

AN INTRODUCTION TO MINDFULNESS AND ITS BENEFITS



The practice of mindfulness has been around for a very long time. It is commonly accepted to have originated in India thousands of years ago [\(1\)](#), adapted from a set of academic practices that existed at the time. Simply put, it sought to develop positive thoughts and actions through focusing on the present.

During the 1960s the practice of mindfulness really started to grow in the west when American university students began adopting Buddhist meditation techniques as part of their daily activities. In recent years scientists have sought to conduct more research into the benefits of this kind of mind training.

The term 'mindfulness' refers most often (but not exclusively) to a form of Buddhist meditation where one focuses on breathing and being completely aware of the present moment. This, however, is a very basic explanation and there are many different forms of mindfulness training, some more complex than others.

There have been a number of studies conducted which show that practicing mindfulness can lead to benefits such as reduced stress levels and increased mental focus [\(2\)](#). This has led to it becoming recognised as an important part of personal well-being regimes by doctors and other healthcare professionals worldwide.

As well as these mental benefits there is also evidence that suggests that regular practise of mindfulness can actually slow down the deterioration in motor function caused by conditions like Parkinson's disease. It also helps sufferers of this debilitating disease to cope with the symptoms [\(3\)](#).

First and foremost, mindfulness can be practiced anywhere at any time, you don't need any equipment or any special clothing in order to do it. For those who are worried about meditating, many people say that they feel more refreshed and less stressed after practising mindfulness as well as having a greater sense of clarity afterward. This is because when we practice mindfulness we train our minds to let go of things that upset us and take notice of the little things around us that help relax us.

What does Mindfulness Involve?

Closing your eyes often helps as you are then less distracted by things going on around you. If you are unable to be in a room with complete silence, headphones or earplugs may also help to avoid interruptions.

Mindfulness can be practiced using various methods. One of the most familiar methods is to focus all of your attention on your breathing. This involves breathing normally and naturally. Do not try to breathe slower or deeper than you normally would.

Really concentrate on feeling the air coming into your body, feel your chest rising and falling. It is a good idea to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth. Concentrating on breathing in this way is very relaxing and calming. This is a great reason to breathe mindfully on a regular basis.

Another form of mindfulness involves focusing on certain parts of the body, one at a time. This can involve moving between different areas of the body from top to bottom or vice versa. You can either physically clench, tighten or wiggle each area or group of muscles, then stop and feel the relaxation. For example, clenching the toes and then when you stop, concentrating on how relaxed they feel. As you move up your leg you tighten the calf muscle and so on.

Alternatively, concentrate on each body part and imagine it being warmed by a golden light. A golden light is what is usually chosen as golden is considered warming and calming. But you can change the colour to suit your needs. If blue works better for you then make it blue! Most often it is easier to imagine this light coming in from above the head, so the person doing the mindful thinking starts at the top of their body and works their way down to the toes.

I, for one, have used this method when I feel stressed and cannot sleep due to the problems of the day running through my head. Nine times out of ten I am fast asleep before I finish the process. And anything that helps you sleep is good, right?

Another form of mindfulness is to focus all your awareness on an object nearby. Some flowers in a vase are a great example. Observe the details, the petals, the veins in the leaves, every tiny detail. Even better, why not take a walk outside? Be aware of the sounds, such as birdsong; the sound of leaves or gravel under your feet. Notice the temperature and feel the breeze on your face. What can you smell? The scent of flowers or freshly mown grass. You could also find a big tree and look at the bark, notice the leaves swaying in the breeze. And even give it a big hug.

A false belief is that you have to chant when being mindful. This is not necessary although counting in your head is another way of being mindful. We've all heard of counting sheep to get to sleep. If done correctly this mindfulness process really can help you drop off!

Many people who try mindfulness say that it improves their lives in ways they never thought possible, and the best thing about it is that once you've learned how to do it you can practice any time anywhere. The key thing here is practice and a little bit of time out of every day for yourself.

The benefits of mindfulness are far reaching and can help you have more self-awareness and acceptance towards yourself. All these things contribute to leading a happier life which everyone deserves.

You can also eat mindfully, which is something people often forget to do. We are all guilty of gobbling up our food while we sit in front of the tv. This takes away the enjoyment of eating. Plus, if you eat mindfully it automatically slows the eating process down. You taste the food and it gives your body a chance to send signals to the brain to let you know you're full. So mindful eating helps you eat less and is a great way to lose weight simply by listening to your body.

You can bring mindfulness into every area of your life. When you are having a shower, really feel the water on your skin. When you are working, be completely in the moment. Focusing on tasks rather than complaining about how bored you are can make them much more enjoyable. Try it. You might be surprised.

Living mindfully is a great way to give yourself some well-earned 'me time' and self-care. Once you have conquered the skill of mindfulness with daily practise you will increase your well-being on many levels. All you do need is a little bit of time.

References

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