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ABN: 62 406 997 428

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the practice of ***paying attention*** to internal experiences: ***thoughts, feelings, body sensations, movements and posture***. Rather than trying to interpret, explain or judge our experiences, the purpose of mindfulness is to ***explore*** and ***feel***, to ***observe*** in the present moment and to encourage ***non-judgmental, compassionate attitude***. The aim of mindfulness is ***acceptance*** or ***'non-resistance'*** to our experience. Acceptance doesn't mean putting up with, or giving up in difficult or unfair situations. It means accepting what we feel or experience in the moment: happy, sad, afraid, angry, physical discomfort etc.

The **mind evolved to constantly scan for danger**. In times past, this may have saved humans from attack by a predatory animal or another tribe. Our brain today works the same as it did for our ancestors. Our busy lifestyle and demands on our time and energy can keep us in a constant state of vigilance.

At any moment our mind is generally thinking about events from the past or focusing on the future. We are rarely completely in the present moment. Much of the chatter going on in our heads is self-critical or concerned about what others may think about us. This is known as ***'monkey mind'***. The **more we try to ignore or push away such thoughts, the stronger and more insistent they become**. The result is often ***distress, anxiety or depression***.

When we are stressed, in physical or emotional pain, we understandably want to get rid of it as fast as possible. This may be through exercise, social activities, entertainment, eating, sex, increased substance use, gambling, spending or other activities

that help to distract from, push away or suppress the pain. Distraction certainly has a place in managing stressors. However, research shows that when we try to avoid physical pain or emotions they tend to ***bounce back stronger than ever***. Mindfulness builds and nurtures resilience. The physical or emotional pain may or may not lessen, but our capacity to deal with it grows. Mindfulness is an activity of the ***prefrontal cortex***, the part of the brain used for thinking, problem solving and controlling emotions. Practicing mindfulness can make the grey matter in this part of the brain thicker and shrink grey matter in the ***amygdala***, the part of the brain that activates the stress response.

When Mindfulness may be unhelpful or harmful

Mindfulness is not a panacea and may not work for everyone.

There are numerous researched benefits about mindfulness and meditation practices. Less known are studies that highlight mindfulness and meditation can lead to distressing experiences.

Some reported detrimental effects are ***depression, negative emotions*** and ***flashbacks*** during meditation for individuals with trauma histories. Some people report ***meditation-induced depersonalization*** (feeling unreal). People close to mindfulness practitioners sometimes report their partner, friend or colleague has become detached and emotionally unresponsive, leading to conflicts in relationships. Mindfulness is ***contraindicated*** for people who are currently experiencing suicidal thoughts and feelings. Advice is recommended for people being treated for a current mental health condition. Mindfulness may be of great benefit or potentially exacerbate pre-existing symptoms.

Some discomfort when learning to practice mindfulness is normal. However, if you find practice exacerbates distressing thoughts or feelings, experiment with other ways to self-soothe and regulate. Strategies include ***resting, exercising***, having a ***snack, calling a friend, massage***, reaching out for ***professional support***. If mindfulness isn't helping or is making you feel worse, it is ***not a failure of the individual or the practice*** but a recognition there is ***not a 'one size fits all'*** approach to life.

Mindfulness Practices



Focus on your breath: Take *long slow deep breaths* in through the nose, out through the mouth. Focusing on the breath moves us out of the '*freeze, fight, flight*' response and helps to ground in the present.



Progressive muscle relaxation: Start from the top of your head and slowly progress through each muscle group, squeezing and relaxing each part of your body. If you notice any tension, *breathe into* that part of the body.



Monkey mind: Welcome all your thoughts – even the judgmental critical ones. Allow your thoughts to come and go. Don't try to hold on to them, push them away, analyse or judge them. Simply notice your thoughts and accept. *Say hi to the monkey!*



Mindful eating: Eat away from your desk, TV and devices. Focus on all aspects of eating: *sight, taste, smell and texture*. Chew slowly. This will increase enjoyment, improve digestion and decrease overeating.



Mindful walking: Feel your *feet on the ground* and *movement* of your body. Notice everything around you: *sights, sounds, smells and sensations*.



Daily tasks: When washing dishes, folding laundry, brushing your teeth or showering, focus your *full attention on the task and sensations*. Experience the rhythm of daily routines.