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Why be Mindful?

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There's nothing mystical about mindfulness. To be mindful simply means to be aware and engage with what's happening right now. It's about being in the moment.

If you've ever become absorbed in a crossword puzzle or a board game, sung your heart out or "lost" yourself in a book or a film, a letter you were writing or work that you were doing – then you've experienced mindfulness; you've been totally in the moment.

Children are great role models for being in the moment. Watch a child as he plays; he's not thinking about what happened yesterday, or what he's going to do later today. He's simply absorbed in what he's drawing, making or pretending to be. When he's upset, he yells and cries – nothing else matters but what has upset him. He'll cry about it, and then let it go; the offending situation gone and forgotten.

Have you ever taken small children to the cinema? Everything is new and amazing. They stare at the bright lights in the foyer. They stare at everyone sitting around them. They move the seats up and down, gawp at the big screen and flinch when the music starts. They jump on to your lap when it gets scary and they laugh out loud when it's funny. They live each moment.

Even cats show us how to live in the moment! When I look at our cat Norman, I'm sure he's not thinking about the new brand of cat food he had for breakfast or worrying about what's for dinner. Norman simply lives from moment to moment.

You can become mindful at any moment. You can do it right now. Stop everything. Focus on what's happening. What can you hear? What can you smell? Look straight ahead; what do you see? What can you feel? What can you taste?

Don't give it any thought; you don't need to like or dislike, approve or disapprove of what's happening. You simply need to be aware of it.

Even if nothing is there, just be aware of your breathing; the sensation of the air as it enters your nose or mouth and fills your lungs, and as it goes out again.

Does all this seem a bit pointless? How can this non-doing approach be of any value? Let me explain.

The ability to think; to think back on past events and to think about the future – to plan ahead – is a feature that defines us as humans. As well as being capable of thinking about things that *are* happening, we can think about:

- things that *did and didn't* happen
- things that *have* happened
- things that *might* happen
- things that may *never* happen at all.

But thinking is not always an unmitigated blessing. Too often, your thoughts can trap you; trap you in the past and trap you in the future.

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If you're ruminating about events and going back over them again and again then you're living in the past. You're trapped there. Other times, you can be fretting about what lies ahead; anxious and worried: you're trapped in the future. And all the time your mind is chattering with commentary or judgement.

What occurs as a result is that there's no time to experience what's happening right now, because you're distracted by what may happen tomorrow and next week or maybe you're too busy worrying about what you did or failed to do yesterday.

Even when nothing much is happening, *something* is happening. Typically for most of us, it is thinking. Thinking is happening. Rather than simply being aware of what's happening, we're thinking about what is – or is not – happening.

Thinking seems to be our default setting.

If you've ever tried to meditate, the first thing you will notice is that your mind has a life of its own. It just goes on and on: thinking, musing, fantasizing, planning, anticipating, worrying, liking, disliking, remembering, forgetting, evaluating, reacting and so on.

A recent study² found that people spend half their waking hours thinking about something other than what they're actually doing, and this mind-wandering typically makes them unhappy.

The research, by psychologists Matthew A. Killingsworth and Daniel T. Gilbert of Harvard University, used an iPhone Web

app to gather 250,000 data points on peoples' thoughts, feelings and actions as they went about their lives.

“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.”

They discovered that our minds are wandering about 46.9% of the time in any given activity, and the mind-wandering rate was at least 30% for all but one activity. The only activity that generally got people's undivided attention was having sex. (Really? Not sure that I believe that bit!)

The study discovered that people's feelings of happiness had much more to do with where their mind was than what they were doing.

People consistently reported being happiest when their minds were actually on what they were doing.

In his book, *The Power of Now*, Eckhart Tolle suggests that your mind is a superb instrument if used correctly. Used incorrectly, however, it becomes destructive. “It is not so much that you use your mind wrongly – you usually don't use it at all. It uses you. This is the disease. You believe that you are your mind. This is the delusion. The instrument has taken you over.”

Certainly, your mind can wander to good things. You can remember good times and anticipate upcoming events. Mind-wandering becomes a problem though when you are ruing the past, or worrying about the future.

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But, the past is gone and the future isn't here yet. What exists between past and future is the present moment.

So how can mindfulness help?

Mindfulness is a way to look after your mind. Your mind thinks all day and dreams at night. It's always busy and you expect it to just keep going. You cannot stop the mind from thinking, but if it's not given rest, it won't function well.

Mindfulness can give you a break from the endless chatter going on in your mind. It's a bit like the commentary that comes with a sports programme on the TV. Two things are happening: firstly, the game itself and secondly the endless commentary. Turn off the sound and you can experience the game in a more direct way rather than through the mind of another. In your own life, your thoughts are doing the commentary, interpreting your experience: how hard it is, how great it is, how unfair, how beautiful, how wrong, how boring and so on.

Too often, you can get swept away by a tidal wave of thoughts and feelings. This can be particularly powerful when you are faced with worries, pressures and responsibilities and wanting things to be different.

Being mindful; paying attention to what is happening in the present moment is a welcome relief from these stressful and habitual thought patterns.

Mindfulness keeps you grounded and centred – less pushed by what's going on around you. You are more able to stay focused and be calmly present in the midst of both pleasant and unpleasant experiences.

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It's not easy to "think straight" when your mind is overwhelmed and confused; it's hard to see through the mental clutter. Mindfulness helps you to make clear decisions more easily; to choose between one course of action and another.

However, this does not mean that you become rigid in your thinking and behaviour. Quite the opposite! Mindfulness allows you to be more flexible with your thinking. When you're aware of how and what you are thinking, you will be able to disengage from established ways of responding and be open to new, more helpful ways.

You will find that when you are mindful you are less critical. Mindfulness frees you from judgement; it allows you to experience something without judging, assessing or analyzing. You are able to observe experience without getting caught up in it. You understand that what's happening is only difficult, bad, wrong etc. if you choose to think of it as such.

In fact, mindfulness helps you to be aware of when your thinking and self-talk have slipped into negative and unhelpful patterns; to know the type of thoughts and self-talk that fuel your emotions.

When you are mindful, you are more attuned to the links between your thoughts, feelings and behaviour. You are less reactive and more responsive. What's the difference? Well, if you *react*, you are likely to resist or oppose what is happening. If you *respond*, you behave in a way that is appropriate to the situation.

For example, if you feel you have behaved badly towards someone, you might react by attempting to justify your behaviour or deny that you did anything wrong. When you

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are mindful, you are aware of how you feel and what those feelings are telling you. As a result, you are more likely to respond to those feelings of guilt by putting right what you did wrong.

Mindfulness can help you manage a range of difficult emotions. It can help you, for example, to reduce and manage anxiety and worry. When you are focused on the present – on what is happening right now – it is not possible for worries and anxieties to come charging into your head.

Mindfulness is also a powerful way to prevent anger from getting out of control; you are more aware of the warning signs and able to manage the impulse to react immediately. You discover that everything slows down in a way that helps you to respond to difficult situations in a much calmer way.

The quality of your life improves – you are able to manage difficult situations more easily and get more out of the good things in life.

Mindfulness allows you to become totally absorbed in something and enjoy what you are experiencing. You are so focused on what's happening right now, that there is no thought of the “next” moment; nothing can distract you.

You are able to let go and turn your attention to the things that make life worth living.

Mindfulness frees you from being preoccupied with your own situation. Your mind opens to the world unfolding right before you – the singing of the birds, the changing light, the movement of traffic; whatever it is in front of your eyes that is happening right now. It doesn't matter how many

times the birds have sung, the light has changed or the traffic has passed by, mindfulness can help you to see things differently; you are open to new possibilities even in familiar situations.

In fact, mindfulness turns a boring or routine activity into something new. It creates a new perspective; a new way of looking at things and gives you the opportunity to experience everything as if it's for the first time. It doesn't matter how often you've done something, it will always be different; there will always be a different way to do something.

And so, because you are open to new experiences, mindfulness allows you to let go of anything that limits possibilities. It gives you confidence and courage. You develop a stronger self-belief; you are positive about your abilities and are more able to fulfil your good intentions and achieve your goals.

There's no room for self-doubt, no room for unhelpful self-talk such as "I'll never be able to do this", or "I'm not good enough". Mindfulness increases your awareness of these judgemental thoughts; how unhelpful they are and how bad they make you feel.

You put aside the judgements and conclusions you came to as a result of past behaviour and instead think about what you learned that could help you do things differently the next time.

Last but by no means least, mindfulness helps you to understand and connect with other people more effectively. How? In so many ways. You are more able to engage with other people because you are focused on them; you are less distracted and more able to listen to what they're saying and

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feeling. You are more aware of other people's needs and feelings, you are able to experience and understand another person's situation from their perspective. You are more accepting of other people and the differences between you and there is an increased understanding between you. It's a win-win situation!

However, if being mindful simply means to be aware and to engage with what's happening right now, you might wonder how being mindful can be so helpful in such a wide range of situations. It's because there are several aspects and principles of mindfulness.

Aspects of mindfulness

Awareness. This involves being conscious and alert to thoughts, experience and events that are happening in the present moment.

Acknowledgement. This is the recognition of the existence of something. With mindfulness, this means recognizing thoughts, feelings, experiences and events *are* occurring.

Acceptance. This is the state of not doing anything, just understanding that things are (or are not) happening. Acceptance involves knowing that thoughts, feelings, sensations, beliefs and actions, are just that; thoughts, feelings, sensations and beliefs. It's in the present moment that acceptance occurs.

Non-judgemental. This means not making an evaluation of what is happening, just simply experiencing, or observing it. Being non-judgemental requires that you do not give any meaning to your thoughts and feelings, other peoples' actions and events. You simply look at things in an objective way as

opposed to seeing them as either “good” or “bad”. It’s only when you attach thoughts to experiences and events that they have any meaning.

Letting go. This means not hanging on or getting attached to thoughts, feelings, ideas and events. Recognizing they are part of the past.

Focus and engagement. Mindfulness requires focus – a clear and defined point of attention or activity. It means managing your attention so that it is focused and occupied with immediate experience. You focus your attention on one thing at a time.

Beginner’s mind. Rather than responding to events in the same old ways – ways from the past – beginner’s mind can help you to see things in a new light. You put aside your beliefs and the conclusions you came to on previous occasions and open yourself up to new possibilities in familiar situations. You are aware of the subtle changes that make what’s happening now different from what happened in the past. Noticing something new puts you in the here and now because you are more aware of what’s happening right now.

Patience and trust. This aspect of mindfulness is the understanding that things develop in their own time.

It’s important to know that these aspects and qualities of mindfulness – acceptance, awareness, beginner’s mind etc. – are dynamic. That is, although they have distinctive characteristics, each aspect is linked to and interacts with other aspects. So, for example, if you approach a situation with **beginner’s mind**, you are likely to be able to **let go** of thoughts, ideas,

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ways of doing things etc. from the past. This then means that you can **accept** that past events are just that – in the past.

Now that you've learned how and why mindfulness can be beneficial in your life, it's time to make a start on being mindful! The next chapter explains how to be more aware of how you currently use your mind and how your mind uses *you*.

You will see that just by being more aware of your thinking, you are being mindful. And there's further good news; you *can* learn to think in a more open, flexible helpful way. Your mind is up for the challenge!

