



AN INTRODUCTION TO MINDFULNESS



Prudent
SUPPORTED LIVING



JUST ONE THING
Mindfulness

Mindfulness has become quite the buzzword



Mindfulness apps, colouring books, how-to guides, journals, daily affirmation cards, and 'jars of mindful tasks' are easily available to support our quest to become more mindful.

And, on some level, many of us have a feeling that we could do with being a bit more mindful. Perhaps there is a sense that we should be more present in our lives, be more present for others, be less judgemental, enjoy the simple things, and live each day as if it really mattered. But often these are fleeting thoughts, easily swallowed up by bustle of our daily lives or the next fire that needs fighting.

If we really are to become more mindful, to show up more fully for our lives, then we must begin practicing. But where do we start?

About Me – How did I become a Mindfulness Practitioner?

Like many of us, my adult life has been a busy juggling act. I have attempted to balance study, work, family, house moves, illnesses, bereavement, and a myriad of unexpected challenges. I guess I have managed, but it hasn't always felt easy or enjoyable.

After the loss of my father at the age of 18, I struggled with depression. During the years that followed, I found that I kept getting stuck. I would go through periods of feeling lost, sad, anxious, exhausted, depressed, and overwhelmed. Sometimes there seemed to be a trigger, sometimes things just seemed to creep up on me for no apparent reason. Even when I felt 'okay' there seemed to be a subtle cloud of dissatisfaction and unease hanging over me. My mind was always prodding me with a relentless loop of "why this - what if that - when will - if only – I should have – I could have"

Why is it always raining when I walk the dog? What if the doctor can't see us this week? When will the kids remember to bring home their lunch boxes? If only we could afford a bigger place. I should have sent that birthday card sooner. I could have got that job if I had a bit more flexibility.

I tried to figure out what was going wrong, and what was wrong with me. Why didn't I feel happier, steadier, more satisfied with life? I brooded, tried changing jobs, had counselling, took anti-depressants, read self-help books, and took exercise. These were all useful and seemed to help for a while, but for me personally, nothing seemed to have a lasting impact. Happiness and a sense of wellbeing seemed to illude me.

Stumbling across the practice of mindfulness was a turning point. Learning to stop and simply observe my present moment experience without trying to change or 'fix' it, allowed me to get a better understanding of what was actually happening internally and externally. Through mindfulness, I have grown more familiar with the automatic patterns of mind and body that have been driving so many of the reactions, decisions, emotions, and moods I have experienced during my adult life. With practice, I am learning to gently let go of those habits that add to my discomfort and unhappiness. This has created a space for making new, more skilful choices and a growing sense of well-being and stability.

Why do we struggle?

All of us instinctively want to feel happy, steady, and complete. But more often than not, we are left with the feeling that life is somehow difficult and often unsatisfactory. Emotional difficulties come in all shapes, sizes, and intensities. They can be related to big life events or low-level everyday niggles. At some point we will **all experience** one or more of the following:



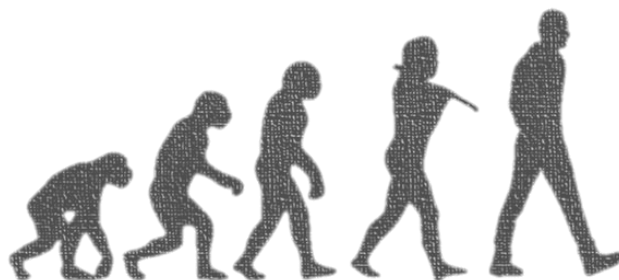
- Fear
- Anger
- Anxiety
- Guilt
- Shame
- Disgust
- Grief

in relation to something that is happening now; when we recall something that happened in the past; or when we think about what might happen in the future. These 'feelings' can be subtle or obvious.

Our experience of these perfectly normal human emotions can become problematic if we try to 'avoid' or conversely 'ruminate' on these feelings. These 'reactions' can leave us feeling anxious, stressed, overwhelmed, exhausted, or even depressed.

It's not our fault...

- The problem *may* be that early humans didn't evolve to be happy, they evolved to survive. It was all about fight, flight, natural selection, and surviving long enough to find a mate and raise children!
- The evolution of human cognition and our ability for abstract thinking, innovation, and planning for the future, is also part of our survival toolkit and not primarily designed to bring us 'happiness.'
- Emotions originally evolved to ensure our survival. They help us to avoid danger by telling us what is safe and unsafe.



Meet Fred and Wilma...



Fred and Wilma were early Homo sapiens living about 40,000 years ago. They had evolved quite a bit from their Homo erectus ancestors, developing enormous brains. The couple used their brains to do all sorts of marvellous things that helped them survive: to think abstractly, plan for their future, find novel solutions to problems, and trade with their neighbours. They were even able to make cave paintings and stone jewellery in their spare time.

But Fred's and Wilma's brains also gave them trouble. They worried about wolves and bears, were envious of their neighbours who had a bigger cave and got into arguments over who should fetch the water on hot days. When it was cold and rainy, they both got irritable, remembering how much better they liked the sun. They noticed changes around them, fretting when there wasn't as much fruit on the trees, roots to eat, or insect larvae (a favourite treat) to snack on. When neighbours got sick or died, they were distressed to realize that this could happen to them too.

Sometimes Wilma got upset when Fred looked at other women. Then she wouldn't have sex with him—which upset him. Sometimes they both thought about their dog that was eaten by the wolves. And they felt terrible whenever their son was hurt by the bully from over the hill. Even when everything was going well, they had thoughts about what had gone wrong in the past or what might befall them in the future. Fred and Wilma were surviving pretty well, and their son had a good chance of making it too, but they still had a lot on their minds.

Does this sound familiar?

So, although the world has changed a lot since Fred and Wilma lived in their little cave, envying their neighbour's home, and arguing over the chores, our own minds are often caught up in very similar 'automatic' habit patterns. These habit patterns can cause us a great deal of discomfort and unhappiness and include:

- Resisting inevitable change
- Seeking out and clinging to pleasant experiences
- Avoiding pain and unpleasantness
- Constant thinking – often with negative undertones
- Working towards goals and outcomes
- Comparing ourselves to others
- Filtering out many parts of our experience – ignoring aspects of our lives as we pursue pleasure or goals
- Blaming ourselves (and sometimes others) for our own perceived unhappiness

Mind Wandering and Automatic Pilot

Interestingly, we are often completely unaware of these automatic, often deeply ingrained, habits of mind. Why is this? Because we spend most of our lives in 'Automatic Pilot' and Doing Mode.

- More often than not, our attention is divided between many different things at any given moment. How many of us check our texts whilst waiting at the checkouts; eat our lunch whilst working at our desks; sort washing or do some tidying as we watch the dinner cooking?
- And, whilst our bodies are busy carrying out all these tasks, our minds are often somewhere else completely. We might worry about a family issue as we drive to work; 'rehearse' a future event as we clean the house; anxiously recall our 'to-do list' as we eat our evening meal; and mentally plan tomorrow's tasks whilst brushing our teeth at bedtime.
- Our minds seem to go round and round automatically, jumping from one thing to another, with little or no direction from ourselves. A mind that is 'scattered' in this way can be troublesome - how often do we feel overtired, forgetful, lacking in concentration, dissatisfied, uneasy, or even overwhelmed?

The mind's ability to automate our life using habits is truly brilliant. Automatic pilot extends the mind's 'working memory' by creating habits that allow us to carry out routine, but complex tasks, with very little conscious input. We can get dressed, drive the car, and make a cup of tea without having to 'remember' what to do each time. Automatic pilot can free up a lot of headspace and time.

However, automatic pilot is a feature of our lives that we hardly ever notice and, as a result, we can easily lose conscious control over it. You can easily end up thinking, working, eating, driving, and walking with very little awareness of what you are doing. The danger is, we can miss much of our lives in this way, including the everyday simple pleasures that can bring us joy and recharge our batteries!

Automatic pilot can be especially troublesome when we are very busy and feeling overloaded. Under pressure, we often become preoccupied, develop tunnel vision, and may unwittingly give more and more control to automatic pilot, including much of what we think. When we are in automatic pilot mode, we become less able to separate what is *actually happening* from *our unexamined interpretation* of events – the storylines our minds are creating. This can be problematic if we are feeling stressed, anxious, or low because, at those times, the storylines tend to be repetitive, rigid, negative, and self-critical.



A wandering mind is an unhappy mind

A Harvard study¹ found that people spend 46.9 % of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they are doing. It seems that this kind of 'mindlessness' is the default setting for many of us, with the mind spending much of its time focused on the past, the future, or wading through self-critical 'should haves' and 'what ifs'. The study found that allowing the brain to run on automatic pilot like this can make people unhappy. The researchers concluded that "A wandering mind is an unhappy mind."

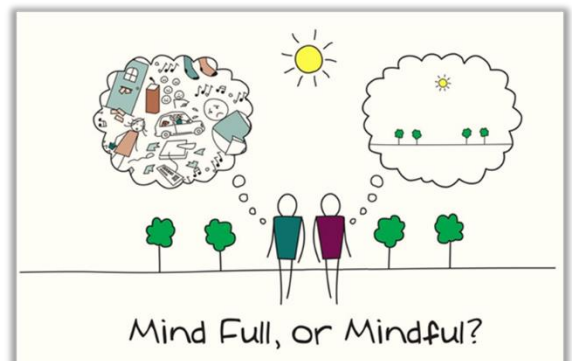


Evidence also suggests that the pace of life and the number of things we have to worry about is a major cause of stress, unhappiness, and illness². And although multi-tasking might appear to help us tick off items on that 'to do' list, research³ has shown that it can actually reduce our productivity, accuracy, and memory. We end up wasting energy by switching from one thing to the next in quick succession.

Moreover, this constant focus on 'doing' means that we can be missing out on all the good stuff happening in our lives right now, the stuff that could be nourishing and replenishing us.

Moving from Mindlessness to Mindfulness

The practice of mindfulness, or gently training the attention, enables us to notice when we are in automatic pilot and 'living in our heads.' By cultivating mindfulness, we start to become aware of the habit patterns that 'drive' our everyday behaviours and could be adding to our sense of discomfort and unhappiness. By becoming more aware of these 'habit patterns' we create a space from which to view experiences with greater clarity. This allows us the opportunity to make wiser choices about how to proceed.



What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a gentle way of training your attention.

This involves noticing what's happening in the present moment, without judgment.

You choose to intentionally bring your attention to what is happening in the:

- Mind
- Body
- Environment

How Mindfulness Can Help

Learning and practicing mindfulness can help you to:



- develop your concentration: steadying and focusing your attention, gently letting go of distractions
- become more aware of unhelpful automatic habits of mind
- choose how to respond, rather than react, to difficult thoughts and feelings
- develop resilience and a sense of balance in the face of life's challenges
- notice and nurture the many pleasant experiences available to you every day
- become kinder and more compassionate towards yourself, appreciating yourself in all your complexity
- extend that compassion and understanding to others, appreciating them in all their complexity

How do we learn mindfulness?

Formal mindfulness practice involves setting aside time for regular mindfulness meditation: a space in our schedule dedicated to practicing the skill of paying attention. Ideally, this would be at about the same time, each day in order to create a meditation 'habit' or routine. By training the attention to rest on one thing at a time, daily mindfulness meditation practices can help to focus the scattered mind. They also provide a quiet, still space from which we can begin to see the patterns and habits of our own minds more clearly. We start to become more familiar with how we are relating to our internal and external worlds.



Traditionally, formal mindfulness meditation practices start by resting the attention on the sensations of breathing, and the sensations arising in the body. These sensations can be observed through sitting meditation, walking meditation, standing meditation, body scan, and gentle movement practices. So, with this offer of mindfulness-wellbeing course through your workplace, what do you already know about mindfulness?

Informal mindfulness practice involves bringing the awareness we cultivate during formal practice into our daily lives. We gently unhook from automatic pilot and become more aware of what we are doing as we are doing it. We can start by choosing a daily activity that we often carry out automatically and intentionally to bring our full attention to it. This could be showering, brushing our teeth, washing our hands, drinking a cup of tea, walking to the car. We do not need to carry out the task any differently, or to try to make ourselves feel any different, we are simply spending a few more moments in our day being 'awake'.

Recommendations and Benefits

It is best not to hurry 'to get' mindfulness. It's the one training where you are encouraged not to strive for results. That being said, a little goes a long way, and setting aside some time each day, can be very beneficial.

There is a growing body of academic evidence that suggests practicing mindfulness and meditation regularly has positive effects on the mind, the brain, the body, and behaviour, as well as our relationships with others. Mindfulness can help with stress, anxiety, depression, and physical problems like high blood pressure, heart disease, and chronic pain.

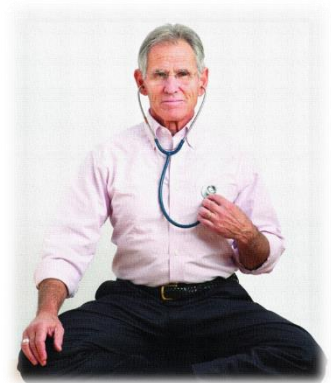
The NHS promotes mindfulness as one of the Five Ways to Wellbeing and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) for the prevention of relapse in recurrent depression. NICE also recommends employers offer employees access to mindfulness, yoga, or meditation on an ongoing basis (NICE Mental Wellbeing at Work Guideline 2022)



Mindfulness-Based Programmes

In the late 1970s, Jon Kabat-Zinn introduced the concept of mindfulness to the Western world by incorporating techniques like meditation, breathing, and yoga into a holistic, non-secular, treatment for those struggling with chronic pain and stress as a result of physical illness (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction MBSR).

In the 1990s, Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale designed Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (based on MBSR) specifically to help people who suffer repeated bouts of depression. These programmes have since branched into providing mindfulness techniques and support for 'everyday' emotional difficulties arising from stress, anxiety, and low mood (MBCT-L and The Finding Peace in a Frantic World Courses)



The programme is structured over eight weekly sessions with accompanying home mindfulness practice.

- The earlier parts of the programme focus on developing mindfulness skills through a range of practices. The intention of these practices is to **develop a friendly awareness of experience** whether it is pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant, and to **enhance concentration**.
- Throughout there is emphasis on developing an understanding and insight into **how dissatisfaction, unhappiness, and distress can develop and be maintained**, and how this process can be addressed by mindfulness training. The theme of responding compassionately and mindfully in place of unhelpful reactivity is at the core.
- In the later parts of the programme, there is a growing emphasis on applying this learning to everyday life. This includes working with distress and difficulties, appreciating the positive, being kinder towards yourself, and extending random acts of kindness to others.

The programme includes:

- Guided instruction in mindfulness meditation
- Gentle stretching and movement, some of which may be done on the floor
- Group dialogue and discussions
- Suggested daily home practices

Mindfulness is essentially a *practice*, so it will require some commitment on your behalf.

- You will be asked to show up to the face-to-face sessions, practice on your own at home, and engage with some simple tasks.
- It can be difficult to carve out time and to add yet another thing to our already busy lives. However, those who 'make a space' within their daily routines for a little mindfulness practice tend to get the most out of the programme.
- Consider the eight weeks as a commitment and investment in your own wellbeing.

A word of caution

- This mindfulness programme is not a 'talking therapy' despite the many therapeutic effects of this practice. It is important to differentiate between the two and have realistic expectations.
- Some mindfulness exercises may not be helpful if you are dealing with a challenging mental health issue, especially in its acute phase. If you are currently receiving treatment, you may wish to consult with your doctor or therapist to ensure this programme is right for you at this time.
- It is important to take good care of yourself during the programme. If you begin to feel unwell, we ask that you let your course teacher know, and recommend that you speak to your GP or therapist, and draw upon your usual support network.
- We also request that you begin with an intention to honour the confidentiality of all participants and course content and will ask you to continue with this throughout.

What happens next?

- Pre-course information is available for you to take away today. It will also be emailed to you.
- The eight-week course starts on the 6th of September.

Prior to this date, please complete the following online forms:

[Registration form](https://forms.gle/9PtUQSeqsA5e8gTA6) [https://forms.gle/9PtUQSeqsA5e8gTA6](https://forms.gle/nLZpGgVsxt2kqHsXA)
[Consent to record audio](https://forms.gle/nLZpGgVsxt2kqHsXA) <https://forms.gle/nLZpGgVsxt2kqHsXA>

- You will be allocated into one of two groups by your line manager.
Group 1 will meet from 10am – 12 noon
Group 2 will meet from 1pm – 3pm
- The course will continue to run on the following dates. Please add them to your calendar.

Week	Date
1	6th Sept
2	13th Sept
3	20th Sept
4	4th Oct
5	11th Oct
6	18th Oct
7	1st Nov
8	8th Nov

- It is a good idea to wear comfortable clothes, and you might like to bring a light blanket, a cushion to support your lower back, and a bottle of water.
- We would like to emphasize the importance of attending each session. Please let the teacher know if you can't be there.

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References

1. Wandering Mind not a Happy Mind
<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2010/11/wandering-mind-not-a-happy-mind/>
2. Mindfulness Report, 2010, Mental Health Foundation.
3. Multicosts of Multitasking <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7075496/>
4. For a list of evidence on the benefits of mindfulness, visit
<https://www.iotmindfulness.co.uk/evidence>