

M is for Mindfulness

As little as 5 minutes of mindfulness at the start of your day can have a huge positive impact. It can boost your ability to focus, increase productivity, reduce stress and enable you to be fully present throughout the rest of your day.

"Mindfulness is the miracle by which we can call back in a flash our dispersed mind and restore it to wholeness so that we can live each minute of life."

Thich Nhat Hanh; The Miracle of Mindfulness

What is mindfulness and what is it not?

Jon Kabat-Zinn (one of the founders of the contemporary mindfulness movement) defines mindfulness this way:

Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally. It's about knowing what is on your mind.

In this view, paying attention is about approaching our thoughts, intentions and behaviour with curiosity and generosity.

It's not about stopping our thoughts or reaching a magical place of no thoughts. It's learning to be with our thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations in a new way.

As Jon-Kabat Zinn explains, "Mindfulness is the only intentional, systematic activity that is not about trying to improve yourself or get anywhere else." Mindfulness meditation is unique in that it is not directed toward getting us to be different from how we already are, not trying to change what is already going on.

Is there a difference between mindfulness and meditation?

Mindfulness includes meditation practice drawn from Buddhist traditions. When teaching the skills of mindfulness it is common to teach meditation techniques that focus primarily on observing what is going on in the body or mind. This helps people develop increased emotional regulation (the ability to manage emotions up or down) by introducing them to what is going on in their bodies and minds and helping them see how to stay with that experience long enough to respond wisely.

This meditation is sometimes called "formal practice" is often of a prescribed or decided length, done sitting or lying or standing in a deliberate posture, with or without guidance to stay with the practice. We are practicing directing and sustaining the attention and in doing so

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developing the muscle of attention and becoming familiar with our capacity for awareness and unawareness.

But formal meditation is not the only way to practice mindfulness. The quality of awareness cultivated in formal practice can also be brought to daily activity by becoming “mindful”. Informal practice or becoming “mindful” might include really listening to our children or friends as they ask us questions or tell us their thoughts rather than thinking about chores that need to be done or what we will say next. It can be dropping in to present moment experience while washing up: feeling the hot water, the weight of the plate and watching the water run off. It can even be just stopping to feel our feet on the ground as we stand waiting at the bus stop or zebra crossing. Informal practice typically lasts for shorter periods of time but is done more frequently than formal practice and can bring a real sense of the joy of being alive.

The COAL acronym and how to use this

Dr Dan Siegal sums up this mindful, non-judgemental approach to ourselves and others with the acronym COAL:

Curiosity: becoming mindfully aware is about discovery, so allow yourself to be surprised.

Openness: don't get stuck by thinking there is only one approach to mindfulness.

Acceptance: give both yourself and those around you a break.

Love: love can be an everyday emotion where we show real kindness to ourselves and others.

Case study

Jim, age 32 and recently promoted to his first managerial position, has just finished his first one-on-one meeting with Anita – a long time employee, age 56, and the team leader on an important marketing project.

Walking back to his office, Jim's thoughts flash back to the meeting with Anita and how badly he responded to some of her questions. Although aware of the way he handled himself, the more attention he gives to his behaviour- defensive, condescending and interrupting- the deeper his feelings of regret and guilt. He cannot stop the judgments and self-incrimination. He knows that his behaviour represents a trait and that it's not the first time he's acted this way. He applies COAL...

(C) “hmm, look at how I just responded... now I'm mindful of my response”

(O) “okay... that's not the first time I behaved this way, it happens too often”

(A) “it happened again, but this time I'm mindful of my behaviour”

(L) “while I don't approve of my behaviour, I know that I care about people and in my heart, I'm a good person.”

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Once a mindfulness practice is established, the resulting new level of awareness can help Jim begin to recognise new opportunities and choices that previously eluded his awareness. The more he recognises opportunities to make different choices throughout his day, the greater his ability to make responsible behavioural choices.

Take notice

Most of the time we're busy thinking about the past or the future, but it's also important to pause and pay attention to the here and now. Try some of the tips below to relax and be in the present.

“Be here now,” as Ram Dass advised back in 1971.

Being more aware of the present moment, the world around you and your own feelings and thoughts, can help you to positively change how you're feeling about life.

Studies have shown that being aware of what is taking place in the present directly enhances your well-being and savouring ‘the moment’ can help to reaffirm your life priorities.

Heightened awareness also enhances your self-understanding and allows you to make positive choices based on your own values and motivations. Take some time to enjoy the moment and the environment around you.

When are we happiest?

A study by Killingsworth and Gilbert in 2010 used an iPhone web app to gather 250,000 data points on subjects' thoughts, feelings, and actions as they went about their lives. The results showed that people spend 46.9 percent of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they're doing, and this mind-wandering typically makes them unhappy.

Surprisingly, our minds seem to wander even for casual and presumably enjoyable activities, like watching TV or having a conversation. While you might hope all this mental wandering is taking us to happier places, the data say otherwise. Just as mindfulness and other wise traditions teach, we're happiest when thought and action are aligned

People are less happy when they're mind-wandering no matter what they're doing. For example, people don't really like commuting to work very much; it's one of their least enjoyable activities. Yet people are substantially happier when they're focused only on their commute than when their mind is wandering off to something else. This pattern holds for every single activity we measured, including the least enjoyable.

“A human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind,” Killingsworth and Gilbert write. “The ability to think about what is not happening is a cognitive achievement that comes at an emotional cost.”

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The lesson here isn't that we should stop mind-wandering entirely- after all, our capacity to revisit the past and imagine the future is immensely useful, and some degree of mind-wandering is probably unavoidable. But these results do suggest that mind-wandering less often could substantially improve the quality of our lives. If we learn to fully engage in the present, we may be able to cope more effectively with the bad moments and draw even more enjoyment from the good ones.

To read more about this study click here:

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/does_mind_wandering_make_you_unhappy

How to be more mindful

Reminding yourself to take notice of your thoughts, feelings, body sensations and the world around you is the first step to mindfulness.

Notice the everyday

"Even as we go about our daily lives, we can notice the sensations of things, the food we eat, the air moving past the body as we walk," says Professor Williams. "All this may sound very small, but it has huge power to interrupt the 'autopilot' mode we often engage day to day, and to give us new perspectives on life."

Keep it regular

It can be helpful to pick a regular time – the morning journey to work or a walk at lunchtime – during which you decide to be aware of the sensations created by the world around you.

Try something new

Trying new things, such as sitting in a different seat in meetings or going somewhere new for lunch, can also help you notice the world in a new way.

Watch your thoughts

"Some people find it very difficult to practice mindfulness. As soon as they stop what they're doing, lots of thoughts and worries crowd in," says Professor Williams.

"It might be useful to remember that mindfulness isn't about making these thoughts go away, but rather about seeing them as mental events."

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"Imagine standing at a bus station and seeing 'thought buses' coming and going without having to get on them and be taken away. This can be very hard at first, but with gentle persistence it is possible.

"Some people find that it is easier to cope with an over-busy mind if they are doing gentle yoga or walking."

Name thoughts and feelings

To develop an awareness of thoughts and feelings, some people find it helpful to silently name them: "here's the thought that I might fail that exam" or "this is anxiety".

Free yourself from the past and future

You can practise mindfulness anywhere and at any time, but it can be especially helpful to take a mindful approach if you realise that, for several minutes, you have been "trapped" in reliving past issues or "pre-living" future worries.

The mind wanders through all kinds of thoughts. All too often these thoughts are about the past or future. The past no longer exists, except in our imagination. The future is imaginary until it happens. We worry about the future and ruminate about the past.

The one moment we actually can experience- the present moment- is the one that seems most elusive and we most avoid. Life unfolds in the present. According to Ellen Langer, a psychologist at Harvard and author of Mindfulness. "When people are not in the moment, they're not there to know that they're not there."

Different mindfulness practices

As well as practising mindfulness in daily life, it can be helpful to set aside time for a more formal mindfulness practice. Mindfulness meditation involves sitting silently and paying attention to thoughts, sounds, the sensations of breathing or parts of the body, bringing your attention back whenever the mind starts to wander.

Yoga and Tai Chi can also help with developing awareness of your breathing. Reminding yourself to 'take notice' throughout your day can strengthen and broaden awareness.

Ideas to increase mindfulness

- Get a plant for your workspace
- Have a 'clear the clutter' day
- Take notice of how your colleagues are feeling or acting
- Take a different route on your journey to or from work
- Visit a new place for lunch

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- Freshen up- even if it's a little chilly outside it can be helpful to open the windows and take a deep breath of fresh air
- Room with a view- try sketching the view from your window and you might be surprised by what you've never noticed before
- Drawing memories- if you don't like the view, have a look through your camera roll and try drawing or painting from your favourite photos
- Listen closely- play some music, close your eyes and try to focus on individual instruments and lyrics
- Happy apps- Insight Timer, Calm, Headspace and Stop, Breathe, Think all have free mindfulness and relaxation activities that you can try with your phone
- Chop chop- cooking can be a great way to clear your mind by focussing on the sensations, sounds and smells of food
- Write it down- journaling can be a great way to reflect on how you're feeling and clear worries from your mind
- Memory box- create a special place to store cards, photos and souvenirs to celebrate all your treasured memories
- Notice nature- even in towns and cities we can all benefit from the calming powers of nature e.g. look after houseplants, spend time in the garden if you have one or even just play recordings of natural sounds like birdsong and the ocean
- Time for slime- slime or play dough can be useful tools for relaxing and there are loads of online tutorials on how you can make your own at home
- Make gratitude a habit- we can sometimes find it hard to notice the positives in our lives so keep a diary or scrapbook where you can list the things you're grateful for
- Just breathe- 5 deep breaths can be enough to make you feel a lot calmer and there are lots of breathing exercises online that you can also use to do this
- Yoga and Tai Chi
- Take up a mindful hobby like knitting

For more ideas to practice mindfulness see the 'Mindfulness Tools' resource.

Further information

But what are the science-based benefits of mindfulness and how might they apply to you?

Proof that it really can be short and sweet

Mental health professionals practicing mindful meditation just five minutes a day for a week experienced significant reductions in stress (Lam, 2015). This proves that just a little bit of mindfulness can make all the difference.

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Ease aches and pains

One study suggests 80 minutes of mindful meditation could reduce the perception of pain by nearly 50% (Zeidan et al 2011). Backing this up is a study of Zen meditators who were found to have a significantly higher pain threshold than non meditators (Grant et al 2010). So, if you experience aches and pains in your back, neck, hips or other areas of your body mindfulness could really help.

Improve your decision making and become smarter

Research shows that long-term meditators have larger amounts of gyrification, or folding of the brain's cortex, compared to non-meditators (Luders et al, 2012). The benefits of these extra folds is faster information processing and avoidance of ruminating on past events, which can distort thinking and decision making.

Practicing as little as one 15-minute focused breathing meditation can get you out of your head, remove the bias from your brain and help you think more clearly.

Develop your 'mental armour'

Mindfulness can also help protect you from emotional events. One study followed marines who prepared for deployment by practicing mindfulness meditation for two hours each week, over an eight week period. The study found it helped them stay alert and in the moment without becoming emotional, giving them a kind of "mental armour".

Boost your attention span and focus

By freeing the mind from distraction mindfulness meditation has been shown to help with attention span.

In a 2008 brain-scan study, experienced Zen- meditators' returned more quickly to their pre-interruption state. It is suggested this is down to the ability to clear their minds of distractions.

This and other research shows that focus and attention is significantly better for those who practice mindfulness.

Increase resilience and equanimity

In 2003 Richie Davidson and Paul Ekman studied a monk with over 30 years of meditative experience. The purpose of this was to assess meditation as mind training and whether this can help us handle destructive emotions better.

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Davidson and Ekman reported that the activity in the monk's prefrontal cortex indicated high levels of equanimity, well-being, and resilience to setbacks. This suggests his discipline of mindfulness certainly paid off!

Mindfulness websites

Getting started with mindfulness

<https://www.mindful.org/meditation/mindfulness-getting-started/>

How to Meditate at Work (or Anywhere) using Spot Meditations

<https://melbournmeditationcentre.com.au/resources/getting-started-guide/introduction-to-spot-meditations/>

<https://melbournmeditationcentre.com.au/resources/spot-meditations-resources/red-light/>

<https://melbournmeditationcentre.com.au/resources/spot-meditations-resources/zoom-lens/>

Meditation course- you choose what to pay

<https://learn-to-meditate.com.au/>

Mindfulness check in

<https://www.mindfulness.org.au/multimedia-resources>

<https://www.mindfulness.org.au/mindful-check-in>

Great resources here

<https://www.mindfulness.org.au/general-public>

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References

Professional Resilience, Future Learn (Distance Learning Course)

Effects of Five-Minute Mindfulness Meditation on Mental Health Care Professionals; Lam (2015)

Brain Mechanisms Supporting the Modulation of Pain by Mindfulness Meditation; Zeidan et al (2011).

Cortical Thickness and Pain Sensitivity in Zen Meditators; Grant et al (2010).

The unique brain anatomy of meditation practitioners: alterations in cortical gyrification; Luders et al (2012).

Thinking about Not-Thinking: Neural Correlates of Conceptual Processing during Zen Meditation; Pagnoni et al (2008)

A wandering mind is an unhappy mind; Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010)