



Mindfulness

Part 1

What is it?

Most simply, mindfulness is ‘the art of conscious living’ (Kabat-Zinn 2005) – the art of bringing into our awareness the whole of our experiencing, as it happens, in the present, immediate moment of its happening. Traditionally it has its origins in Buddhist philosophy and practice. It is however a way of being with yourself and the world which demands no specific faith, belief or religious context.

Mindfulness is now commonly considered, taught and practised as a secular exercise, and through the findings of evidence based research has become a recognised and respected form of support and treatment for both physical and emotional health in mainstream medicine.

Pausing for a moment then to consider the idea of ‘the whole of our experiencing’, we may perhaps be surprised at just how vast it actually is. Our internal experiencing encompasses out thoughts, our feelings, our breathing, our bodily-felt sensations and our emotions, whilst our external world will include noises we hear, sights we see, smells we smell etc. So the art of conscious living, though simple in its concept, is perhaps by its very nature quite a challenge.

Why is ‘conscious living’ important?

Although this rich source of internal and external experiencing and information is readily and continuously available to

us, as individuals we are generally most conscious of only one part of it – our thoughts. It is these that we tend to most react to and these that we consider our reality, informing subsequent thoughts, feelings and emotions. However, when we consider the idea that our experience is so much wider than just our thoughts, we are actually only responding to a part of our story in reacting just to these. We can therefore very soon be following a ‘train of thought’ that moves us further and further away from the present moment of our actual lived experience, based on information from only a fraction of it. However, if we can allow ourselves to be open to and experience the fullness of our actual ‘moment by moment’ direct experiencing just as it is (i.e. the whole picture, without needing it to be any different) we often find that it is not quite ‘as we thought’. By doing this, we offer ourselves the opportunity to respond to its wholeness, rather than just a single aspect of it. Experience and research indicate that when this happens there is a direct beneficial influence on our physical and mental health and sense of wellbeing. (See section ‘What does the research say?’)

Consider the following

It’s a cold, rainy morning and once again the bus is late – this is the third time this week and you start to feel yourself getting annoyed. You’ve got an important meeting at work and you think you’ll probably be late. Your irritation grows and you wonder how much longer you’re going to have to wait. Perhaps you should have driven. You start to think how hopeless the public transport system is and wonder what you pay your council tax for. This then reminds you that tuition fees are going up next year and now you can feel both irritation and concern within as you start to fret about how you’ll support your children through university. As the feelings of anxiety grow (you’re going to be late, pathetic council spending, unrealistic government policies, financial worries) you start to berate yourself for the stupid idea not to drive, and

your agitation increases. You wonder whether you'll be in any fit state for the meeting once you do finally get there and wish you could just crawl back to bed...

A more mindful response of being with this situation would perhaps go something like this:

It's a cold, rainy morning and once again the bus is late - this is the third time this week and you start to feel yourself getting annoyed. You notice your heart beating slightly quicker and a tightening sensation in your shoulders and abdomen. You notice the low noise of the traffic and the slushy sound of the tyres on the road, the different levels of children's voices. You notice the tingling sensation of the cold air on your nose and the wet of the rain on your face. You feel your weight sinking into your shoes, supported by the ground and the cold sensation of your wet trouser on your ankle. You notice your thoughts, wondering again if you will be late. You start to notice the tightening sensation in your abdomen increase, and you consciously turn your attention to notice and be with the minute experience of each in breath and each out breath...

Mindfulness then is not about good or bad experiences, fast or slow speeds, right or wrong ways of doing things. It is much more about the wholeness of events as we experience them (whatever their size or intensity) and allowing ourselves to be with that, however it is. In this way we give ourselves the opportunity to choose our response more consciously rather than to automatically react.

What does the research say?

The last 10 years in particular have seen a wealth of research into the influence of mindfulness on brain function, emotional wellbeing and

physical health. The results of such studies have now allowed mindfulness to enter mainstream medicine as a recognised form of treatment / support for those with a number of conditions, but most particularly depression and chronic pain. One of the leading teachers, researchers and experts in the field, Jon Kabat-Zinn (2011), says of mindfulness:

'It is really about paying attention, about facing the actuality of things. It's a new way of being in relationship with one's experience. It draws on your own internal resources and offers great potential for learning, growing and healing. It helps us live lives that are more authentic and accepting.'

In the results of a review of 52 studies between 2003 and 2008 Greeson (2008) states:

'Both basic and clinical research indicate that cultivating a more mindful way of being is associated with less emotional distress, more positive states of mind and better quality of life. In addition, mindfulness practice can influence the brain, the autonomic nervous system, stress hormones, the immune system and health behaviours including eating, sleeping and substance use in salutary ways.' He concludes that 'The application of cutting-edge technology toward understanding mindfulness – an 'inner technology' – is elucidating new ways in which attention, awareness, acceptance and compassion may promote optimal health – in mind, body, relationships and spirit.'

Most recently, the results of Hozel, Carmody and Vangel et all (2001), in their study on mindfulness practice in our everyday lives we need to set aside specific time for more formal practice to help cultivate this way of being.

But unlike exercise there is nothing forceful, pushing or goal orientated about mindful practice. In fact, the opposite is true. Mindfulness itself and mindful practice is about being with ‘what is’ however that may be, turning towards what is already present rather than creating a goal to move towards, noticing with a kindly curiosity and an interest all that is arising, without the need for it to be different. So paradoxically, the aim of each mindful practice is to have no aim. There is nothing particular to be achieved, no particular place to get to – simply to allow ourselves to notice and be with whatever arises or emerges within us and without us during the practice time.

To help us with this it is useful to hold in ourselves the following qualities both as we enter into the practices and as we become more familiar mindfulness as a concept in our everyday life.

Qualities of self

Non-judgemental – moving away from judging our thoughts and sensations as good or bad or just with indifference – allowing whatever arises to be there, just as it is without judgement.

Acceptance – ‘it is how it is’ – being as best you can with whatever ‘is’ – thoughts, feeling, sensations. Not bracing against them or resisting them but softening and turning towards them. Whatever is present is present – trying to pretend otherwise can be futile and set up greater distress and anxiety.

Beginner’s mind – each moment, experience, breath is new – irrespective of how many times we have done the same task before, eaten the same food, walked the same route or breathed a breath. No matter how much we ‘think’ we know, our ‘knowledge’ can sometimes get in the way of our direct experiencing of things as they actually are in the present moment.

Patience - honouring the natural rhythm of emergence and evolution – being patient with yourself through the learning process – not pushing, not forcing. There is nothing aggressive about mindfulness.

Letting go – everything passes, whether we like it or not, both the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’. Not attempting to hold on to thoughts or feelings or sensations – being with them as they come and as they go – opening one’s self to the ebb and flow.

Trust – holding the belief of our own inner wisdom – allowing our self to become more fully our self rather than attempting to become more like somebody else. We are the best person to be us.

Non-striving – not trying to get somewhere or achieve something in particular which can take us away from our direct experience – ‘when I’m more relaxed then I’ll be ok’.

(Adapted from Full Catastrophe Living by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2001), Piatkus)

THE PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness practice focuses on three areas: the breath, the body and the body in motion.

The Breath – the practice of Sitting Meditation

Settling into, holding and being conscious of a comfortable yet alert posture throughout the meditation is an important part of the practice. Sitting meditations are therefore usually done on an upright hard backed chair or on the floor using a specific meditation stool or cushions.

Meditation practice can be of any duration (between 20-40 minutes is

common) and practised as frequently as preferred. Often a sitting meditation, depending on the length of time, will start with focusing on the breath and then move specifically through the body sensations, sounds, thoughts and emotions to 'choiceless awareness' – an all-encompassing awareness of all that is arising and passing through our consciousness.

Focusing on the breath serves several purposes and underpins all mindful practice:

- It centres our self completely in the present moment. Each breath can only ever be in the here and now, and so as we follow each in-breath and each out-breath as fully as we are able to we are automatically anchoring ourselves in our immediate experiencing.
- Physiologically our breath, when attended to 'just as it is' – however that may be – has a self-regulating and self-balancing effect which in itself can be settling.
- As a focus for bringing our attention to something, the breath is perfect – it's always available, immediately accessible, constantly with us, requires no special preparation and is completely free!

The Body – the practice of the Body Scan

The body scan generally lasts around 30-40 minutes and tends to be practised either lying comfortably prone on the floor or in a comfortable sitting position.

The body scan guides attention through the whole of the body, region by region, inviting awareness to be brought to whatever feelings and/or sensations may be present in that particular part, at that particular, at that particular moment. The body scan helps us tune in to direct

physical sensations as they occur and guide with intent our focus of awareness from part to part. It also helps us to stay with and explore different feelings and/or sensations however they may be for us.

The Body in Motion – the practice of Mindful Movement

Mindful movement can be practiced in a number of ways such as mindful walking, gentle yoga or tai-chi movements. In a similar way to the body scan, attention is brought to different parts of the body and the sensations that may be present, but this time whilst it is in motion – something that we perhaps rarely do. Mindful movement also helps us to notice, remain with and accept our physical limits and boundaries – offering us the choice of sometimes choosing to move away from them or perhaps extending slightly beyond them. This learning can also be helpfully transferred to our being with more difficult emotional experience.

Part 2

Mindful Practice

In order to be able to focus on the practice itself, rather than trying to remember ‘what comes next’, many mindful practices are guided vocally, either through group practice with a facilitator or by the use of CDs or downloads at home. The following provides an idea of the type of instruction that each practice will include.

Contacting the breath

Lie on your back on the floor, hands resting loosely by your side. Notice in particular the sensations of where your body touches the floor. Allow yourself on each out breath to sink further into the support of the

ground beneath you. Breathe fully, from your chest and abdomen, and then gently move your hands to rest on your abdomen. Focus your consciousness on the physical sensation of your hands rising and falling with each breath. Rest here in awareness for a few moments, then gently remove your hands, returning them to your sides. Focus attention now into the abdomen and experience directly, as much as possible, the sensations of breathing.

Mindfulness of breathing meditation

Settle into a comfortable sitting position – alert, dignified, upright. Bring awareness to the body – the physical sensations, where contact is made with the floor, your seat, your hands resting on your lap. Experience a sense of centeredness, connectedness and support – the weight of you sinking down, the height of you rising up. Bring your attention to the sensations of breathing. Follow your breath as it enters your body through the nostrils, down the back of the throat, into the abdomen. Experience the rise and fall of your abdomen. Follow your breath as it leaves your body. Notice perhaps the pause between breaths. Just focus on this breath, then this breath, then this breath. Don't consciously change the rhythm of your breathing or the depth of your breathing – just be with each new breath in each new moment as if for the first time. Gently bring your attention back to the breath each time you notice that your mind has wandered – not judging the wandering or where it's wandered to, not getting caught up in more and more thoughts but just perhaps noting where the mind has travelled to and then gently but intentionally returning it back to the breath.

Observing – acknowledging – returning – again and again and again

Mindfulness of sound

Settle into mindfulness of breathing as above. Consciously choose to move away from the breath and up to your ears; to awareness of sound, to awareness of the silence between sounds. Don't move out to seek sound, but open up to allow sound to come to you. Bring awareness to the different levels, pitches, lengths, spaces. Anchor yourself by returning to focus on the breath if you find your mind wandering (as above) and then return to awareness of sound.

Mindfulness of thought

Consciously move away from sound to awareness of thoughts. Allow them to arise, be acknowledge and then let go of them. Do this perhaps like watching a film, seeing the images come and go but not getting drawn into them, just noticing. Do this perhaps like standing and watching a train pass by, aware of the carriages but knowing you can just let them pass. You don't have to get on. Or do this perhaps like clouds in the sky, your mind being the spaciousness of the blue sky and your thoughts being clouds that float by as you sit and watch. If you notice yourself getting drawn into some thoughts, gently acknowledge that particular thought, maybe noting its charge, its weight and then gently but firmly returning your attention to the anchor of the breath and then back to 'just noticing' thoughts.

Mindfulness of walking

Intentionally choose to bring your attention to the sensations of walking. Be still and notice the contact, connectedness and support of the floor as you stand balanced on both feet. Choose to lift one foot as you prepare to take the first step. Notice sensations as your heel and then your toes peel off the floor, the bending of the knee and the transferring of weight from one leg to the other as you prepare to lower your foot and move your weight forward. Notice the lowering of the foot and the

simultaneous raising of the opposite foot as the step is taken. Allow your eyes to fall in a soft focus in front of you – not staring at your feet or what's around you. Anchor yourself by returning to focus on the breath if you find your mind wandering, and then return to mindfulness of walking.

Mindfulness of movement

With all of the following movements it is important that you move and hold each of them only for as long as is right for you, in your body, in that moment.

Mindfulness is not about pushing through or forcing beyond comfortable limits emotionally or physically. It is more about recognising where we are and where our 'edges' may be, and then making a conscious choice to move gently towards this edge as far as is comfortable – or to move away from it.

All movements begin from the following basic posture. Stand with your feet about a hip width apart, knees softly bent, hips facing forward, shoulders relaxed, arms hanging loosely at your sides, head aligned centrally between your shoulders, chin tucked in slightly, eyes looking forward. Bring awareness to the sensations of breathing and just resting here in awareness for a moment.

1. On an in-breath gently raise your right arm up straight above your head with your fingertips pointing upwards, your left hand hanging loosely at your side. Bring awareness to whatever sensations may be present, particularly in your arms and through your side. On an out-breath slowly peel your left heel off the floor, as with your right arm you gently increase the stretch, reaching further up with your fingertips. Breathe and rest here in awareness, noticing any changes in sensations, perhaps tingling, perhaps areas of warmth or cold as

you pause for a moment before slowly bringing your left heel down to the floor, lowering your right arm and slowly coming to rest.

Notice changing sensations as you anticipate, move towards and then come to rest. Pause, anchor yourself in the breath and then repeat the exercise on your left side.

2. On an in-breath gently raise both arms to shoulder height. On an out-breath gently turn both hands so the fingertips are pointing towards the sky. Notice perhaps the pull across the elbow joint and down the forearm, noticing perhaps any tingling. Hold the position for a few breaths, and then if you feel comfortable just extend the stretch a little by gently pushing further outwards the palms of your hands. Hold the position for a few breaths, keeping your gaze softly focused, your legs, knees and shoulders relaxed. Notice any change in sensations in intensity and/or position. Gradually lower your hands and arms noticing the different sensations as your body comes to a place of rest.
3. Gently lift both shoulders up towards your ears, slowly rolling them backwards, lowering them, rolling them forward and then raising them up again in a circular motion. Repeat several times and then change direction. Notice any particular areas of tension or discomfort, moving only as far as is comfortable for you.
4. Slowly make very small circles with the tip of your nose, allowing your eyes to follow the circle. Gradually increase the size of the circle, lowering your chin towards your chest on the downward curve. Repeat several times, change direction and then come to rest.

Some general tips for meditation and mindful practice

- Practice at a time and place where you will be free from interruption, in an environment which is warm and comfortable.
- Practice at a time when you're not too tired.
- Initially practice for say 10 minutes then gradually increase the time.
- Consider setting a gentle timer so you can allow yourself to move fully into the meditation without having to 'keep an eye on the time'.
- Consider setting specific times aside on specific days rather than thinking 'I'll do it when I've got time'.
- Remember it's a skill that takes time, discipline and commitment – just like exercise.
- Be patient with yourself and allow your experience to be your experience each time without judging it or yourself.

How do I find out more?

There is now a wealth of information available on mindfulness in many different formats, books, guided practices, courses, workshops.

Googling Mindfulness followed by your chosen format (and local area if looking at courses) will bring up a wide variety of options. The following is only a very small selection.

Books

- Full Catastrophe Living: How to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation (1990), Jon Kabat-Zinn, Piakus
- The Mindful Way through Depression: Freeing yourself from Chronic Unhappiness (2007), Mark Williams, John Easdale, Zindel Segal and Jon Kabat-Zinn, Guildford Press

- Mindfulness in Plain English (2002), Bhabte Henepola Gunaratana, Wisdom

Websites

- www.bemindful.com
- www.mindfulexperience.org
- www.mentalhealth.org.uk

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction courses

- www.cambridgebuddhistcentre.com

References

- Greeson, J.M. (2008) Mindfulness Research Update: 2008, Complementary Health Practice Review (2009) January 1;14(1) 10-18. Retrieved from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2679512>
- Holzel B.K., Carmody J, Vangel M et al (2011). Mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional brain gray matter density. Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging 191 36-43.
- Kabat Zinn, J. (2011) Norris Cotton Cancer Centre.
- Kabat Zinn, J. (2008) Full Catastrophe Living. How to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation. Piatkus, ISBN 978-0-7499-1585-8
- Kabat Zinne, J. (2005). Where-ever you Go, there you are. Piatkus.

Staff Counselling Service
1st Floor, 17 Mill Lane
Cambridge, CB2 1RX
Tel: 01223 762160

Email: staffcouns@admin.cam.ac.uk
Website: <https://staff.counselling.cam.ac.uk>