

- » Defining mindfulness
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- » Exploring the journey of mindfulness

Chapter **1**

Discovering Mindfulness

Mindfulness means flexibly paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, infused with qualities like kindness, curiosity, acceptance and openness.

Through being mindful, you discover how to live in the present moment in an enjoyable way rather than worrying about the past or being concerned about the future. The past has already gone and can't be changed. The future is yet to arrive and is completely unknown. The present moment, this very moment now, is ultimately the only moment you have. Mindfulness shows you how to live in this moment in a harmonious way. You find out how to make the present moment a more wonderful moment to be in – the only place in which you can create, decide, listen, think, smile, act or live.

You can develop and deepen mindfulness through doing mindfulness meditation on a daily basis, from a few minutes to as long as you want. This chapter introduces you to mindfulness and mindfulness meditation and welcomes you aboard a fascinating journey.

Understanding the Meaning of Mindfulness

Mindfulness was originally developed in ancient times, and can be found in Eastern and Western cultures. Mindfulness is a translation of the ancient Indian word *Sati*, which means awareness, attention and remembering.

- » **Awareness.** This is an aspect of being human that makes you conscious of your experiences. Without awareness, nothing would exist for you.
- » **Attention.** Attention is a focused awareness; mindfulness training develops your ability to move and sustain your attention wherever and however you choose.
- » **Remembering.** This aspect of mindfulness is about remembering to pay attention to your experience from moment to moment. Being mindful is easy to forget. The word 'remember' originally comes from the Latin *re* 'again' and *memorari* 'be mindful of.'

Say that you want to practise mindfulness to help you cope with stress. At work, you think about your forthcoming presentation and begin to feel stressed and nervous. By becoming *aware* of this, you *remember* to focus your mindful *attention* to your own breathing rather than constantly worrying. Feeling your breath with a sense of warmth and gentleness helps slowly to calm you down. See Chapter 6 for more about mindful breathing.

Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn, who first developed mindfulness in a therapeutic setting, says:

'Mindfulness can be cultivated by paying attention in a specific way, that is, in the present moment, and as non-reactively, non-judgementally and openheartedly as possible.'

You can break down the meaning even further:

- » **Paying attention.** To be mindful, you need to pay attention, whatever you choose to attend to.
- » **Present moment.** The reality of being in the here and now means you just need to be aware of the way things are, *as they are now*. Your experience is valid and correct just as it is.
- » **Non-reactively.** Normally, when you experience something, you automatically react to that experience according to your past conditioning. For example, if you think, 'I still haven't finished my work,' you react with thoughts, words and actions in some shape or form.

Mindfulness encourages you to *respond* to your experience rather than *react* to thoughts. A reaction is automatic and gives you no choice; a response is deliberate and considered action. (Chapter 12 delves deeper into mindful responses.)

AWARENESS FROM THE HEART

The Japanese character for mindfulness is illustrated below:



This Japanese character combines the words for 'mind' and 'heart' and beautifully captures the essence of mindfulness as not just awareness, but awareness from the heart.

- » **Non-judgementally.** The temptation is to judge experience as good or bad, something you like or dislike. I want to feel bliss; I don't like feeling afraid. Letting go of judgements helps you to see things as they are rather than through the filter of your personal judgements based on past conditioning.
- » **Openheartedly.** Mindfulness isn't just an aspect of mind. Mindfulness is of the heart as well. To be open-hearted is to bring a quality of kindness, compassion, warmth and friendliness to your experience. For example, if you notice yourself thinking, 'I'm useless at meditation,' you discover how to let go of this critical thought and gently turn your attention back to the focus of your meditation, whatever that may be. For more on attitudes to cultivate for mindfulness, see Chapter 4.



WISE
WORDS

World-renowned monk, Ajahn Brahm, says the word mindfulness doesn't capture the importance of kindness in the practise. So what word does he recommend? *Kindfulness*. And I fully agree! I usually tell my students to practise 'kindfulness' rather than just mindfulness. This helps to remind them to bring a warm, friendly awareness when practising mindfulness – and usually makes them smile too! Remember to practise being kindful, not just mindful.

Looking at Mindfulness Meditation

Mindfulness meditation is a particular type of meditation that's been well researched and tested in clinical settings.

Meditation isn't thinking about nothing. Meditation is kindly paying attention in a systematic way to whatever you decide to focus on, which can include awareness of your thoughts. By listening to your thoughts, you discover their habitual patterns. Your thoughts have a massive impact on your emotions and the decisions you make, so being more aware of them is helpful.

In mindfulness meditation, you typically focus on one, or a combination, of the following:

- » The feeling of your own breathing
- » Any one of your senses
- » Your body
- » Your thoughts or emotions
- » Your intentions
- » Whatever is most predominant in your awareness



REMEMBER

This book and accompanying downloadable audio (MP3s) include guided meditations.

Mindfulness meditation comes in two distinct types:

» **Formal meditation.** This is a meditation where you intentionally take time out in your day to embark on a meditative practise. Time out gives you an opportunity to deepen your mindfulness practise and understand more about your mind, its habitual tendencies and how to be mindful for a sustained period of time, with a sense of kindness and curiosity towards yourself and your experience. Formal meditation is mind training. Chapter 6 contains more about formal meditation.

» **Informal meditation.** This is where you go into a focused and meditative state of mind as you go about your daily activities such as cooking, cleaning, walking to work, talking to a friend, driving – anything at all. Think of it as everyday mindfulness. In this way, you continue to deepen your ability to be mindful, and train your mind to stay in the present moment more often rather than habitually straying into the past or future. Informal mindfulness meditation means you can rest in a mindful awareness at any time of day, whatever you're doing. See Chapter 8 for more ways to be mindful informally.



REMEMBER

When I say 'practise' with regard to meditation, I don't mean a rehearsal. To practise meditation means to engage in the meditation exercise – not practising in the sense of aiming one day to get the meditation perfect. You don't need to judge your meditation or perfect it in any way. Your experience is your experience.



WARNING

Mindfulness is not just about having your attention caught – it's about cultivating a flexible attention. Flexible attention means you can choose where to focus your attention. For example, when a child (or adult!) is playing a computer game, they may have their full attention on the game, but the attention is usually not flexible. Their attention is caught by the game. That's not mindfulness. As you become more mindful, you're able to move your attention from one place to the other more in a flexible way.

Using Mindfulness to Help You

You know how you get lost in thought? Most of the day, as you go about your daily activities, your mind is left to think whatever it wants. You're operating on 'automatic pilot' (explained more fully in Chapter 5). But some of your automatic thoughts may be unhelpful to you, or perhaps you're so stuck in those thoughts you don't actually experience the world around you. For example, you go for a walk in the park to relax, but your mind is lost in thoughts about your next project.

First, you're not really living in the present moment, and second, you're making yourself more stressed, anxious or depressed if your thoughts are unhelpful. (Chapters 12 and 13 explore overcoming unhelpful thoughts.)

Mindfulness isn't focused on fixing problems. Mindfulness emphasises acceptance first, and change may or may not come later. So if you suffer from anxiety, mindfulness shows you how to accept the feeling of anxiety rather than denying or fighting the feeling, and through this approach change naturally comes about.

I like to say, 'What you resist, persists. What you accept, transforms.'

This section explores the many ways in which mindfulness can help you.



WARNING

In mindfulness, acceptance means to *acknowledge* your present-moment experience, whether pleasant or unpleasant, is already here. You're discovering how to 'make peace' with your present moment experience rather than fighting it. Acceptance doesn't mean resignation or giving up. Acceptance is an active and empowering state of mind.

Allowing space to heal

When you have a physical illness, it can be a distressing time. Your condition may be painful or even life-threatening. Perhaps your illness means you're no longer able to do the simple things in life you took for granted before, like run up the stairs or look after yourself in an independent way. Illness can shake you to your very core. How can you cope with this? How can you build your inner strength to manage the changes that take place, without being overwhelmed and losing all hope?

High levels of stress, particularly over a long period of time, have been clearly shown to reduce the strength of your immune system. Perhaps you went down with flu after a period of high stress. The scientific evidence strongly agrees. For example, research on care-givers who experience high levels of stress for long periods of time shows that they have a weaker immune system in response to diseases like flu.

Mindfulness reduces stress, and for this reason is one way of managing illness. By reducing your stress you improve the effectiveness of your immune system, and this may help increase the rate of healing from the illness you suffer, especially if the illness is stress-related.



REMEMBER

Mindfulness can reduce stress, anxiety, pain and depression, and boost energy, creativity, the quality of relationships and your overall sense of wellbeing. The more you engage in mindfulness, the better: monks who've practised mindfulness all their lives have levels of wellbeing, measured in their brains, way above

anything scientists thought was possible. Sometimes their happiness levels are so high, they think there's something wrong with their brain scanners!

Chapter 14 is all about how mindfulness can help to heal the body.

Enjoying greater relaxation

Mindfulness can be a very relaxing experience. As you discover how to rest with an awareness of your breathing or the sounds around you, you may begin to feel calmer.

However, *the aim of mindfulness is not relaxation*. Relaxation is one of the welcome by-products. In clinical studies comparing the benefits of mindfulness and relaxation, there's often little beneficial effect in the relaxation exercises but significant benefits in practising mindfulness. This shows how different they are.

Mindfulness is the development of awareness of your inner and outer experiences, whatever they are, with a sense of kindness, curiosity and acceptance. You may experience very deep states of relaxation when practising mindfulness, or you may not. If you don't, this certainly doesn't mean you're practising mindfulness incorrectly.

Why is relaxation and mindfulness so different? Mindfulness is about cultivating greater awareness of what's going on within or around you. It's a state of wakefulness. Whereas relaxation is associated with falling asleep, letting go and reducing your level of awareness. Mindfulness is about moving towards challenging experiences to help you learn from difficult thoughts, feelings, urges and sensations. Relaxation is often about moving away from such challenges – which means you can't learn from them.



REMEMBER

When you first begin practising mindfulness, you may not find it relaxing at all. This is totally normal and nothing to worry about. Try shortening your practises and take a break whenever you wish. Be kind to yourself and let the process of mindfulness be unforced and gentle.

Table 1-1 shows the difference between relaxation and mindfulness exercises.

Improving focus and feeling happier

To be mindful, you usually need to do one thing at a time. When walking, you just walk. When listening, you just listen. When writing, you just write. By practising formal and informal mindfulness meditation, you're training your brain, with mindful attitudes like kindness, curiosity and acceptance.

TABLE 1-1 **Relaxation versus Mindfulness**

Exercise	Aim	Method
Mindfulness	To pay attention to your experience from moment to moment, as best you can, with kindness, curiosity, acceptance and openness	To observe your experience and shift your attention back to its focus if you drift into thought, without self-criticism if you can
Relaxation	To make muscles relaxed and to feel calm	Various, such as tightening and letting go of muscles

So, if you're writing a report, you focus on that activity as much as you can, without overly straining yourself. Each time your mind wanders off to another thought, you notice what you were thinking about (curiosity), and then without criticising (remember you're being kind to yourself), you guide your attention back to the writing. So, you finish your report sooner (less time spent thinking about other stuff) and the work is probably of better quality (because you gave the report your full attention). The more you can focus on what you're doing, the more you can get done. So mindfulness can help you finish your work early – yippee!



REMEMBER

You can't suddenly decide to focus on your work and then become focused. The power of attention isn't just a snap decision you make. You can train attention, just as you can train your biceps in a gym. Mindfulness is gym for the mind. However, you don't need to make a huge effort as you do when working out. When training the mind to be attentive, you need to be gentle or the mind becomes less attentive. This is why mindfulness requires kindness. If you're too harsh with yourself, your mind rebels. Be mindful with your mind, not against your mind.

Your work also becomes more enjoyable if you're mindful and when you're enjoying something you're more creative and focused. If you're training your mind to be curious about experience rather than bored, you can be curious about whatever you engage in.

Eventually, through experience, you begin to notice that work flows through you, rather than you doing the work. You find yourself feeding the children or making that presentation. You lose the sense of 'me' doing this and become more relaxed and at ease. When this happens, the work is effortless, often of a very high quality and thoroughly enjoyable – which sounds like a nice kind of focus, don't you think? In psychology, this is called being in a state of flow, and it is strongly associated with greater wellbeing and happiness – yay! (More on going with the flow in Chapter 5.)

Developing greater wisdom

Wisdom is regarded highly in Eastern and Western traditions. Socrates and Plato considered philosophy as literally the love of wisdom (*philo-sophia*). According to

Eastern traditions, wisdom is your essential nature and leads to a deep happiness for yourself and to helping others to find that happiness within themselves too.

You can access greater wisdom. Mindfulness leads to wisdom, because you learn to handle your own thoughts and emotions skilfully. Just because you have a negative thought, you don't believe the thought to be true. And when you experience tricky emotions like sadness, anxiety or frustration, you're able to process them using mindfulness rather than being overwhelmed by them.

With your greater emotional balance, you're able to listen deeply to others and create fulfilling, lasting relationships. With your clear mind, you're able to make better decisions. With your open heart, you can be happier and healthier.

Mindfulness leads to wisdom because of your greater level of awareness. You become aware of how you relate to yourself, others and the world around you. With this heightened awareness, you're in a much better place to make informed choices. Rather than living automatically like a robot, you're consciously awake and you take action based on reflection and what's in the best interest of everyone, including yourself.

I consider the Dalai Lama as an example of a wise person. He's kind and compassionate, and thinks about the welfare of others. He seeks to reduce suffering and increase happiness in humanity as a whole. He isn't egocentric, laughs a lot and doesn't seem overwhelmed with all his duties and the significant losses he's experienced. People seem to thoroughly enjoy spending time with him. He certainly seems to live in a mindful way.

Think about who you consider to be wise people. What are their qualities? I'd guess you find them to be conscious and aware of their actions, rather than habitual and lost in their own thoughts – in other words, they're mindful!

Discovering your true self

Mindfulness can lead to an interesting journey of personal discovery. The word *person* comes from the Latin word *persona*, originally meaning a character in a drama, or a mask. The word *discovery* means to dis-cover or to uncover. So in this sense, personal discovery is about uncovering your mask.

As Shakespeare said: 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.' Through mindfulness practise, you begin to see your roles, your persona or mask(s) as part of what it means to be you. You still do everything you did before: you can keep helping people or making money or whatever you like doing, but you know that this is only one way of seeing things, one dimension of your being.

You probably wear all sorts of different masks for different roles that you play. You may be a parent, daughter or son, partner, employee. Each of these roles asks you to fulfil certain obligations. You may not be aware that it's possible to put all the masks down through mindfulness practise.



REMEMBER

Mindfulness is an opportunity to just be yourself. When practising mindfulness meditation, you sometimes have clear experiences of a sense of being. You may feel a deep, undivided sense of peace, of stillness and calm. Your physical body, which usually feels so solid, sometimes fades into the background of your awareness or may feel like it disappears altogether, and you can have a deep sense of connection and oneness with your surroundings.

Some people become very attached to these positive experiences in meditation and try hard to repeat them, as if they're 'getting closer' to something. However, over time you come to realise that even these seemingly blissful experiences also come and go. Enjoy them when they come, and then let them go.

Through the practise of mindfulness, you may come to discover that you're a witness to life's experiences. Thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations come and go in your mindfulness practise, and yet a part of you is just observing this all happening – awareness itself. This is something very simple that everyone can see and experience. In fact, being naturally yourself is so simple, you easily overlook it.

In research into the latest form of mindfulness therapy called Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), becoming aware of this sense of self that is beyond your thoughts, emotions, sensations and urges is a key part of mindfulness. Through identifying with this 'Observer Self' you become more psychologically flexible and resilient against the challenges of life.

According to Eastern philosophy, as this witness, you're perfect, whole and complete just as you are. You may not feel as if you're perfect, because you identify with your thoughts, emotions and body, which are changing over time. Ultimately you don't need to do anything to attain this natural state, because you are this natural state all the time – right here and right now.

For these reasons, mindfulness is not about self-improvement. At the core of your being, you're perfect just the way you are! Mindfulness exercises and meditations are just to help gently train your brain to be more focused and calm, and your heart to be warm and open. Mindfulness is not about changing you: it's about realising that you're perfectly beautiful within, just the way you are.



WISE
WORDS

Consider what Eckhart Tolle, author of *A New Earth: Create a Better Life*, says:

'What a liberation to realize that the "voice in my head" is not who I am. Who am I then? The one who sees that.'

Once you spend more time being the witness of your internal experiences, you're less disturbed by the ups and downs of life. This understanding offers you a way to a happier life. It's that little bit easier to go with the flow and see life as an adventure rather than just a series of struggles.

Starting the Mindfulness Adventure

Mindfulness isn't a quick fix, but the adventure of a lifetime. Imagine mindfulness as being like a journey on a boat. You're an explorer looking for new and undiscovered land. Along the way I'll explain how mindfulness mirrors such a journey.

Beginning the voyage

The journey begins, and you set sail. You're not sure what you're going to find, and you may not be too sure why you're going in the first place, but that's part of the excitement and adventure. You may think that you're finally doing something you really enjoy and can gain from. This is what you wanted to do, and you're on the boat now. At the same time, you're a bit anxious about what may happen – what if things don't work out?

The beginning of the mindfulness journey may feel like this for you. You may be thinking, 'Finally, I've found what I need to do,' and you're keen to find out how to do it, being curious and in anticipation. At the same time, you may feel unsure that you can 'do' mindfulness: you suspect you don't have the patience/focus/discipline/inner strength. You have *ideas* about the journey of mindfulness. At the moment you may suffer from *x* and *y*, and after reading this book you want to have reduced those painful feelings. You may have clear goals you want to achieve and hope mindfulness is going to help you to achieve those goals.



REMEMBER

Having a long-term vision as to what you hope to achieve from mindfulness is helpful, but concentrating too much on goals is unhelpful. Mindfulness is ultimately a goalless activity. Mindfulness is process-oriented rather than goal-oriented. You're not actually going anywhere. This is the paradox of mindfulness. If you get overly obsessed with the goals, you focus on the goal rather than the process. However, mindfulness is the journey itself. You aren't going to reach the present moment sometime in the future: you can only be in the present moment *now*. More important than anything else is how you meet this moment. If you can train yourself to be open, curious, accepting, kind and aware of this moment, the future takes care of itself. So, as you steer your boat, keep aware and awake. See Chapter 3 for more about vision in mindfulness.

Overcoming challenges

As you continue your mindfulness journey, before long the initial excitement begins to wear off. You experience rough seas and pirates! Some days, you wish you hadn't started this journey in the first place. Perhaps you should have just stayed at home.

Regularly practising mindfulness can be challenging. What was new and exciting to begin with no longer feels fresh. You may sense a resistance to sit down and meditate, even for a short period, but without knowing why. Don't worry: this is very common. When you overcome the initial resistance, you may discover the practise isn't as bad as you imagined meditating to be. As soon as you start, you feel okay and even enjoy it. You also feel great afterwards, because you managed to overcome the initial resistance of your mind to do something for your own health and wellbeing.

Each time you struggle with the thoughts and feelings in your mindfulness practise, you're probably not accepting or acknowledging them as the natural state of your mind. You're aiming to achieve a certain state of mind rather than being present to what's arising in your mind. Lack of acceptance usually means criticism of yourself or of the whole process of mindfulness. If you persevere, you discover slowly but surely the importance of accepting your thoughts and emotions and the situation you're in and not blaming anyone for that situation, including yourself. In mindfulness, acceptance always comes first; change follows.

Another common challenge is understanding the right attitude to bring to your mindfulness practise. Unhelpful but common attitudes include:

- » I'm going to do this and must get it right.
- » I should focus 100 per cent.
- » I'm going to try extremely hard.

Having done a bit of mindfulness meditation, you get thoughts like 'I can't focus at all' or 'My mind was all over the place. I can't do it' or 'That was a bad meditation.' However, as you continue your journey of mindfulness, your attitudes begin to shift towards thoughts such as:

- » I'm going to bring an attitude of kindness and curiosity, and acknowledge whatever my experience is, as best I can.
- » I won't try too hard, nor will I give up. I'll stay somewhere in the middle.
- » My mind is bound to wander off. That's okay and part of being mindful.
- » There's no such thing as a bad meditation. Every meditation is an opportunity to learn and grow.



WISE
WORDS

REACHING THE OTHER SIDE

One day, a young man was going for a walk when he reached a wide river. He spent a long time wondering how he would cross such a gushing current. Just when he was about to give up his journey, he saw his teacher on the other side. The young man shouted from the bank: 'Can you tell me how to get to the other side of this river?'

The teacher smiled and replied: 'My friend, you are on the other side.'

You may feel that you have to change, when actually you just have to realise that perhaps you're fine just the way you are. You're running to achieve goals so that you can be peaceful and happy, but actually you're running away from the peace and happiness. Mindfulness is an invitation to stop running and rest. You're already on the other side.

As your attitudes change, mindful exercises and meditations becomes easier, because you're bombarded by fewer judgemental thoughts during and after the practise. And even if you do have judgemental thoughts, you treat them like all the other thoughts you experience and let them go as best you can.

Exploring the journey of a lifetime

After sailing for a long time, you finally see some land in the distance that's more beautiful than anything you've seen in your exploration. You decide to stop when you get there. The land looks so new and fresh, but at the same time very familiar and cosy. As you draw closer, you discover that you're approaching your own house. Of all the places you've been and all the adventures you've had, you feel most at home here, the place you left! However, the journey hasn't been fruitless. You've discovered much along the way and had to travel that journey to discover what you most treasure.

Ultimately in mindfulness, you realise that you don't need to search for anything at all. Everything is okay just the way things are. You're already home. Each moment is magical, new and fresh. Each moment is a treasure never to be repeated again, ever. Your awareness is always shining, lighting up the world around you and inside you effortlessly. Awareness has no off or on switch: awareness is always effortlessly on. Although you experience ups and downs, pleasures and pain, you no longer hang onto things as much, and you therefore suffer less. This isn't so much a final goal as an ongoing journey of a lifetime. Life continues to unfold in its own way, and you begin to grasp how to flow with life.



In this context, think about the following quote from Buddha:

The secret of health for both mind and body is not to mourn for the past, worry about the future, or anticipate troubles, but to live in the present moment wisely and earnestly.'

The journey of mindfulness is to discover how to live this way.



A TASTE OF MINDFULNESS: MINDFULNESS OF SENSES

You may like to experience a little mindfulness. You could read endlessly about what a coconut tastes like, but you won't really know till you taste it yourself. The same goes for mindfulness.

The beauty of this simple mindfulness exercise is that it covers everything you need to know about mindfulness. I have adapted the exercise from a technique I discovered at a 'school of practical philosophy' many years ago. I would like to pass on the gift to you.

This exercise is best done by listening to Track 2 from the audio. Find a comfortable posture for you. You can sit up in a chair, a couch or lie down on a mat – whatever you prefer. Begin by noticing the colours entering your eyes. Notice the tones, shades and hues. Enjoy the miracle of sight that some people don't have. Then, gently close your eyes and be aware of the sense of touch. The sensations of your body. The feeling of your body naturally and automatically breathing. Feel areas of tension and relaxation. Next, be aware of scent. Then move on to any taste in your mouth. Next, become aware of sounds. Sounds near and far. Listen to the sound itself, not so much your thoughts about the sounds. Let go of all effort when listening – allow the sounds to come to you. Finally drop into your observer self – the awareness that lights up all your senses. Rest in that background awareness, whatever that means for you. The feeling of 'being'. The feeling of 'I am' that we all have. Just let go of all effort to do something, and just be . . . and when you're ready, bring this mindful exercise to a close and stretch your body if you wish.

Consider these questions:

What effect did that exercise have on your body and mind? What did you discover?

If you want to become more mindful, you could simply practise this exercise a few times a day. The exercise is simple but powerful and transformative when practised regularly.