the meditation – you learn to become aware when you are thinking and return your attention to the breath.



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Stability – the foundation – a little at a time

Continuously re-associating the mind with the breathing creates stability. Becoming more accomplished at keeping the mind on the breath without distraction is a sign that the mind is gradually being 'tamed' – which can be described as establishing the foundation in meditation training.

Because we have trained our mind to be able to focus on one thing we can now have a stronger ability to focus on any object or endeavour. Or put another way; we have tamed the wild horse – no we can ride it wherever we want to go.

As with any form of training, frequency helps to build the foundation. Even if you are unable to meditate for more than a few minutes at a time, try to do so a few times a day and progress to having a longer session daily which might start at 20 minutes and gradually progress to an hour or more.

Clearly mark the beginning and end of the session to acknowledge to yourself that you are making space to work with your mind – you want to engender a general sense of decorum and appreciation without things feeling too rigid or too formal.



Movement – let's walk

As a means of slowing down the mind and helping to integrate mind and body, walking meditation is helpful. You can also use this technique to break up periods of sitting meditation: Put the right hand over the left fist, with both hands just below the solar plexus. Walk slowly and gently, taking short steps and focusing on the placement of each foot from heel to toe and the shifting of weight from foot to foot. You can also 'walk mindfully' whenever you are walking normally (do not do this when you need to be mindful of traffic or other threats). Count your steps per in-breath and out-breath and deliberately focus your attention on how it feels to move; pay attention to all the body movements and sensations that accompany walking.

This practise works for any form of exercise or activity – simply focus your attention deliberately on what you are doing. For example if you like to run, spend some of your run focussing on your 'form'; your body position, how your feet are striking the ground etc. (See 'Running with the mind of meditation' by Sakyong Mipham).

The trouble with the future and the past

A clear benefit of becoming more mindful is that of becoming more aware of our own thinking habits. Once we become aware of them and accept them we have the option to change them if we wish. These worries can keep us from enjoying being here now. So the practise here is to bring your mind back to the present and to gently and kindly recognise the habit every time it pulls you away from the present. Each time you recognise and acknowledge this habit energy you slightly reduce its power over you – you reduce this thinking habit. This doesn't mean you shouldn't look forward to things and make plans; you can still aim to be fully present when doing so.

Mindful breathing helps remind us that past difficulties or traumas are not happening to us now. We are safe right now and we can choose to remember this. Similarly by practising putting your full attention into the present you are training yourself to develop the positive habit of dwelling happily in the present, the here and now.