

Chapter 1

Improving Your Wellbeing with Mindfulness

In This Chapter

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 - ▶ Perceiving its purpose
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The person who's never worried, faced challenges, suffered pain or struggled with life has never existed. Every single person (however rich or materially successful) experiences difficulties, simply as a part of being alive. So don't worry – you're not alone! Therefore, the issue isn't to try and avoid or run away from problems (that's futile), but to find a healthy way to tackle or live with them, without adding to your original suffering.

I believe that mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) is a great technique for doing just that, first because it worked for me and second because research proves that mindfulness can convey a sense of meaning and purpose to life, based on the understanding that everything in life is interconnected.

In this chapter I introduce you to the basic concept of MBCT, how it works and how you can use it to improve your life and wellbeing. I describe two central aspects of MBCT that crop up throughout this book: the importance of experience and of trying to be in the present moment. I also provide a brief taster of some of the useful skills you can pick up as you practise the meditations and exercises in this book.



Although the term may seem a bit forbidding at first glance, MBCT isn't something reserved for academic experts or an elite group of super-dedicated Eastern monks. Quite the reverse: MBCT is a practice for you to use in your own way and integrate into your personal life to help combat your personal

demons. Whatever your background, culture, religion, experience, age, and so on, MBCT can work for you. After all, if suffering is a universal fact of being human, the world needs a universal approach to dealing with it.

Placing the Power in Your Hands: Discovering MBCT

In this section I introduce you to the nature of MBCT practice, which helps you overcome personal problems by increasing your understanding about the reality of the world you live in and your own thoughts and behaviours. I describe the term MBCT, break down its components of Eastern philosophy and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), and explain how these aspects integrate so effectively in MBCT.



The essence of MBCT is discovering how to let go of negative thinking and behaviour patterns.

You certainly don't need to know anything about the historical development of MBCT to practise it successfully but if you're interested, check out the nearby sidebar 'A brief history lesson: East meets West' for a little background.

A brief history lesson: East meets West

MBCT is a fusing of two distinct techniques: the Eastern, Buddhist philosophy of meditation and everyday mindfulness and the Western psychological treatment called cognitive behavioural therapy. First created and used as a group-intervention tool to prevent relapse into depression, MBCT is used today as a path of healing for loads of mental and physical health issues.

MBCT was developed by three clinical psychologists: Mark Williams, John Teasdale and Zindel Segal. They all studied mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), a programme based on mindfulness meditation and yoga that Jon Kabat-Zinn created in the US to help people with chronic pain and illness. For more on Jon

and on MBSR, turn to the later sidebars 'The work of Jon Kabat-Zinn' and 'MBSR: The forerunner to MBCT', respectively.

These early practitioners discovered that even negligible increases in sadness reactivated depressive thinking patterns in formerly depressed people. But an experiment showed that MBCT significantly reduced the recurrence of depression in people who had experienced clinical depression more than twice; in fact it halved the recurrence of depression in this group. To confirm its effectiveness, the experiment was repeated a few years later and the positive results were repeated.

Encountering the term MBCT

Don't let the apparent jumble of consonants of MBCT put you off! Its meaning is pretty straightforward.



The 'M' stands for *mindfulness*, which you can see quite simply as the practice of bringing your awareness deliberately to the present moment in time and experiencing it without judgement or expectation. Mindfulness isn't about intense concentration or effort. In fact, most little children are quite naturally mindful, such as when they're absorbed in flying a kite and being amazed, eating a delicious ice cream or building sandcastles. Children have the enviable ability of living in the present moment without any reason for doing a particular thing. In this sense, they live life to the full.

Although adults often lose this natural ability as they mature, mindfulness can reconnect you to this sense of pure living without constantly feeling that you need to create purpose.

And the other letters? Well:

- ✓ B stands for *based*, as in 'derived from' or 'connected to' (but you knew that, didn't you!).
- ✓ C stands for *cognitive*, which refers to the thinking, planning and measuring part of your brain.
- ✓ T stands for *therapy*: the treatment of disorders and illnesses. (Interestingly, *therapia* is a Greek word meaning 'walking a path together for a while', so you can see me as walking with you for these eight weeks. The rest of your life then continues to deepen your practice.)

Essentially, MBCT is about becoming more aware of how you think and behave in order to help improve your life.

Drawing on Buddhist philosophy



Although MBCT draws on techniques from Buddhist mindfulness meditation, Zen, yoga, Taoism and Christian mysticism, MBCT isn't a spiritual path in itself. It's a secular form of meditations and exercises aimed at reducing your suffering.

That said, traditional Buddhist philosophy is a central part of MBCT. This philosophy emphasises the importance of direct personal experience, as opposed to just studying a theory. Meditation, therefore, is the path that connects theory with practice. The goal of mindfulness is to observe your mind

in depth. In order to develop profound insight into the unfolding of life and the meaning you give it, you need to observe your mind deeply and regularly, and question what you find out.

Awareness, as seen in the Buddhist context, refers to a certain kind of focusing in the present moment: with alertness, openness, objectivity and non-judgement.



When practising mindfulness, try as best as you can to observe everything that arises; experience thoughts without adding emotional memories from the past that may taint them as positive or negative. Furthermore, try to experience awareness of the present moment as an unbroken progression, coming and going, without being censored or interpreted, or held on to or pushed away.

In this book's eight-week course (which I introduce in Chapter 3 and cover week-by-week in Chapters 4 to 11), I encourage you to experience mindfully every single moment of your life (however apparently mundane) as something special and almost miraculous – to allow life to unfold itself moment by moment. In other words, when you eat, just eat; and when you walk, just walk!

One practical example that's a central part of Buddhist meditation is just focusing your attention on your breath. By this simple act of anchoring awareness on the breath, you start breathing more deeply, which leads to a more peaceful and focused awareness moment to moment. In a sense, meditation is a way of befriending yourself, because with practice you tend to experience life with less anger and more acceptance.

The work of Jon Kabat-Zinn

The vision of molecular biologist Jon Kabat-Zinn made the application of mindfulness to medicine and psychotherapy possible. A keen practitioner of yoga and Buddhist meditation for more than a decade, he was inspired by the benefits these traditions brought him. He was convinced that others could improve their own wellbeing as well, by adopting these practices in their own lives.

His goal was to make mindfulness available as a life-enhancing skill for all and to 'translate' parts of Buddhist wisdom and philosophy. He hoped to reduce suffering where it was mainly caused by unhelpful thinking, expectations and behaviours. He wrapped the wisdom of the East into a digestible form for people in the West.

For more on Jon Kabat-Zinn, flip to Chapter 19.

Working together

Dr Aaron Beck, a psychiatrist and the founding father of CBT, was frustrated with his attempts to treat patients suffering from major episodes of depression with psychoanalytical therapy in the 1960s. He concluded that the notion and motto of the analytical approach that patients need to suffer was simply unnecessary and even damaging at times. He applied psychoanalysis to patients, at times for more than six years, without seeing significant changes. In some cases, they responded so negatively that they attempted suicide.

In contrast, in CBT the therapeutic relationship is extremely important and focuses on empathy, genuineness, respect, warmth and unconditional positive regard. The client and therapist work as a team to resolve problems and two-way feedback is encouraged. Goals for change are identified and agreed upon. Even the therapist's mistakes are admitted and the client suggests solutions when therapy gets stuck. In fact, you could say that clients are trained to become their own therapists.



Keep a look out for these aspects that I revisit repeatedly throughout this book. They're central to the exercises I provide and to the attitude I invite you to have when practising mindfulness: bringing awareness to this moment you've selected and doing so without judgement. So, if you choose to focus on your breath and your mind flits off occasionally, you just kindly and patiently bring it back and start over.

Developing from CBT

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is one of the most highly recommended and respected talking therapies of the 21st century (for some background, see the nearby sidebar 'Working together'), and can be defined as an active, directive, time-limited, structured approach used to treat a variety of mental problems such as depression, anxiety, phobias, stress, pain, and so on.

CBT mainly focuses on the here and now, and the therapist accompanies the client towards chosen goals. In this sense, CBT (and MBCT) is *client driven* and you choose what you want to work on throughout the whole therapy. As with MBCT, you're also advised to use a notebook to record insights, just as I do in this book (check out Chapters 3 and 4 for more about creating your personal mindfulness diary).

MBSR: The forerunner to MBCT

MBSR is a group-based programme, designed and developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn and colleagues at the University of Massachusetts, for people with a wide range of physical and mental health problems. It comprises an eight-week course and has been used to treat patients within a large traditional American hospital since 1979.

By 1999 over 10,000 patients had completed the course and it was extended into prisons, deprived inner-city areas, schools, and professional sport and corporate environments. MBSR is now a recognised part of behavioural medicine and general healthcare. Its potential

lies not only in treatment, but also in prevention of 'dis-ease'!

MBSR uses the ancient tradition of mindfulness in an accessible, secular format and helps participants to conquer their difficulties when suffering from a variety of physical and psychological illnesses. MBSR research shows positive results for participants with chronic pain, fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis, psoriasis, generalised anxiety disorder and panic attacks, and some forms of cancer, among other ailments. The programme involves intensive training in mindfulness meditation, yoga movements and discussions on stress and life skills.

During CBT treatment sessions, problems are uncovered and assessed constantly. Problems are identified and therapy helps you to shed light on how your thoughts and emotions, physical health, relationships and general daily functioning, are interrelated. The treatment plan is created early on but constantly reviewed and expanded; plus a specific timeframe is set and adhered to.

Integrating mindfulness and CBT into MBCT

MBCT is based on an integration of CBT components with Eastern mindfulness meditations (check out the preceding section and the earlier 'Drawing on Buddhist philosophy', respectively), as well as mindful movement skills. It aims to increase your understanding about your particular difficulty (such as anxiety, chronic fatigue, chronic pain and illness, depression, eating disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, sleeping difficulties, stress, and so on).

For example, in the case of depression (to which I devote the whole of Chapter 12), you're given information about the universal characteristics of depression to help you recognise your personal *relapse signatures* (behaviours and thinking patterns peculiar to you – when you know the signals that indicate you may be slipping back into depression, you can nip it in the bud). The pattern of behaviour that makes people vulnerable to depressive relapse is called *rumination*. When ruminating, the mind repetitively reruns

negative thoughts. The core skill that MBCT develops is intentionally to shift mental gears. It doesn't so much attempt to change unhelpful thoughts into more helpful ones, as encourages the insight that focusing repeatedly on negative thoughts and how to change them can accentuate and highlight them, possibly deepening them rather than alleviating them.



Key themes of MBCT include learning by experience (see, for example, the body scan meditation in Chapter 4 and mindful movement in Chapter 6), and the development of an accepting, open attitude, in which you deliberately face problems and uncomfortable feelings.

Through increased mindfulness training, you become more aware, moment by moment, of physical sensations and of thoughts and feelings as merely experiences rather than absolute truths. This insight helps you to become less convinced and bothered by your negative thoughts, and allows you to notice much earlier on when you're moving towards the blues.



Thus, you discover how to take the stand of an observer looking at your thoughts but not believing them or acting on them. You slowly but surely understand that you *aren't* your thoughts!

MBCT is relatively cost- and time-effective and is now included in the National Institute of Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Guidelines for the prevention of recurrent depression.



Here's a quick exercise to demonstrate an important truth about thoughts. Please sit down in a comfortable position and think of yourself as being a green frog jumping about and croaking. What do you feel? Most likely, you feel silly or even ridiculous – you know that you aren't a frog (if you're not sure, I'm afraid you need more than mindfulness!). Don't worry, just keep an open mind and enjoy the silliness.

Now, with the same open mindedness, think of yourself as a failure, remembering all your lost relationships, failed job interviews and other things that didn't work out as you hoped. Does that sound more like you? Is this how you think of yourself at times?

But nobody is a 'complete failure', because no one fails at every single action in their life! See how easily you slip into believing your negative thoughts and pessimistic self-talk?

When you were thinking that you're completely inadequate, I bet you felt low, raw and vulnerable. Yet when you visualised being a green frog, you may have felt giddy with laughter, imagining yourself leaping and making strange noises. Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, apparently advised his patients to *regress* (be childish) at least twice a day. So come on – fool around!



This frog-versus-failure experiment shows how much easier you believe the suggestion that you aren't good enough, whereas the 'frog' suggestion doesn't stand a chance of being taken seriously. Human beings are much more easily convinced of their flaws rather than funny or positive things, because the human mind is more inclined to believe negative suggestions. Unfortunately, negative thoughts are like Velcro and positive thoughts are like Teflon!

Recognising the Need for a Mindful Approach

Although CBT (see the earlier section 'Developing from CBT') is often effective in treating depression, one particular client group (whose members had suffered three or more episodes of depression) continued to relapse, almost as if CBT can turn off negative thinking but not fully delete it from the mind's hard disk. The more often a person experiences a major episode of depression, the more likely they are to relapse.

For this reason, clinical psychologists Segal, Teasdale and Williams started searching for a therapeutic way to prevent or at least reduce depression relapse (turn to the sidebar 'A brief history lesson: East meets West' for the background). The result was the eight-week MBCT course, during which you acquire the necessary skills to improve your wellbeing and *joie de vivre* in the here and now (see the chapters in Part II of this book).

Addressing the shortcomings of CBT

In contrast to CBT's focus on recognising unhelpful thoughts and replacing them with helpful ones (which often gives the negative thoughts too much power and simply reinforces them), MBCT states that thoughts aren't facts and therefore you don't need to focus on them more than necessary. In Buddhist philosophy, thinking is seen as an additional sense, no more or less important than seeing, smelling, tasting, touching or hearing.



MBCT endeavours to show you how to focus your awareness on all your senses. Meditations regularly use one anchor for your awareness. Without an anchor, you can just end up thinking, planning, worrying, day-dreaming and so on. As a result, MBCT really makes you aware of how busy your mind is and how it tends to stick to negative thoughts.

By giving your mind one single anchor of attention (such as your breath or body, a sound, and so on), you can truly be and experience the present moment.

Get meditating, quick!

Modern technology and hard evidence prove what people who practise mindfulness meditation have known for a long time: MRI scans show without doubt that MBCT is like a mental workout for your brain. Areas of the brain connected to compassion and calm tend to increase, whereas areas to do with the stress response and anxiety become less activated.

The brain's amygdala plays a key role in the processing of emotions, memory and emotional reactions. Buddhist monks who meditate intensely on a regular basis have (unknowingly) modulated their amygdalas to the extent that they experience less anxiety than non-meditators.

Going beyond traditional therapy

Choosing to practise MBCT is more than choosing a therapy: it's about engaging in a lifestyle change (as I explain in Chapter 2). If you decide to give it a go and slowly but surely harness yourself with its skills, it doesn't end after you're familiar with the practices. MBCT becomes part of your everyday life and affects not only your existence, but also that of all people you're connected to or are in touch with.

Enjoying the Benefits of MBCT

In this section I lay out just some of the many benefits that MBCT can bring to you, whether combating problems such as anxiety, depression and fear or generally improving your life and relationships by making you more aware and attentive and able to live in the present. For more benefits, check out Chapters 2 and 3.

Seeing the evidence of success

MBCT has managed to improve the lives of many people with diverse problems. Here are just a few examples of such problems (with appropriate chapters if I mention these issues directly):

- ✓ Anger management (Chapter 10)
- ✓ Bipolar disorder with a history of suicidal thoughts
- ✓ Cancers, including breast and prostate

- ✓ Chronic fatigue syndrome
- ✓ Chronic pain and illness (Chapters 6 and 15)
- ✓ Coping skills for parents and carers of children with autism
- ✓ Depression (Chapter 12)
- ✓ Eating disorders (Chapter 13)
- ✓ Fibromyalgia (an autoimmune disorder causing physical aches and pains)
- ✓ Generalised anxiety disorder (Chapter 14)
- ✓ Health anxiety
- ✓ Living healthily after retirement (Chapter 16)
- ✓ Psoriasis
- ✓ Psychosis
- ✓ Relationship difficulties (Chapter 17)
- ✓ Sleep disturbances (Chapter 14)
- ✓ Stress (Chapters 7 and 14)



To help you appreciate the importance of application and regular use of MBCT, consider this comparison: using MBCT is as important and useful as brushing your teeth. Just as regular dental hygiene improves how long you can keep your own teeth, reduces stomach cancer and digestive disorders (and has even been linked to reducing heart disease), implementing the MBCT exercises in this book is sure to have a positive effect on your internal and mental wellbeing.

Depression

Depression is the subject of Chapter 12, but here are some of the proved benefits (published by the Mental Health Foundation):

- ✓ MBCT is more successful than maintenance doses of anti-depressants in preventing depression relapse.
- ✓ Three-quarters of people engaging in an MBCT programme alongside anti-depressants were able to come off their medication within 15 months.
- ✓ MBCT can reduce the severity of symptoms for people who are currently depressed.

Anxiety

Although I discuss anxiety in detail in Chapters 7 and 14, here are some of the Mental Health Foundation's published results for anxiety:

- ✓ MBCT can reduce sleeplessness in people with anxiety disorders.
- ✓ Mindfulness promotes greater self-acceptance in practitioners.
- ✓ Mindfulness can reduce dependency on alcohol, caffeine, prescription medication and illegal drugs (Chapter 13 focuses on addiction in detail).

Fearing past and future experiences

Dealing with events from your past and expectations or fears of the future can be extremely difficult. These fears even have the power to hold you back from the life you want to lead in reality. MBCT can help you overcome and find a way of coming to terms with those unhelpful thinking and behaviour patterns.

As you gain more and more insight through the practice of MBCT you may comprehend that whatever your plans for the future may hold you have no guarantee that they'll unfold as you hope they will. The only certainty is the fact that everything changes, and sometimes too soon. This is why this moment is so precious; it represents your life right here and now.

MBCT helps you enhance your ability to be aware in the present moment. You find out how to be less attached to pleasant experiences and less worried about unpleasant ones, because when you realise that life changes moment by moment you truly understand a central slice of MBCT wisdom: everything is impermanent for everybody. Nothing's wrong with enjoying the moment, but you need to avoid fixating on it over and over or keeping it alive forever, because that's when you create disappointment and suffering for yourself. Nothing lasts forever!

Knowing where the fear comes from

Your past experiences shape you and your thinking. Some aspects of your beliefs about the world may have been formed when you were a young child. They may have helped you to survive then, but over time they may well become an obstacle for enjoying the present moment.

For example, people who were bullied at school, or who have been neglected by adults who should have cared for them, can become overly self-sufficient people who barely ever seek the help or company of others. This behaviour can become a real obstacle at work, when they're seen as recluses who refuse to delegate or communicate, and in their private life, when they're unable to open up to friends. Intimate relationships suffer too: the perfectly independent and self-sufficient person can never trust or commit fully, because their underlying belief is that other people are going to hurt or disappoint them.



Mindfulness can help you uncover such fears and negative underlying beliefs and so free you to start again in the present moment. The memory of your suffering doesn't disappear, but you can file it away so that it doesn't constantly interfere with your experience.

Knowing what the fear can lead to

Fears about the future are partially due to how the human brain evolved. The brain is amazing, but alas it is primed to watch out anxiously for potential dangers. Mother Nature never worried about you having a peaceful life, but instead how your species can survive.

Thus, you and all other humans have a tendency to worry about the future, because your cave-dwelling ancestors never knew what threat lurked around the corner. Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson calls this feeling 'an ongoing internal trickle of unease. This little whisper of worry keeps you scanning your inner and outer worlds for signs of trouble.' (You can read more about Rick and other inspiring people in Chapter 19.)



Mindfulness works out your brain and builds 'thinking roads' that enable you to be less fearful of the future and the now, and fully immerse yourself in truly living life. The more you practise, the more your brain structurally changes and engages your self-soothing system.

Choosing to live in the now

The meditation master Thich Nhat Hanh says that 'if we are not fully ourselves, truly in the present moment, we miss everything.' How true that is! Check out Chapter 19 for more on Thich Nhat Hanh.



Please carry out this simple exercise to experience the sense of relief that comes from focusing on the present moment. I invite you to bring your awareness to this moment: are you aware of any immediate danger or threats? If not, you can safely adopt an attitude of 'right now, in this very moment, everything is okay'. You're obviously reading this chapter, and your mind is trying to digest this information, which is great, because it proves that right now you have no need to feel anxious.

Continue to check in with yourself every hour or so and see whether you're still okay. In all likelihood, more often than not, the answer is 'yes'. So think to yourself: 'I'm fine, all is okay right now'. Feel into your body; what are you aware of when you just soothe yourself this way? Maybe it feels more than okay, perhaps even good. You may not have everything you want or desire (who does?), but think about the things you do have and the parts of your body that are well and not in pain.

As an experiment, write down in your diary (I describe setting up a mindfulness diary in Chapter 4) all the things that are okay, good or wholesome in this very moment. The list may well get quite long.



Here are a few ways you can live in the moment in everyday practice:

- ✓ Drink and talk more slowly.
- ✓ Eat nuts, raisins, chocolate buttons and the like one at a time, instead of scoffing a whole handful!
- ✓ Don't read or watch TV while eating.
- ✓ Don't look at your mobile phone when meeting with friends and family, or just before you go to bed.

When feeling stressed, ground yourself, feel your feet rooted to the floor and connect deeply to your breathing.

Perusing even more ways that MBCT can help you

Here are some more key aspects of MBCT (in no particular order), along with the chapters where I discuss them, so that you can turn straight to any location that seems particularly relevant to you:

- ✓ Responding wisely and kindly rather than acting rashly or unthinkingly. I discuss the importance of wisdom and compassion in Chapter 11.
- ✓ Accepting what is, even if that's challenging. When you know what you're dealing with, you can discover what can be mindfully changed and what has to remain as it is ('*Que sera sera*, whatever will be, will be'). (Flip to Chapter 8 in particular for more on this aspect.)
- ✓ Discovering all about your thoughts, how they affect you, how you can observe them and most importantly that thoughts are only mental events, not facts (check out Chapters 5, 7 and 9).
- ✓ Developing meditation practice, in particular the 40-minute body scan and 3-minute breathing space exercise (check out Chapters 4 and 6, respectively).
- ✓ Harnessing your aptitudes of childlike curiosity, trust and kindness (read Chapters 9 and 10).
- ✓ Reading mindful poems and stories that help to deepen your understanding of mindfulness. (I scatter such poems and stories throughout the book).

- ✓ Seeking out other mindfulness resources to maintain your motivation and expand your experience (I provide ideas in Chapter 18) and visiting mindful locations (see my suggestions in Chapter 20).
- ✓ Getting back in touch with your body, so that you learn to notice the little signals it gives you before having a panic attack or a full-blown episode of depression (see Chapters 4, 12 and 14).
- ✓ Keeping your body moving; challenging the idea that you can no longer enjoy movement because aspects of your body are no longer fully functioning (see Chapters 3 and 15).
- ✓ Motivating you to experience another new way of living every day in the present moment (I describe an entire mindful day in Chapter 11). Step out from autopilot and really engage in regular activities by fully experiencing them. When you eat an orange, for example, take your time and sense deeply how you peel the fruit, how you break it up into individual slices, eating one at a time, enjoying the sweet taste and being truly present when doing so (see Chapter 4 for more on performing everyday activities mindfully).



Autopilot refers to functioning without awareness (being ‘mindless’): for example, entering a room and forgetting why you went there, driving home and being clueless about what happened during the journey and how you got safely from A to B, or having a shower without remembering how it felt (being unaware of the sensation of water on your skin or the smell of the soap because you were busy making plans for the day). The concept of *not* living on autopilot is central to mindfulness and so occurs throughout this book.

Autopilot, however, does have a place in your life. If you had to learn everything daily over and over again, you wouldn’t learn very much and wouldn’t fulfil your potential. Life would become very repetitive. So what you’re aiming towards is the middle ground: using autopilot and also bringing awareness to special moments throughout the day.