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Why be Mindful?

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You may think that being mindful requires an ability to completely clear your mind and go off into an altered state in an attempt to get to a better place. Not so; mindfulness does not involve complex meditation routines. Mindfulness is *not* about having an empty mind or suppressing thoughts and feelings. Nor does it require years of practice, sitting in the lotus position in a flowing white robe on a beautiful beach.

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 children as they play; they're not thinking about what happened yesterday, or what they're going to do later today. They are simply absorbed in what they're drawing, making or pretending to be.

When they're upset, yell and cry—nothing else matters but what has upset them. They'll cry about it, and then move on; the offending situation gone and forgotten.

And, if you've ever taken young children to the cinema, you'll know that they find everything 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 loud music starts. They clutch at you when it gets scary and they laugh out loud when it's funny. They live each moment fully.

Cats also show us how to live in the moment. When I watch our cat Norman, I'm sure he's not thinking about the new brand of cat food he had earlier in the day or worrying about what's for dinner. He's absorbed in what's happening right now. 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.

### ***Your amazing mind***

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

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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.

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 may 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 judgment.

There's no time to experience what's happening right now, because you're distracted by thinking about what's happening tomorrow or next week, or maybe you're worrying about what you did or failed to do yesterday.

Even when nothing much is happening, *something* is happening. Thinking is happening. Rather than simply being aware and engaged with what's happening, we're thinking about what is—or is not—happening.

Thinking seems to be our default setting.

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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: planning, anticipating, worrying, liking, disliking, remembering, forgetting, criticising, judging and so on.

A study in 2010 found that people spend half of 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 app to gather 250,000 data points on people's thoughts, feelings and actions as they went about their lives.

They discovered that our minds are wandering about 46.9 percent of the time in any given activity, and the mind-wandering rate was at least 30 percent for all but one activity. The only activity that generally got people's undivided attention was having sex.

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 engaged and focused on what they were doing.

"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."

The spiritual teacher and writer Eckhart Tolle agrees. In his book, *The Power of Now*, he suggests that your mind is a superb instrument if used correctly. Used incorrectly, however,

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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 forthcoming events. But this ability to think back to the past and forward to the future is not always an unmitigated blessing. Mind-wandering becomes a problem when you are ruing the past or worrying about the future. At its most extreme, concerns about the future can lead to anxiety disorders. And constantly dwelling on events and issues from the past can lead to depression.

The past is gone and the future isn’t here yet. What exists between past and future is the present moment.

### ***Mindfulness can help you feel calmer and more grounded***

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 can’t 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 thoughts and 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 someone else’s thoughts and commentary. In your own life, your thoughts are doing the commentary, interpreting your

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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, commentary and feelings. This can be particularly powerful and difficult when you are faced with worries, pressures and responsibilities, and wanting things to be different.

Being mindful—paying attention and staying with what’s happening in the present moment—is a welcome relief from these stressful thought patterns. You are more grounded and centred; less pushed and pulled 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.

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 doesn’t 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’ll be open to new, more helpful waysides and approaches.

Furthermore, you’ll find that when you are mindful, you are less critical. A mindful approach frees you from judgment; it allows you to experience something without judging, assessing or analysing. You’re able to observe experiences and situations without getting caught up in them. You understand that what’s happening is only difficult, bad, wrong, etc. if you choose to think of it as such.

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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.

### ***Mindfulness and 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 is the difference between being reactive and responsive? Well, if you react, you are likely to resist or oppose or be overwhelmed by what's happening. If you respond, you behave in a more considered way; a way that is appropriate to the situation and is more likely to lead to a positive outcome.

For example, if you feel guilty about the way you've behaved towards someone, you might react by attempting to justify your behaviour or denying that you did anything wrong. But when you're mindful, you are more aware of what the feeling of guilt is telling you—which, quite simply, is to put right your wrongdoing. And so you then respond thoughtfully—by apologising and/or making up for what you did or didn't do to the other person.

Mindfulness can help you manage a range of difficult emotions. It can help you, for example, 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 respond to difficult situations in a much calmer way. (More on managing anxiety, anger and other emotions in Chapter 5.)

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.

***Engaging with the world around you***

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's no thought of the 'next' moment; nothing can distract you. You are able to let go and turn your attention to the enjoyable things in life.

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 is in front of your eyes and 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 it.

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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 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 judgmental thoughts; how unhelpful they are and how bad they make you feel.

You put aside the judgments and conclusions you came to as a result of past behaviour; instead, thinking about what you have learned could help you to 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 feeling. You are more aware of other people's needs and feelings; you are able to 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.

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

There are a number of aspects to mindfulness that serve both as requirements and as benefits. They are:

**Awareness & acknowledgement.** This involves being conscious and alert to thoughts, experiences and events that are happening in the present moment.

**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-judgment.** This means not making an evaluation of what's happening, just simply experiencing, or observing it. Being non-judgmental requires that you do not give any meaning to your thoughts and feelings, other people's actions and events. You are simply looking at things in an objective way as opposed to seeing them as either good or bad, fair or unfair, nice or nasty, etc. It's only when you give 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. Recognise that they are in 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 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 unfold and 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 and ideas, 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 and helpful way. Your mind is up for the challenge!

## In a nutshell

- There is 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.
- The ability to think; to think back on past events and to think about the future is a feature that defines us as humans.
- Your mind can remember good times and anticipate forthcoming events. But this ability to think back to the past and forward to the future is not always an unmitigated blessing. It can be a problem when you are stuck ruing the past or worrying about the future.
- Mindfulness is a way to look after your mind. Your mind thinks all day and dreams at night; it's always busy. You can't stop the mind from thinking, but mindfulness can give you a break from the endless thoughts and chatter going on in your mind. Mindfulness can help you feel calmer and more grounded.
- There are a number of dynamic aspects to mindfulness—awareness and acknowledgement, acceptance, non-judgment, letting go, focus and engagement, beginner's mind, patience and trust—that serve both as requirements and as benefits.