



mindfulness



IN 10 EASY STEPS

Overview

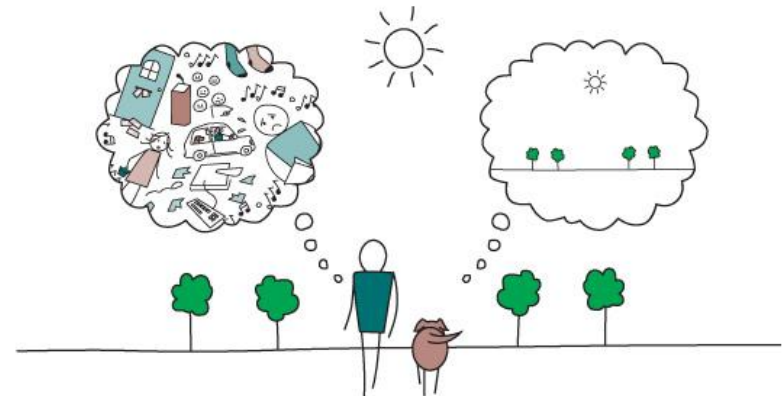
Mindfulness has been practised for many thousands of years in the East, through traditions like meditation, yoga, martial arts and tai chi. Recently embraced by Western science and psychology, mindfulness can be defined as paying attention to present moment experiences with openness, curiosity and a willingness to be with what is.

Sounds deceptively easy, doesn't it? And sure, we may be able to remain mindful sitting on a meditation cushion or in a yoga pose. But the real challenge is bringing mindfulness into everyday life – into our relationships, our thoughts and our actions – trying not to harm ourselves or others but rather bringing a caring and compassionate attitude to all our interactions.

When we're able to do this we stand to benefit both physically and psychologically. As well as reducing stress, anxiety and depression, scientific studies show that mindfulness is associated with improved immune functioning, lowered blood pressure, reduced chronic pain, muscle tension and headache, plus lowered cholesterol and blood cortisol levels.

If you're interested in learning more about mindfulness, consider researching the topic online, taking courses, reading books and watching videos to increase your knowledge. It's also a good idea to find a local teacher or listen to CDs and podcasts.

In the meantime you can download our eBook to help get you started: Mindfulness in 10 easy steps ...



Mind Full, or Mindful?



Learn to meditate

The best way to more easily cultivate mindfulness in everyday life is to formally train in meditation, an ancient form of mindfulness training said to be at least 4000 years old.

In the blog [Pay attention](#), conference favourite Dr Craig Hassed explains that meditation is noticing what's happening here and now in the body and, most importantly, in our 'monkey mind', a term used by the Buddha to describe our crazy, all-over-the-shop thinking.



Try this simple practice:

- Assume a comfortable position either sitting cross-legged or in a chair.
- Let the eyes drop down so they're unfocused, but not closed. If we close our eyes we tend to get caught up in fantasies.
- Start by focusing on the breath and giving full attention to the breath as it flows in and out.
- You can also bring attention to your belly and notice your abdomen rising and falling with each breath.
- When your mind begins to wander, simply notice and bring your attention back to the breath.

- As you start to feel more comfortable maintaining mindfulness of breath move toward focusing on your thoughts and feelings. Recognise how you're feeling and what you're thinking. Gradually you'll begin to experience emotions consciously, your perceptions will begin to change and you will experience fewer moments of agitation, more moments of serenity.

It's fine if you don't want to meditate and find movement such as mindful walking, tai chi, yoga or qi gong more focusing than sitting. Just so long as you bring your awareness to your body. Experiment to find the style of practice that suits you.



Make meditation a habit

Now that you've started a meditation practice, resolve to make it a daily habit.

First, decide how long your sessions will be. Note that as little as 10-15 minutes a day will enhance your overall daily mindfulness.

Make a point to practice at the same time of day to help you establish a regular habit. If nothing else, it'll give your family the message 'this is my quiet time so please don't bother me'. Note that before breakfast and dinner are ideal times because you're more likely to fall asleep after you've eaten as your metabolism is at a low point.

It's also advisable to make your meditation place special and aesthetically pleasing. Decorate with flowers, candles, and inspiring pictures of nature or holy beings. And keep it quiet. That means minimising intrusions from noisy devices like mobile phones.

Lastly, avoid time anxiety by having a clock where you can see it. Just open your eyes when you think the meditation time is up. If it's not, continue practicing. It's probably not a good idea to set an alarm as this can jolt you out of meditation, not exactly conducive to carrying over some of what you practice into the rest of your day.

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Just breathe!

You don't have to be sitting on a meditation cushion in order to breathe mindfully. In fact, you can be anywhere and decide to stop for five to 10 minutes to pay attention to your breathing.

The breath is always present – it's in the here and now – whereas often our mind is elsewhere. There's also a connection between our breathing – its rate and depth – and how quickly we think. For example, you breathe faster in a panic state than when you're feeling calm. So the settling of the breath can help settle the mind.

Feel your lungs filling with air as you inhale and then feel how they contract as you exhale. Experiment with different kinds of breathing. Breathe through your mouth and nose. Feel your breath in your nose, lungs and diaphragm. Take some deep breaths and some shallow breaths. Watch your mind. Do your thoughts wander? And how long does it take to bring your attention back to the present moment?

Bringing your attention to your breath is a simple and effective way to address tension and re-centre yourself in a hectic day. Just taking a few slow breaths and noticing the flow of the breath in and out can bring a sense of calm and focus. It can also help you notice your feelings and avoid responding in a reactive way.



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Get inspired

What better way to motivate yourself to make mindfulness and meditation a part of your life than to read what other people have said on the subject:

Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor.

Thich Nhat Hanh

Meditation is the ultimate mobile device; you can use it anywhere, anytime, unobtrusively.

Sharon Salzberg



As we encounter new experiences with a mindful and wise attention, we discover that one of three things will happen to our new experience: it will go away, it will stay the same, or it will get more intense. Whatever happens does not really matter.

Jack Kornfield

When you reach a calm and quiet meditative state, that is when you can hear the sound of silence.

Stephen Richards

Mindfulness meditation doesn't change life. Life remains as fragile and unpredictable as ever. Meditation changes the heart's capacity to accept life as it is. It teaches the heart to be more accommodating; not by beating it into submission, but by making it clear that accommodation is a gratifying choice.

Sylvia Boorstein

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Integrate

While it's important to maintain mindfulness during formal meditation, it's even more important once you get up from your cushion at the end of the session to stay mindful in your everyday life. And it doesn't matter what you're doing: chatting, driving, working or eating.

Take eating; many of us are so busy and distracted we bolt down our food without even noticing what or how much we're putting into our mouth. Where's the joy in that?

Mindful eating, on the other hand, involves first sitting down at a table solely to eat, without engaging in any other activities such as reading, watching TV, chatting or playing with your iPhone.

It then means paying full attention to each piece of food you select to eat, how it looks, how it smells, how you cut it, the muscles you use to raise it to your mouth, the texture and taste of every bite as you chew and savour it slowly.

You'll be amazed at how much better food tastes when eaten in this way and how filling a meal can be. It's also very good for digestion.

To remind you to be mindful during the day, consider picking prompts you encounter on a regular basis such as email and text pings and a phone's ringtone, to shift your brain into mindful mode.



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Don't stress

Whatever impacts on the mind impacts on the body. Whenever we worry or relive traumatic past events, we activate the body's stress response which causes psychological wear and tear and predisposes us to chronic illness. The medical term for this is increasing our 'allostatic load'.

The good news is that just being mindful can dramatically ease a pressured state of mind. Talking [here](#) about the practice of mindfulness and how it can help alleviate stress is Shamash Alidina, one of the UK's most well-known mindfulness coaches and presenter at *Mind & Its Potential* in October this year. You can read the blog [here](#).

So how does mindfulness reduce stress? While there's much about the practice that's conducive to calm, Alidina focuses on three qualities in particular:

1. Accepting your present moment experience here and now ... "rather than [fighting] it which gives it the space to arise and pass away."
2. When we're present we can't help but let go of our worries about the future and our regrets about the past.
3. When we still our mind enough to begin noticing our thoughts, we also start noticing that which observes our thoughts, our awareness. "Rather than being close up and feeling your strong so-called negative emotions and being lost in them, you're able to take a step back and watch them from [your awareness] and there are benefits to that."





Do one thing at a time

If you're one of those people who tries to accomplish a lot of things at once, join the club. Life is busy and as a result many of us are rushed off our feet to get everything done that we need to. No wonder multitasking has achieved virtual mantra status in our culture.

Mindfulness though is the opposite of multitasking because it means being focused on just one thing in the moment. So the next time you're tempted to check emails while talking on the phone while drinking your coffee, stop, breathe and resolve to single task instead.

There's even a Zen proverb that perfectly encapsulates this preferred way of being: "When walking, walk. When eating, eat." You can even practice mindfulness while you wait, a time when it's especially tempting to occupy yourself doing something else. In our fast-paced lives, waiting is a big source of frustration. But while it might seem like a nuisance, waiting actually represents a great opportunity.

So the next time you find yourself in a long line or at the bus stop, bring your attention to the breath. Focus on the flow of the breath in and out of the body, from moment to moment and allow everything else to just be including your feelings of impatience and irritation.

Read our blog [It's a mad world](#) which examines mindfulness as an antidote to anger.





Do less

Some people wear their busyness like a badge of honour. Yet there's nothing cool about filling up your days with endless appointments, jobs and social engagements, especially if you're trying to be more mindful in your life. What happens instead is you just end up getting frazzled as you rush from one commitment to the next, unable to focus on what you're doing and probably not really enjoying yourself.

It's also more likely that under these circumstances you'll be tempted to multi-task, a no-no (see no. 7) if you're trying to be mindful.

The solution is to shrink your to-do list. And yes, you can say no to things. It's simply a matter of prioritising what's important and letting go of what's not. Better still - manage your schedule so that you always have plenty of time to complete each activity or task, enough so there's no drama if this takes longer than anticipated. That way, whatever you do, you can do it more slowly, more completely and with more concentration.



Bring awareness to routine activities

Think of all the routine tasks you do on a daily basis then ask yourself, do you do them mindfully? Chances are you're on autopilot as you perform most everyday tasks such as shopping for groceries, brushing your teeth, feeding the cat, standing in line and having a shower.

Don't worry. You're not alone in your experience of heightened distractedness. Pioneering psychologist Professor Ellen Langer, speaking at [Happiness & Its Causes 2012](#) – her talk is the subject of this [blog](#) - has spent much of her professional life studying human health through the lens of her theory of mindfulness.

Langer defines mindlessness as essentially being on automatic pilot. "The past determines the present; your rules and routines govern rather than just guide what you do." However when you're mindful, the opposite is the case.

Langer, whose work centres on increasing mindfulness in different scenarios then observing what happens, notes the effects of 'being here now' are utterly transformational, both mentally and physically.

So learn to pay attention to even those humdrum tasks you are performing throughout the day. Cooking and cleaning are often seen as drudgery but you can turn them into amazing daily rituals if you are truly present. Take your time, and move slowly. Make your actions deliberate, not rushed and random, to help you focus on what you're doing.





Put the 'being' back in human

All the world's great wisdom or spiritual traditions remind us that we are human beings not 'human doings'. But what does that mean exactly? One interpretation is that we are so much more than our external accomplishments, that is when we allow ourselves to stop, to be silent, to simply be, our true self is revealed.

Which is why for many people mindfulness meditation is also a spiritual practice, intended to help us connect with that which is so much bigger than our merely 'doing' persona. You can read more about meditation as a means for self-exploration in these three blogs:

The purpose of life >> [LINK](#)

Why meditate? >> [LINK](#)

Wow! >> [LINK](#)

So why not resolve to set aside some time everyday to just be: whether that's sitting in silence in order to become aware of your thoughts and breathing, or taking a slow walk in nature and really tuning into the sights and sounds around you: the leaves on the trees, the clouds in the sky, the birds and the insects.

For one thing, there's so much to see if only we took the time to notice what actually *is* instead of how we think things are. Not only that, as psychologist Professor Ellen Langer (again) explains in this [blog](#), this process of noticing not only anchors us quite naturally in the present moment, it reveals to us that nothing is quite as it seems, a thoroughly enlivening experience.

Look at kids and how they view the world. They're very much in the present moment. If it has been raining and there's a puddle, a child will look at it straight away, be curious about it and probably splash around in it. That curiosity and delight is just naturally there. But sadly as we grow up, these qualities seem to diminish for most of us. So it's about rewatering this aspect of our being, recultivating the mindfulness that's innate within all of us.



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