

INTRODUCING MINDFULNESS

- The aim of mindfulness is to increase awareness so that we can learn to live more fully, responding to situations with choice rather than reacting automatically.
- We do this by learning to pay attention to all our experiences, including our bodily sensations, thoughts, moods and emotions, and to the small changes within them.
- To focus on our experiences and the way they change, we have to become more aware of them.

Being open to all of our experience has the possibility of leading us to greater health and well-being.

In a car we can sometimes drive for miles “on automatic pilot”, without really being aware of what we are doing. In the same way, we may not be really “present”, moment-by-moment, for much of our lives. We can often be “miles away” without knowing it.

On automatic pilot, we are more likely to have our ‘buttons pressed’; events around us, and thoughts, feelings and sensations in the mind (of which we may be only dimly aware) can trigger old habits of thinking that are often unhelpful, and may lead on to worsening mood, or to physical and emotional symptoms of stress.

By becoming more aware of our body sensations, feelings and thoughts from moment to moment, we give ourselves the possibility of greater freedom and choice; we do not have to play out the same old patterns that may have caused problems in the past.

The aim of mindfulness is to increase awareness so that we can respond to situations with choice, rather than react automatically. We do that by practising becoming more aware of where our attention is, and deliberately bringing the focus of attention back into our body and senses, over and over again. Mindfulness is not about trying to get somewhere else, but simply being aware of where you are – and allowing yourself to BE where and AS you are.

To begin with, we place attention in different parts of the body as a focus to anchor our awareness in the moment. Mindfulness training also involves putting attention and awareness in different places at will.

If I Had My Life to Live Over

I'd like to make more mistakes next time.

I'd relax, I would limber up. I would be sillier than I have been on this trip. I would take fewer things seriously. I would take more chances. I would climb more mountains and swim more rivers. I would eat more ice cream and less beans. I would perhaps have more actual troubles, but I'd have fewer imaginary ones.

You see, I'm one of those people who live sensibly and sanely hour after hour, day after day. Oh, I've had my moments, and if I had to do it over again, I'd have more of them. In fact, I'd try to have nothing else. Just moments, one after another, instead of living so many years ahead of each day. I've been one of those persons who never goes anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat and a parachute. If I had to do it again, I would travel lighter than I have.

If I had my life to live over, I would start barefoot earlier in the spring and stay that way later in the fall, I would go to more dances. I would ride more merry-go-rounds. I would pick more daisies.

Nadine Stair, 85 years old, from the Stress Reduction Workbook, University of Massachusetts Medical School

One Person's Report

This man had been in hospital for depression four years before, following which his wife and three children left him, and there had been no further contact except through lawyers. He had become very depressed and lonely, although had not been in hospital again.

He was now over the worst of his depression, and started to use the body-scan tape to help prevent his mood from deteriorating. These were his comments after eight weeks:

"For the first ten days it was like a burden. I kept 'wandering off' and then I would worry about whether I was doing it right. For example I kept having flights of fancy. When the tape mentioned Massachusetts I would think of a trip to Boston with the family 5 years ago.

After ten days I relaxed more. I stopped worrying if I was thinking about anything else. When I stopped worrying about it then I actually stopped the flights of fancy. If I did think of something else I picked the voice on the tape up again when I stopped thinking. Gradually the flights of fancy reduced. I was happy to listen to him and then I started to get some value from it. I began to feel very relaxed. When he got to the bit about the neck it felt like someone was massaging my shoulders. I was able to breathe into my toes.

It becomes more real the more that you try it. I began to look forward to it.

Soon I had developed it so that I could actually feel the breath going down to the base of my foot. Sometimes I didn't feel anything, but then I thought, "If there's no feeling then I can be satisfied with the fact there is no feeling".

Another problem at the start was the tape saying, "Just accept things as they are now". I thought that was totally unreasonable. I thought to myself "I can't do that".

I tried too hard to start with. Eventually I just put it on and expected to go off into a realm of thoughts. I didn't worry if concerns came in. Gradually the forty minutes passed without me losing the speaker and from then on, the next time was more effective.

It's not something you can do half a dozen times. It's got to be a daily thing.

What I found most helpful was the idea of spreading oxygen through the blood, detoxifying the system. I almost got a tingling sensation over the body.

It sounds silly, but I found it helpful in a snooker match I was playing. There were five of us in the team and we were two-all with me as the last one to play so everything depended on me. There was blue and pink and black to pot so it could go either way. I felt very highly stressed, felt my heart beating and other team members urging me on. And then I thought about the oxygenated blood, detoxifying everything and I felt the breath going into my fingers and I relaxed and I won. Those little thoughts themselves relaxed my arms.”

“Psychological stress is a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his/her resources and endangering his/her well-being.”

*Richard Lazarous
‘Stress Appraisal and Coping’ p.19
Springer Publishing Co. NY, 1984*

“Life was meant to be lived, and curiosity must be kept alive. One must never, for whatever reason, turn her back on life.”

*Eleanor Roosevelt
‘The Autobiography of Eleanor Roosevelt’
Da Capo Press, 1992*

The Breath

Breath is life. You could think of the breath as being like a thread or a chain that links and connect all events of your life from birth, the beginning, to death, the end. The breath is always there every moment, moving by itself like a river.

Have you ever noticed how the breath changes with our moods - short and shallow when we're tense or angry, faster when we're excited, slow and full when we're happy, and almost disappearing when we're afraid. It's there with us all the time. It can be used as a tool, like an anchor, to bring stability to the body and mind when we deliberately choose to become aware of it. We can tune into it at any moment during everyday life.

Mostly, we're not in touch with our breathing - it's just there, forgotten. So one of the first things we do in mindfulness-based stress reduction is to get in touch with it. We notice how the breath changes with our moods, our thoughts, our body movements. We don't have to control the breath. Just notice it and get to know it, like a friend. All that is necessary is to observe, watch, and feel the breath with a sense of interest in a relaxed manner.

With practice, we become more aware of our breathing. We can use it to direct our awareness to different aspects of our lives. For example, to relax tense muscles, or focus on a situation that requires attention. Breath can also be used to help deal with pain, anger, relationships or the stress of daily life. During this program, we will be exploring this in great detail.

Karen Ryder, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Instructor,

Mindfulness of the Breath

1. Sit in a comfortable posture, with your spine erect; let the shoulders drop.
2. Close your eyes if it feels comfortable.
3. Bring your awareness to body sensations, by focusing your attention on the sensations of touch, contact and pressure in your body where it makes contact with the floor and whatever you are sitting on. Spend a few minutes exploring these sensations, just as in the body scan.
4. Bring your attention to your belly, feeling it rise or expand gently on the in-breath and fall or recede on the out-breath.
5. Keep the focus on your breathing, 'being with' each in-breath for its full duration and with each out-breath for its full duration, as if you were riding on the waves of your own breathing.
6. Every time that you notice that your mind has wandered off the breath, softly notice what it was that took you away and then gently escort your attention back to your belly and the feeling of the breath coming in and out.
7. If your mind wanders from the breath a thousand times, then your 'job' is simply to bring it back to the breath every time, no matter what it becomes preoccupied with. It is just as valuable to become aware that your mind has wandered and to bring it back to the breath, as it is to remain aware of the breath.

(Adapted from Jon Kabat-Zinn, 'Full Catastrophe Living', Piatkus: London, 1996, p. 5)