

Mindfulness

With today's ever-increasing pace of living, both outside of and in the workplace, it is essential that people have access to stress management techniques to help calm the mind. This not only benefits you psychologically but with a strong connection between body and mind, a healthy mindset can drastically improve the skin too.

This document contains four exercises that aid mindfulness.

What is Mindfulness and where does it originate from?

Mindfulness is about becoming fully aware of the present and what is happening right now. It is about letting go of the past and the future and being totally aware of what is happening in this moment. This may sound like a simple process but it is an extremely powerful tool that allows the user freedom to deal with intense and emotional situations with a clearer viewpoint.

Mindfulness is a way of life that should be practiced daily alongside meditation to get the full benefits. Similarly to how people interested in their physical health combine exercise and eating well, the two elements of mindfulness and meditation should go hand in hand to allow for the full benefits to be received. Although Mindfulness originates from Buddhism, it is now widely recognised as a secular practice, which makes it an ideal stress reduction technique for everyone.

There are various courses taught by qualified professionals that an individual can attend in order to learn more and it is advised that one should do this to ensure a full understanding of what it all entails. However, there are also lots of quick simple techniques that can be used daily and in emergency situations.

Jon Kabat-Zinn is a Professor of Medicine Emeritus and creator of the Stress Reduction Clinic and Centre of Mindfulness in Massachusetts. He introduced the eight-week Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction Course to some of his patients suffering from stress-related illnesses back in the 1980s and it was through this teaching that the course became recognised worldwide.

Kabat-Zinn's teaching of Mindfulness is very much non-secular and he stresses that it should be accessible to all walks of life, regardless of religion or beliefs.

How can Mindfulness help?

Mindfulness can help people become more aware of their thoughts, feelings and body sensations, so that instead of being overwhelmed by them they are better able to manage them.

Scientific evidence has shown that regular practice helps the amygdala (the primal region of the brain associated with fear and emotion) shrink, therefore reducing unhelpful responses to stress and replacing them with more thoughtful ones.

In today's society, overwhelming thoughts and feelings can arise regularly, whether it's feeling worried about giving a presentation in a meeting or perhaps a confrontation with a colleague. When something like this happens, the amygdala goes on high alert and the person in this situation can begin to feel

tense, panicky or shaky - or if there's a confrontation, perhaps feel a tightening in the chest. These feelings can sometimes prolong throughout the day, leading to a spiral of further unhelpful emotions.

A good way of looking at stress on the brain is that such overwhelming emotions would have come in very useful to protect our cavemen ancestors. It's probably safe to say that the amygdala did a very good job of warning when predators were about to attack! The problem with the brain is that it cannot distinguish between what is a life-threatening attack and what are just a few heated words or scary meetings – both can create the same intensity of emotions.

Back in prehistoric times, once the perceived threat to life was over our ancestors were able to forget about the incident with ease. Thankfully we deal with far less life-threatening situations these days, but stress can remain with us for much longer, especially if we ruminate about the past or project too much into the future.

This is why using Mindfulness as a stress reduction and management technique is useful to create a happy, healthy population.

How often should you practice Mindfulness and where?

Ideally, Mindfulness should be practiced every day, incorporating meditation into the practice too. However, just a few moments of a technique can help dramatically. Mindfulness can be practiced anywhere and does not require any special equipment. Below are some short and simple techniques to help people manage stress a little more effectively throughout the working day.

Technique 1: Mindful awareness

This is a good exercise to practice with a particular daily routine such as making a cup of tea or brushing your teeth. The steps below can be used when making a drink, but of course can be adapted to anything done regularly.

The reason this is such a good thing to do is that while senses are being focused on things such as touch or hearing, the stress response in the brain is lessened greatly. A useful analogy is that activating the senses and having the brain on high alert is like trying to drive a car in two gears - it's not possible to do both!

This awareness can greatly contribute to stress reduction, even if just for a few fleeting moments.

Example of being mindfully aware - making a hot drink.

- Pick up the empty kettle before filling it... how does it feel in your hands? Is it smooth against the skin, is there any coldness?
- Listen to the water as you fill the kettle up; are there any changes in the flow?
- Stir the hot water in to the mug and listen to the sound of the spoon, feel the spoon between your fingertips.
- Enjoy the taste of the drink: what sensations arise? Hotness? Sweetness?

This may seem quite a trivial exercise to do at first but it is one of the easiest ways to incorporate mindfulness into daily living.

When fully aware and concentrating on the task in hand, the mind is in more of a resting state which inevitably provides some respite.

It is not uncommon for mindfulness advocates to practice mindful awareness for hours at a time, although this can take time and a little patience!

Technique 2: 7/11 Breathing

This is a particularly good exercise for panic/anxiety attacks. It can be used in the presence of others due to the discreet nature of the technique and can quickly relax the mind. It is known to work well in traffic jams or in stressful meetings. It can be done discreetly so others are not alerted to any changes.

- Breathe in through the nose for a count of seven seconds
- Breathe out through the mouth for a count of eleven seconds
- Repeat this for as long as you feel necessary. It works so effectively because the outbreath allows you to exhale more oxygen than you inhale, thus counteracting the over-breathing that occurs when we are stressed and overwhelmed.

Technique 3: The Three-Minute Breathing Space

This exercise can be done for a few seconds or as long as three minutes if time permits. It is particularly useful during or after a situation that causes discomfort, such as a heated telephone discussion or perhaps receiving a confrontational email.

- If possible, walk away from the situation to the kitchen or rest room. If this is not possible then remain where you are
- Take three deep breaths, ensuring the mouth is closed on the in breath and slightly open when exhaling. This should help you to start feeling more grounded
- Now examine what feelings are going on in the body, is there tightness across the shoulders or perhaps a faster heartbeat than usual? Just accept what is there without wanting to change it, by observing feelings it helps us to understand what has just happened - perhaps a tightness in the chest may relate to anger, or a rapid heartbeat to fear
- Become aware of thoughts: are they racing, negative, neutral or perhaps positive? Are these thoughts projecting towards the future or dwelling on something that's happened in the past? Just accept what is happening at this moment in time - not trying to clear the thoughts away but becoming an observer of them rather than caught up in them. They are just thoughts that come and go.
- Now bring your attention to the breath. It may be helpful to count your breaths in such as "one two, three in" then "one, two, three, out". Keep doing this for a few minutes to help return to a more relaxed state.
- Repeating this exercise as often as possible throughout the day allows a greater sense of what is happening to the body and mind when faced with a stressful situation. It gives space between the feeling and halts a possible reaction to it.

Technique 4: Mindful Listening

Quite often, it is possible to be physically present in a conversation but actually lost in deep distraction and not really paying attention to what the other person is saying. There are many advantages to practising mindful listening for both parties.

Mindful listening is particularly effective for people to adopt when in conversation with others. It ensures that the other person is heard and valued and also that you can truly be present and aware of what is being said.

Mindful listening can be a powerful tool in group situations too. It can help alleviate boredom and also allow whoever is speaking to feel valued and heard. It can also benefit the listener, as they may be able to remember points that have been raised at the meeting some time later as they are being truly present.

- Bring your attention to the conversation. What is being said? If possible, does it feel comfortable to maintain eye contact with the speaker?
- Avoid crossing arms or turning away from the speaker. Instead adopt a forward-facing, relaxed posture
- See if it is possible to acknowledge what is being said by only interrupting the conversation when it is necessary, such as when the speaker asks you a question or when you feel it appropriate to add to the conversation
- If you feel any strong emotions such as boredom or frustration, acknowledge that your mind may have wandered, but then try to focus your attention back on the words being spoken.