

Mindfulness and meditation



This booklet is part of our Active Monitoring service. Take your time as you work through it. If you find any exercise uncomfortable, take a break and discuss it with your practitioner.



About mindfulness

Mindfulness involves paying more attention to the present moment, to the world around you and being more aware of your own thoughts and feelings. Some people have found that it is an effective way of tackling stress, anxiety and depression.

Popularised by Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn from the University of Massachusetts and Professor Mark Williams from Oxford University, amongst others, mindfulness is an approach to improving health and wellbeing that you may find helpful.

Some mindfulness practices draw on Buddhist traditions, including meditation. But there's nothing religious about mindfulness and everyone, regardless of their beliefs, can enjoy the benefits.

Modern life

Some people who promote mindfulness say that a problem of modern life is that we're all so busy doing things that we've lost the ability to simply enjoy 'being'.

Because we rush from one thing to the next, or because we feel stressed or anxious, we can stop noticing the world around us. We can end up living life in our thoughts, focusing on the next thing, rather than taking pleasure from the present moment. We can also stop noticing how we are really feeling and how those thoughts and feelings might be affecting our reactions and behaviours. Sometimes, people describe feeling as if they are on autopilot.

How mindfulness can help

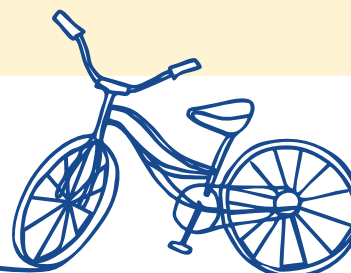
If you feel some of these things apply to you, mindfulness techniques may help you to find greater pleasure in life. These techniques can also help you to become more aware of the way that you are feeling and allow you to explore how your thoughts and feelings affect the way you react to difficult situations.

Some people who practice mindfulness say that it helps them to respond more effectively in these situations, as well as helping to reduce their feelings of stress, anxiety or depression.

Exercise one: are you on autopilot?

Think about a recent journey, perhaps the one you took to your latest Active Monitoring appointment.

Write down what you remember about this journey:



Now answer the following:

What was the weather like when you left?

Did you pass through any traffic lights? Did you get stopped at any? If so what was in front of you?

Did you see anyone taking a dog for a walk?

What did you see that gave you most pleasure?

Was there anything different about your journey?

Next time you travel somewhere, try to notice these kinds of details. Does it make your journey feel different?

Most people would struggle to remember all but the barest details. On journeys, we tend to be focused on the task ahead or dwelling on historic issues that we don't feel happy about. As a result we miss the here and now. We miss many things that might bring us pleasure. And this doesn't just apply to journeys.

Often, much of our life is lived with our heads either in the future or the past. Even if we do this deliberately, perhaps to shut out things we're finding difficult, it has the effect of storing up emotions that may be more difficult to deal with later.

Practical problem solving doesn't always work for emotions

When we feel stressed, anxious or unhappy, our natural instinct is to take a practical approach to try to fix these feelings. Just as we might with an everyday problem, we have a tendency to turn our minds inwards, to search through past memories for a time when the problem occurred before, in the hope of remembering a solution. This can happen naturally, without our being aware of it.

But, whilst it can work for practical problems, for emotional problems it may be unhelpful to bring up memories of times when we've felt stressed or anxious. Such memories can intensify feelings of stress by making it feel part of a pattern. The more our mind searches for a solution, the more likely it is to bring up uncomfortable memories of past situations that make us feel worse.

When we get into this way of thinking, it can be hard to break. It can also dominate our mood. Small, unrelated issues, such as someone's inconsiderate driving or a family member's thoughtless comment, can seem more significant than they really are and we may react more strongly than usual.

Using mindfulness

Mindfulness can help us to understand that these negative thoughts and feelings are a natural function of our mind's exploration for a solution. Through better understanding of how our mind works, we have an opportunity to observe this process, without reacting to it. We can make more considered choices as to how to respond to situations and experiences that make us feel uncomfortable.

Mindfulness can help you by:

- encouraging you to slow down and appreciate the here and now
- enabling you to notice your thoughts and feelings more
- giving you time and space to consider how you wish to react to the way you feel
- allowing you to explore alternative approaches before you act.

Whilst it is simple to do, for most people, mindfulness is a new approach and it can take a little practice until you get used to it. As with all of our exercises, if you find it difficult, please talk to your practitioner.

Exercise two: introduction to mindfulness

A good first step into mindfulness is to choose a simple, everyday activity and give it your full, undivided attention for 5-10 minutes. Whilst you do this, you'll be practicing being in the moment, enjoying the details of the here and now, rather than thinking about the past or future.

In the following example, we've chosen to illustrate the approach by drinking a hot drink. But you could choose anything – from washing the dishes to eating an apple or going for a walk. You will probably want to read through the exercise a few times before you try it, or you could ask a friend or your practitioner to help guide you through it.

1. Begin by finding somewhere that you're not going to be interrupted. Turn off your phone. Sit comfortably with a freshly made mug of tea or coffee or chocolate, whatever you choose. Now, place the mug in front of you and just observe it. Notice the pattern on the mug, if there is one, and the texture of the surface. Perhaps examine how the handle meets the body of the mug. Are there any reflections on the surface? Look at every detail as if seeing it for the first time.

2. Without burning yourself (!), run your fingers over the mug. Feel if you can sense the pattern on the mug with your fingers. Where does the warmth from the drink start and stop on the outside, is it at the same level as the liquid inside? What else do you notice as you feel?

3. When you're ready. Gently lift the mug and breathe in the aroma of your drink. What can you smell? Is the smell stronger or less strong than you expected? If it has no smell, then notice that too. Can you feel the warmth of the drink close to your face? Notice too how you're holding the mug; how does it feel in your hand now that you've lifted it?

4. When you're ready, and you're happy that your drink is cool enough, take a sip. Notice the taste and compare it to the smell. Which is stronger? If they're the same, notice that too. Feel the warmth in your mouth, and allow the liquid to roll over your tongue and warm the roof of your mouth. Notice what your mouth does when you prepare to swallow. When you're ready, swallow and see if you can feel the warmth as it flows down through your body.

5. Take your time as you drink a little more, does your experience of the taste change after the first sip? Giving the drink your full attention, see what else you notice that would normally pass you by. After spending a good 5 or 10 minutes on this exercise, notice how you feel. It may feel strange not to simply gulp it down as you do something else. You may feel more relaxed. Or your mind may be struggling to avoid switching to other things, don't worry if it does.

You could try the same approach with a walk, even if only for a few minutes. Rather than using the time as you walk to sort out our thoughts, notice what you see and smell. Notice your movements and how your muscles feel. Notice your breathing, without trying to control it. Of course, as you do these exercises, your mind is likely to wander. And that's fine. Just notice that it is doing so and gently bring it back from those thoughts to focus on the mindful activity that you've chosen.



Exercise three: mindful breathing meditation

Focusing on your breathing is an extremely useful way of helping you be aware of the here and now. Breathing is something we all do unconsciously, on autopilot. Your breath is always there, no matter where you are, what you're doing or how you're feeling. It's always available to you.

The following breathing meditation should take around five minutes. As with exercise two, you will probably need to read through the steps a few times before you try it. Or you could ask a friend or your practitioner to guide you through it.

1. Find a quiet place where you can sit comfortably, with your back relatively straight. This can be either on a chair or on the floor – whatever you feel most comfortable with.
2. Place your hands in your lap and gently close your eyes if you wish. Or you can gaze down at your knees or a spot in front of you on the floor.
3. Take a few deep breaths and try to let go of any tension you may be feeling in your body. Spend a few moments focusing just on this.
4. Start to become aware of your breathing. Breathe through your nose if you can, and feel the breath as it enters and leaves your body. You can feel the air as it enters and leaves your nostrils, or you can feel it in your abdomen as it expands with each in breath and contracts with each out breath. Take your time.
5. Breathe in slowly. And then out. Don't try to control your breath – just allow it to flow naturally in... and out. Continue to watch your breath, moment by moment, for a while.
6. You may notice that the rate of your breathing has changed since you began the meditation. Or it may be the same. Either way is fine.

7. Now start to count your breaths on each exhalation. Breathe in, and as you breathe out, count one silently to yourself. Continue counting on each out breath until you have counted to ten, and then begin at one again. Repeat this as much as you feel you wish to.
8. If you notice any thoughts coming into your mind, be aware of them, let them go and gently return to counting your breathing.
9. When you're ready to emerge from your meditation, slowly bring awareness back to your body. Be aware of the support of the chair or floor beneath you. Wiggle your fingers. Then your toes. Become aware of the room and the people around you. And, when you're ready, open your eyes.

Using mindfulness everyday

Mindfulness has helped many people to reduce their feelings of stress, anxiety and depression. It tends to be most effective when people practice on a regular basis, setting aside a small amount of time on most days. It can feel unusual at first but, by incorporating mindfulness into your day, you may find that it helps you to find an increased sense of calm and happiness.

Further information is available on Mind's website, mind.org.uk, and on the NHS Choices website, nhs.uk. There are also many books on mindfulness and there are courses in many areas.



Notes

Notes

We won't give up until everyone experiencing a mental health problem gets both support and respect.

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