

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is:

- Being aware of what is going on around you and in you.
- Learning to step out of difficult thought patterns.
- Learning to step out of unhelpful habits.
- Getting more in touch with your body, and how it links to your thoughts and feelings.
- Learning to respond rather than react.
- Learning how to bring choices to more and more of what you do.

Mindfulness is not:

- Spacing out.
- Stopping thoughts.
- Escaping.

What does mindfulness training do?

Mindfulness training includes lots of exercises to:

- Pay attention to your body
- Pay attention to what is going on around you
- Stop and pause before acting
- Ultimately, learn more about yourself
- And then, learn how better to respond to life's challenges

What does mindfulness focus on?

Mindfulness covers:

- Training the mind to pay attention in a controlled way, even if only for a few seconds.
- Coming back to the present moment, to examine what is coming in through the senses.
- Becoming more aware of thoughts, feelings and body sensations.
- Developing a kinder attitude to yourself.

The raisin exercise

The raisin exercise is intended to show you that by simply paying attention to an everyday activity (eating) in a particular way, that experience can be very different. It may not be nicer, but it is almost always different.

Try these, over the coming week:

Two or three times a day, pause and take stock of what is going on for you. How do you feel? Are there any areas of tightness or difficulty in your body? What thoughts are buzzing through your head.

Try to eat one meal mindfully. You do not have to eat it as slowly as the raisin exercise. Try going at half your usual pace, and experience each mouthful.

Go for a mindful walk, and pay attention to what is going on around you.

Have a lovely week

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.

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.

Try these over the coming week:

Choose a routine thing you do, such as making a cup of tea, and before you do it try a three-step breathing space.

Do something you would not normally do, but which you have been thinking about doing.

Choose something routine to do mindfully, such as brushing your teeth.

Have a lovely week

Getting to know our bodies

Our thoughts and feelings often dictate our lives, and sit in the centre of our attention. However, our thoughts and feelings are often mirrored through sensations in our bodies. By bringing more attention to our bodies, we can get more of an insight into how we react to events that surround us, and to the effects of thoughts and feelings on our lives.

By bringing thoughts, feelings and body sensations together in our awareness, we begin to realise how much tension and stress is felt in the body. Often sensations arise in the body before they are reflected in our thoughts and feelings.

The Body Scan

Find a comfortable place to lie or sit for about 30 minutes. Settle into your position, adjusting so that you can stay still in this position for the whole practice.

Begin by becoming aware of your surroundings, then bring attention to the sensation of your body in contact with the floor, or your seat if you are sitting, or anywhere that your body is in contact with the outside world. Then for a short while bring attention to the rhythm of your breath entering and leaving the body.

Starting with the left foot, focus your attention on your toes, noticing the sensations there. Notice whether sensations are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. You may have no sensations where your attention lands, but that is okay too. Move attention to include the sole of your left foot, noticing what sensations are there in the same way. In this way the guidance will take you all the way through your body, at each stopping point just noticing sensations without trying to change them.

Throughout the exercise, inevitably your mind will wander. That is natural, and if you are listening to guidance just resume where the guidance is at the point that you noticed your mind wandered. Mind wandering is natural. If you are lying down, you may drift off to sleep too. That too is natural. Do not judge yourself negatively for any of these.

Try these over the coming week:

Find a guided body scan and follow it.

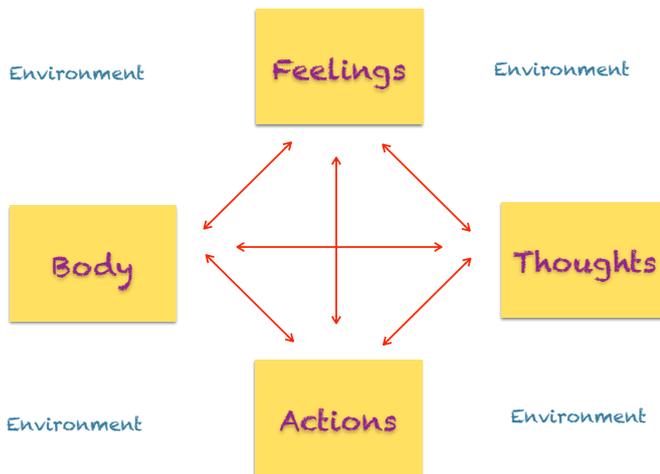
(There are some links and downloads at <http://www.kenlunn.com/mindfulness>)

Whenever you start to feel stressed, try the three-step breathing space. How do you feel after it?

Go for a mindful walk. Don't rush, but choose a leisurely pace. Really focus on experiencing what is going on around you.

Have a lovely week

Touchstone PCP - Mindfulness



Body, Feelings, Thoughts, Actions

We often have a limited view of ourselves. Our body, thoughts, feelings and actions are much more tightly linked than we think, and they all respond to or engage in different ways with the environment.

Consider a day when you wake up tired and in a weary mood. Perhaps you had a broken nights sleep. Your thoughts are likely to be more negative on such a day. Your body might feel heavier, and you might be a little more snappy with people, or at least you are likely to be less cheerful.

Imagine a happier day, when you have had a good nights sleep. You are more likely to meet people with a smile. You may be lighter on your feet, and you may greet challenges with a lighter heart.

Take this a little further, have ever noticed how on days when you feel down the world seems to gang up on you? On days where you are happy the world seems to go more smoothly, and the bumps are easier to ride over? There is no magic in this. Smile at people, and they are more likely to smile back, frown and you will get more scowls. If you hurry things or are distracted, you are likely to make more mistakes. Take more time, and you are more likely to do things well.

We often feel that if only we could change our environment we would be happy. Sometimes that is true, but changing our response to the environment can also be very helpful.

As we become more mindful, we get a better sense of how external events impact on our thoughts, feelings and body sensations. We become more and more aware of how things are interlinked. With that skill, we can start to come off automatic pilot and learn to respond.

Mindfulness is not intended to encourage particular strategies beyond awareness. A kind awareness itself can be very helpful. However, that awareness begins to allow the ability to respond rather than react, to see the bigger picture. Waking up to body sensations, to feelings and how they link into thoughts, is often enough to give an opportunity to respond rather than simply react. You might feel angry or hurt by something, but by acknowledging the whole experience you may choose not to lash out, or if you still need to respond in a firm way you might do so without losing control.

Your Stress Barometer

We often hold stress in particular areas of the body. For many of us it is in the shoulders, but it might be in the lower back, the legs, the tummy area. Now you are familiar with the body scan, you might be more aware of exactly which areas of your body are most reactive to stress.

Where is your stress barometer?

Try checking in with that area throughout the day. Do not make an effort to change it, but bring some kind attention to it. If you have time, just stay in awareness of it for a few moments. Note how it changes through the day, what the sensations are, what thoughts seem to be linked to it.

Walk mindfully through your life ...