

Mindfulness

What is Mindfulness?

Have you ever been doing something, brushing your teeth, walking the dog, doing the washing up etc., and suddenly realised that you have come to the end of what you were doing without really noticing what has happened? If so you are not alone, this is something that we all do from time-to-time as our minds wander off to thinking about other things and we switch onto “autopilot”.

Being on autopilot can be quite helpful at times, allowing us to problem solve, plan etc. while getting on with the little things we need to do. However, there may be times when we experience unhelpful thoughts (worries, doubts, self-criticism, painful memories) and painful feelings fighting for our attention, making it hard to concentrate on what we are doing. At these times, we can feel disconnected from life, rather than being an active participant. Another way of looking at this might be we feel that we are watching a film of our life rather than starring in it. At these times, it can feel like we are stuck on autopilot.

Mindfulness is the alternative to being on autopilot. Mindfulness involves paying attention to the present moment; on purpose and without judgement (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). It is an approach by which we may become more aware of our thoughts and feelings and more connected to our experiences.

The Practice of Mindfulness



Mindfulness can be practiced anytime, anywhere by noticing what our mind is doing and gently bringing ourselves back to the present moment. It is very likely that your mind will drift off repeatedly. That is to be expected. When you notice yourself drifting off, merely bring yourself back to focusing on whatever you were focussing on - usually your breath. You may have to bring yourself back many times during mindfulness practice. That's ok. It doesn't mean you are doing it wrong. Our minds constantly pull us out of the present moment. We are gently practicing coming back to the present whenever we notice we've left it.

What are the benefits of practicing mindfulness?

There is a lot of evidence that mindfulness can help us to manage difficult thoughts and feelings. It may also help us to improve our attention and concentration. It may help us to do this by:

- Helping to steady and ground us
- Enabling us to stay with our emotions until they disappear, so giving us a way of safely managing them
- Giving us a “platform” from which to observe our thoughts and feelings – to allow us to see that we are separate from our thoughts and feelings
- Helping us to become more aware of the times when our mind wanders off and better at bringing it back to whatever we are doing
- To provide a tool for impulse control

Common Pitfalls

“It doesn't work for me!”

People often complain that mindfulness “doesn’t work for me”. This is usually because they believe that mindfulness should make them feel a certain way. It is important to be aware that mindfulness is not about “achieving a desired state”, it is simply about “being with” our experiences.

You may notice yourself feeling relaxed. That's a nice by-product of mindfulness, but not the goal. The goal is merely to be present as much as we can. And you may encounter feelings - emotions, physical sensations - which you don't like. If that happens, see if you can take an open and compassionate stance towards those feelings, without trying to change them.

“But the problem hasn’t gone away!”

Another common complaint when people practice mindfulness is that it doesn’t solve the problem. When people encounter difficult life events (e.g. exams, money worries, health problems, relationship difficulties etc.) these often lead to painful thoughts and feelings. People may turn to mindfulness at these times to try to cope, however become frustrated when it doesn’t ‘fix’ the problem.

Mindfulness does not provide a way out of difficult life events, but may help the person step back and observe their experiences. This may in turn give them the opportunity to see things from a different perspective, or think about what else they might need to help them through this time.

“I haven’t got time”

When people think of mindfulness their first thought is often about meditation and how they might make time for this in their busy lives. However mindfulness, put simply, is about paying attention. This is something we can do anytime, anywhere. There are a few ideas below in the mindfulness exercises section about how you might be more mindful in your day-to-day tasks.



Introducing Mindfulness to Children and Young People

First things first...

Establish your own practice. You would have trouble teaching your children to ride a bike if you had never learned. To teach mindfulness to your children, you need to practice it yourself. There are a few exercises below that might help you to begin to bring this into your life. Don't let this step stop you, there are lots of simple ways to bring mindfulness into your life in small ways!

Keep it simple. Mindfulness is a big word for kids to understand. So perhaps introduce it as paying attention: it is noticing our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and what is happening right now.

Check your expectations. Are you expecting mindfulness to stop anger outbursts? To eliminate worry? If so, you are likely to be disappointed. Remember that while feeling relaxed or reducing anger might be nice side-effects of mindfulness, they are not the ultimate goal. Mindfulness will not get rid of what is normal child behaviour like tantrums, loudness, whining etc.

Don't force it. If your kids aren't interested drop it and come back to it at another time.



Listen to the Bell

An easy way for children to practice mindfulness is to focus on paying attention to what they can hear. You can use a bell, a set of chimes or a phone app that has sounds on it. Tell your children that you will make the sound, and they should listen carefully until they can no longer hear the sound (which is usually 30 seconds to a minute).

Practice with a Breathing Buddy

For young children, an instruction to simply "pay attention to the breath" can be hard to follow. One way to make this easier may be to practice with a breathing buddy. Ask your child to lie down and place a stuffed toy (their buddy) on their belly. They focus their attention on the rise and fall of the stuffed animal as they breathe in and out.

Make your Walks Mindful – Go for a “Noticing Walk”

Take your child out for a walk and ask them to notice things that they haven't seen before. You might choose part of the walk to be completely silent and notice all the different sounds you can hear, or a part to walk slowly and notice all the things that happen in our bodies when we walk.



Establish a Gratitude Practice

Gratitude is a fundamental component of mindfulness and it is important to teach children to appreciate the little things in their lives, as opposed to focusing on all the toys and goodies that they crave. You might introduce this by having a time each day/week to share the things you are thankful for (e.g. over dinner, just before bed).

Try the Spider Man Meditation!

For children that are obsessed with all things superheroes, this can be really effective. Ask them to activate their “spidey-senses” and to notice everything they can smell, taste, hear in the present moment.



Check your Personal Weather Report

In *Sitting Still Like a Frog*, Eline Snel encourages children to “summon the weather report that best describes [their] feelings at the moment.” Sunny, rainy, stormy, calm, windy, tsunami? This activity allows children to observe their present state without overly identifying with their emotions. They can't change the weather outside, and we can't change our emotions or feelings either. All we can change is how we relate to them. It allows children to notice also that they are not their emotions. As Snel describes it, children can recognize, “I am not the downpour, but I notice that it is raining”.

Make a Mind Jar

A mind jar is a bit like a snow globe - shake it up and watch the storm! But soon, if we sit and breathe and simply watch the disturbance, it settles. As do our minds.

A version of this post first appeared on Sarah's blog **Left Brain Buddha**. You can follow Sarah on Facebook, Pinterest, and Twitter. Follow Sarah Rudell Beach on Twitter: www.twitter.com/leftbrainbuddha



Mindfulness Exercises for Busy Lives

Mindfulness in Your Morning Routine

Pick an activity that is part of your daily morning routine, such as brushing your teeth, or having a shower. When you do it, totally focus on what you are doing: the body movements, the taste, the touch, the smell, the sight, the sound etc.

For example, when you're in the shower, notice the sounds of the water as it sprays out of the nozzle, as it hits your body and as it gurgles down the hole. Notice the temperature of the water and the feel of it in your hair and on your shoulders and running down our legs. Notice the smell of the soap and shampoo and the feel of them against your skin. Notice the sight of the water droplets on the walls or shower screen, the water dripping down your body and the steam rising upwards. Notice the movements of your arms as you wash or scrub or shampoo.

When thoughts arise, acknowledge them, let them be and bring your attention back to the shower. Again and again, your attention will wander. As soon as you realize this has happened, gently acknowledge it, note what distracted you, and bring your attention back to the shower.



Take Ten Breaths

- Throughout the day, pause for a moment and take ten slow, deep breaths. Focus on breathing out as slowly as possible, until the lungs are completely empty and breathing in using your diaphragm.
- Notice the sensations of your lungs emptying and your ribcage falling as you breathe out. Notice the rising and falling of your abdomen.
- Notice what thoughts are passing through your mind. Notice what feelings are passing through your body.
- Observe those thoughts and feelings without judging them as good or bad and without trying to change them, avoid them, or hold onto them. Simply observe them.

Notice Five Things

This is a simple exercise to centre yourself and connect with your environment. Practice it throughout the day, especially any time you find yourself getting caught up in your thoughts and feelings.

- Pause for a moment
- Look around and notice five things you can see.
- Listen carefully and notice five things you can hear.
- Notice five things you can feel in contact with your body (E.g. Your watch against your wrist, your trousers against your legs, the air upon your face, your feet upon the floor, your back against the chair etc.).

Mindful Eating

How often do you get to the end of a meal without really noticing what you have eaten? Mindful eating encourages us to slow down and to really pay attention to the experience of eating; what does the food look like? What does it smell like? What do you notice about the texture and taste? How do you know when you are full?

Helpful Links and Resources

<https://www.headspace.com/>

Head space is mindfulness made simple. There is an app which can be downloaded to support mindfulness practice.

<http://www.freemindfulness.org/download>

This site provides a range of free audio downloads that can be used to support mindfulness practice.

Books:

John Kabat-Zinn (2012). *Mindfulness for Beginners: Reclaiming the Present Moment-and Your Life.*

Eline Snel (2014). *Sitting still like a frog: mindfulness exercises for kids (and their parents).*

Alisa Reddy (2014). *The art of mindfulness for children: mindfulness exercises that will raise happier, confident, compassionate and calmer children.*

