

Mindfulness - a radical act of sanity

Agenda

1. Welcome and short breath practice.
2. What is mindfulness - a short introduction.
3. Mindful eating of chocolate, and discussion.
4. Automatic pilot - taking over the controls of our lives.
5. Three-step breathing space, and discussion.
6. Break, and small group discussion - could mindfulness help?
7. Being mode and doing mode - getting off the treadmill.
8. What else is in a mindfulness course?
9. Any questions?
10. Short meditation to close.

What is Mindfulness?

In the late 1970's Jon Kabat-Zinn established a "stress reduction clinic" at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. He was inspired to take a number of Buddhist and Yoga practices, strip out the "religious" elements, and teach them to people who had chronic and persistent medical problems that clinicians were unable to cure. The intention was not to cure those illnesses, but to help people live more effectively with their problems. The programme developed and was remarkably successful, and a protocol called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) was created and used extensively, both within Massachusetts hospital and more widely.

Over the next two decades, alongside good anecdotal evidence, studies started to show that there were significant benefits arising from MBSR. A development of that protocol, Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) was developed, and studies showed that as an intervention this was marginally better than drug therapy for helping people with certain depressive illnesses to avoid relapse, and it is now an NHS recommended treatment.

John Kabat-Zinn originally defined mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally". That is an easy thing to express, but not easy to do. Mindfulness has become very popular in the media, and is bringing a lot of attention to it.

Automatic pilot - paying attention

We spend a lot of our time with our attention being drawn from one thing to another. In the mindfulness world, it is often said that we spend a lot of our lives on automatic pilot. To a large extent that doesn't matter. We wouldn't want to have to think about everything we do in fine detail; we certainly would not want to be like the proverbial caterpillar confused about how it walks by having to pay attention to each leg individually. Automatic pilot has a role to play.

Sometimes however we need to take the controls back from automatic pilot. Much of meditation or mindfulness is really about taking over the controls and switching off automatic pilot, at least for a little while. By doing so, we can start to break some of our bad habits and create some good habits.

In the early stages of developing mindfulness skills, we begin to recognise when we are on automatic pilot and when it's appropriate to switch off automatic pilot. You can do this from time to time throughout the day. Just deciding to do some simple thing, such as brushing your teeth, with full attention on what you are doing helps to develop the skill of paying attention and moving away from automatic pilot.

A useful exercise is to take a pause from time to time, and just check in with yourself. It might not be for more than a few seconds. Just stop what you are doing and ask yourself in a way meaningful to you: "what is going on for me right now? How am I feeling?". Then go on with your day.

Automatic pilot can become very damaging when it is programmed badly. For example, if your mind is programmed to look out for verbal threats, then automatic pilot can start to treat even innocent comments as a potential threat. Similarly, if automatic pilot is switched on most of the time to worry about work, then you might be distracted whilst driving and drive dangerously.

Our aim is not to switch off automatic pilot, but to recognise when it may become a problem, and to learn how to take over the controls, and then to reprogram it.

Three-step breathing exercise

It can be useful to introduce small exercises throughout the day to bring us more in touch with our feelings. The three-step breathing exercise is a short exercise that can be done very quickly, either as a response to a stressful activity, or as a preparation for a stressful activity, or just simply as a way of calming ourselves in bringing us in touch with the immediate moment.

The image of an hourglass is sometimes used to describe this exercise. It begins with a wide awareness, narrows down to the breath, and expands out to a wider awareness again. It is a way of using the breath to anchor yourself into the present moment.

Integrating practice like this, that is short and simple but done regularly, is one way of integrating mindfulness into your daily activities. To begin with, choose some routine activity you can link it to - boiling the kettle, turning on the computer, anything that is a natural interlude or transition. It need not be, and indeed sometimes should not be, something that is large and obvious to others. The three-step breathing exercise for example can be used as a response to a stressful event, say in a meeting just before you are expected to speak on an important topic.

1. Stop whatever you are doing. Consciously bring your awareness to what is going on around you. Then bring your awareness into your body, noticing what is going on for you at this moment. How do you feel? What is your emotional temperature? What thoughts are going through your mind?
2. Bring awareness to your breath. Notice how your breath is. Do not consciously change your breath, but staying with your breath and notice its changes. Stay with it as long or as short as you have available. If you are sitting, you may choose to close your eyes.
3. Widen your awareness to your whole body, feeling perhaps that the whole body is breathing. Then expand your awareness back into what is going on around you. Notice the sensations that are coming in. Notice how you feel. Then continue with your day.

Being mode and doing mode

In mindfulness we often talk about two orientations to the world: being mode and doing mode. Being mode is very much based on accepting what is there for you, not striving to change it, not judging the current situation, experiencing what is there. Doing mode is very much about "getting somewhere", achieving a goal, changing what is, improving things. One is not necessarily better than the other, though in some circumstances one mode may be preferable.

We all live somewhere on the spectrum between being and doing. Work is usually a doing activity, with much to achieve. In fact, that is usually why we get paid! But we all need to step off the treadmill from time to time, and rest from doing mode. That is when being mode can be of most value.

Doing mode, however, can be very addictive. "If only I could do just a bit more ...". Recognise that? At the end of the day, tired from a day's work, you sit on the sofa with a cup of tea and put your feet up, and immediately your mind switches to something you need to do. Instead of enjoying your cup of tea, you start to plan. A few minutes later the tea is gone, perhaps with a few biscuits to "give you some energy," and you are off on your next task.

Doing mode at its most extreme becomes "driven doing mode". When that happens, we simply never stop doing things until exhaustion takes over. Our lives can become goal oriented, and even when we have achieved a goal there is another one to replace it. Driven doing mode can be very addictive, and if it becomes a permanent way of living it can be very harmful - we will consider that more later in the course.

Mind Wandering and Mindfulness

Mindfulness practice is not about a state, it's not about getting somewhere. A couple of common misconceptions are that mindfulness meditation is about not thinking, or relaxing, or achieving a particular pleasant state of mind. Such states of mind and body may arise but that is not the goal, and mindfulness practice is not about not thinking or trying to get anywhere in particular.

Research shows that there is a correlation between mind wandering and unhappiness. Depression involves intense, closed rumination. In mindfulness meditation we take an object, like our breathing or sound or body sensations, and use it to help us to remember to return to a mindful awareness of the present moment. We do this over and over again, building our “attention muscle”, patiently and non-judgementally

Each time you recognise being caught up in mind wandering, and return to a caring and curious awareness of the present moment, is a moment of mindfulness. Awareness itself is non-judgemental, and notices what is happening in the present moment without evaluating it. The more practice we have at returning to the present moment, the more natural that becomes.

Even though you intend to keep your attention resting with your breath or sound or a particular part of your body your mind will naturally wander. The mind thinks, and you will notice that you’ve become caught up in thinking. Please don’t make thinking the enemy. Thinking is an amazing, creative, and brilliant capacity we have. When you notice you’ve been caught up in mind wandering, rest assured you haven’t done anything wrong and you’re not falling short. This is a moment of mindfulness: a moment of remembering. Remembering what? Remembering to return to presence. Remembering to give your attention to what’s happening in this moment with curiosity and care.

Breath meditation - stepping back into the present moment

A key effect of mindfulness practices is to help us gain more insight into what is going on for us in the present moment. We often feel that we are in the middle of impossible and unchangeable circumstances without really examining them. By taking time out, we can get a fresh perspective on our circumstances, and build a foundation that will help us to respond thoughtfully rather than react automatically.

A mainstay practice for many is breath meditation. The breath is always with us, and though we hardly notice it for much of our daily activity, we can always return to it. So doing, we can temporarily become aware of our thoughts and sensations in a more detached way, and turn back and take a view of what is happening to us.

By taking a regular time out to practice noticing and returning to breath, over time we can gain abilities to see a little bit more clearly what is happening around us and within us.

Breath meditation is not intended as an escape. Rather, the breath should be seen as an anchor that can help us avoid being tossed by the storms of life and blown into more dangerous waters. The breath is very much in the body, and using the breath we are stepping out of auto-pilot and coming back to our senses, back to what is here for us now.

Mindfulness courses

In a short introduction, it is only possible to give a taster of what is covered in a mindfulness course. Most courses start with simple practices, but then go on to look at communication and self-care. A lot of emphasis is placed on attitudes, and therein lies much of the value. There are lots of types of course around. The main courses available are Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) that overlap significantly.

Further reading and research

The following book is a good general introduction to mindfulness: Williams, M., & Penman, D. (2011). *Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world*. London: Piatkus.

The following book is probably the definitive text, first written in 1990 and updated recently. It can be hard going, but is full of insights: Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living, Revised Edition: How to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation*. New York, NY: Delta.

There are lots of talks on youtube. Look for Jon Kabat-Zinn, Shauna Shapiro, Chade-Meng Tan, Ajahn Brahm, Pema Chodron, Jack Kornfield, Mark Williams.

There is a meetup group for some of the mindfulness and meditation events I am involved with. and a Facebook page. Check out www.kenlunn.com for links and some guided meditations. If you have any questions, email me on ken@kenlunn.com.