

Introduction to Mindfulness



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Mindfulness appears to be the 'in' thing these days. You will find Mindfulness in the papers, magazines, on the TV, and the internet. So why is it so popular? Mindfulness has been around for a long time, for thousands of years. It has many shapes and fashions, but what underlines all of this is that it can help us cope with life better.

However, there are a few things we must clear up first regarding Mindfulness as to what it can and cannot do. Many people have the belief that people who do mindfulness can clear their minds of thoughts. That is what mindfulness is all about, isn't it? No human-being can stop thinking, it is just impossible, what mindfulness is about is changing your relationship with your thoughts/thinking.

This is a quote from Jon Kabat-Zinn on mindfulness, Jon Kabat-Zinn is recognised as one of the main individuals to start mindfulness in the west.

"Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of the present-moment reality. It wakes you up to the fact that our lives unfold only in moments. If we are not fully present for many of those moments, we may not only miss what is most valuable in our lives but also fail to realise the richness and the depth of our possibilities for growth and transformation."



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So, how do we do it? There are different ways to be mindful, I guarantee that you have been mindful at some point in your life but didn't recognise it. You may have experienced a time when you were so focused on what you were doing, playing with the kids, going for a walk, noticing a sunset or sunrise. But for a fraction of time, you felt ok, not excited or full of happiness, but ok. If you recognise that experience then you just experienced mindfulness.



The most talked-about way of experiencing mindfulness is through meditation, a good way I find to think about meditation is to compare it to going to the gym for your physical health. However, we all know you don't need to go to the gym to get fit. The same goes for mindfulness, there are several other ways to experience it without doing meditation, whatever works for you. I will cover some of these later, as for just now I will talk about meditation.

Meditation is a practice to develop, to start with if you can find a position that is comfortable and relaxed, but not too relaxed that you fall asleep. Mindfulness is not about relaxation, relaxation is a side effect of meditation. The meditation aims to bring your attention to the present moment, very often you start with the breath, bring your attention to the sensation of breathing in and out. It is important not to think about the breath but to feel the sensation of the breath coming and going. You may find that listening to something, such as a ticking clock may be more comfortable for you. There is no right or wrong so long as it is something that is happening in the present moment.

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As you pay attention to the present moment you will very quickly be taken away by the mind to the future or the past or it may be something happening in your life now, but will be in the form of judgments. This is perfectly normal, this is what the mind does, you will lead to problems if you try to force your mind back. The process is to become aware of and acknowledge the thought then gently bring your attention back to the present moment. This process may be repeated hundreds of times throughout a meditation, but becomes less over time and practice.

What I have just spoken about is called formal mindfulness, there is also informal mindfulness. There are many ways this can be done, such as when out for a walk, doing a hobby, out in the garden, playing with the kids. It doesn't matter what it is just so long as you can bring your attention to the present moment, even if it is only for a very short time.



This cycle of bringing your attention to the present is the heart of mindfulness, the more you become aware of the mind and the process it goes through you will recognise the way the mind does not stay present for very long and if it does it will be making judgments and opinions on the present moment. A good way to think about the mind is as a time traveller, the mind wants to take you into the future, which is very often linked to fear and anxiety, or it takes you to the past which is linked to depression, sadness, guilt or shame, and many more emotions. What you will become aware of over some time, is that your mind can travel, but you physically can't.

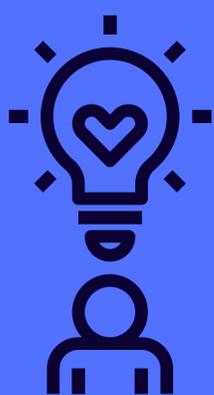
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So, in all essence, you are always in the present and this is what we all have great difficulty in doing. The mind wanders off, we pay attention to it, then we believe everything it comes with and to make matters worse the body reacts to the mind, so we feel what we think and now we have just created the perfect illusion.

This has been an overview of mindfulness, it is something to be experienced rather than just reading about it. It is a journey where the destination is not truly of relevance it is more the journey. If you are one of the lucky few to reach the destination, well done you, come along to Mindspace and tell us about it. For most of us, myself included, it is a lifelong commitment, but one worth doing. Mindfulness is not the answer to everything, it will not stop things happening to you in your life, but what it can do is to make it easier to handle life. The mind is an incredible thing, it can allow us to imagine lots of things, good and bad. But it can create a lot of suffering. Being able to watch the mind in a mindfulness way can decrease the suffering, happy Mindfulness!



Resources

www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness

www.mrsmindfulness.com/what-is-mindfulness

www.scientificamerican.com/article/mindfulness-the-science-behind-the-practice