

## Mindfulness

### What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is about being fully aware of living, right now, in this moment. Research has shown that being mindful is good for us. It can have long term benefits for our health and happiness. This section will tell you more about what mindfulness is, how it can help children, young people and adults to flourish and how you can develop a more mindful life for yourself and for the children you work with or live with.

Have you ever arrived at work and realised that you don't remember driving there? When you are having a shower, are you actually there, enjoying the feeling of the hot water on your back, or are you thinking about a meeting you have to go to or about what chores you have to do next? Many of us live our lives on automatic pilot. We go through the motions of our daily routines, we worry about the future or we spend time going over yesterday's argument with a friend. Many of us do not live in the present – we don't pay attention to what is happening in our lives now, at this very moment. If we stop and think about it, this moment is actually all that we have.

Mindfulness is paying attention here and now with kindness and curiosity

Association for Mindfulness in Education

Children often pay more attention to the present moment than adults do. Young children especially, will focus on a toy or a game, and they seem to enjoy taking time to really experience things like the feel of sand in their fingers or the sound of a familiar voice telling their favourite story. However, as children get older, they live in a world of being told what to do, what time to go to school, to hurry up with an activity. This begins to create in children that automatic pilot way of living that we as adults are so familiar with – they become less aware of what they are doing *right now*.

Being in the present moment can help us all cope better with our lives and feel happier. This is because mindfulness is about respecting, and not judging, ourselves - it is about just accepting ourselves for who we are. It is very simple, but can be a very powerful way of keeping us in touch with what is really important about our lives. It is about helping us not to get bogged down by past mistakes. If now is ok, we are ok.

Mindfulness also involves keeping our minds clear of thoughts, so that we can focus on what is happening now, without being distracted. This means we need to become more aware of our thoughts. If we can be aware of our thoughts, it is easier to accept our thoughts as just thoughts, and then 'let them go', knowing that they don't have to affect us.

The process of mindfulness can help us to pay attention to the present moment. We can teach children and young people to do this too.

### Being mindful

Being mindful is simply about paying attention to those things in the present moment that we so often ignore, for example: the rich taste of our morning coffee, the sound of birds singing, the sensation of rain on our face, or the feeling of anger or joy in our body.

It is also about taking time to be aware of all the good things in your life - all the good things surrounding you right now like family, friends, your home, the food you have to eat, your pet, etc. This doesn't mean you can't have goals or want your life to be better. But if you spend too much time thinking about what you don't have yet, or feeling that you are not the person you want to be yet, it can make you feel unhappy and stressed.

Suppose we went at a slow enough pace... to feel our bodies, play with children, look openly, without agenda or timetable into the faces of loved ones... Suppose we took time each day to sit in silence. I think if we did those things, the world wouldn't need much saving.

Donella H. Meadows

Mindfulness can be practised in many different ways. It simply involves bringing your attention to the present moment. Mindfulness is not the same as meditation. You *can* meditate to become more mindful but it is only one way to become more mindful. And mindfulness is *not* about trying to achieve a higher level of consciousness which some meditative practices aim to achieve.

Mindfulness is often confused with relaxation. Although you may become more relaxed when you are mindful, this is not the goal of mindfulness. The goal is to be aware of and accept whatever way your body and mind feel at this moment in time. Our minds are often very busy and full of our thoughts, many of which are about the past and future. The goal of mindfulness is to be aware that we have thoughts, but to let them go so that we can focus on the present, without distraction.

## How can mindfulness help?

More and more people across the world are recognising the benefits of mindfulness. It has been used in healthcare to help reduce stress and anxiety. If someone is stressed or anxious they worry about what *might* happen in the future rather than what is happening in the present. Mindfulness provides an alternative focus by bringing attention to the present moment. Therefore, the vicious circle of worrying can be broken.

In people with depression, it has been found that mindfulness can help prevent the depression coming back. Mindfulness training may help people who are depressed to become aware of their despairing, hopeless thoughts and redirect their attention to other aspects of the present moment, such as their breathing and positive aspects of their environment.

Mindfulness has been shown to be associated with energy, optimism, higher independence, competence and higher life satisfaction, which may indicate why it has been found to be an effective tool in business.

In education, studies of mindfulness training suggest that mindfulness has the potential benefit of improving children's attention and social skills, reducing test anxiety and improving a sense of calm.

Evidence suggests that therapeutic workers who have had mindfulness training show improved outcomes for their clients.

There have been many other positive outcomes associated with mindfulness training. To name a few, research suggests that practicing mindfulness can:

- Improve immune function
- Increase empathy
- Enhance relationships
- Improve academic performance
- Reduce symptoms of hyperactivity in young people
- Increase satisfaction with parenting skills.

## Mindfulness in schools

Mindfulness is now being taught in some American schools and is practised by both pupils and teachers. It is proving to be very successful.

### Case study - Mindful School Program in the USA



#### How the Program works

- Teachers receive four independent training sessions and a curriculum.
- They teach children to pay attention to their experiences. In a series of engaging mindfulness exercises, students learn to focus on a number of experiences including: listening, breathing, movement, walking, eating, seeing, test-taking, developing kind and caring thoughts toward oneself and others.
- The Program is delivered in 15-minute training sessions given 3 times a week during a 5-week course. It is school-wide so that everyone benefits from the same teaching, creating a school culture of calm, focus, and connection.
- One of the aims of the Program is that teachers will continue to incorporate mindfulness into their daily schedules after the Program has finished.

#### The results reported by the Mindful Schools Program are:

- Better focus and concentration
- Raised self-awareness
- Decreased stress for pupils and teachers
- Improved school-wide culture
- Better conflict-resolution skills
- Increased calm
- Better ways to respond to difficult emotions
- Increased empathy and understanding of others

#### Quotes from pupils

I like mindfulness because it helps me feel better and teaches me to concentrate.

I think if everybody knew how to do mindfulness there wouldn't be that much killing and fighting over little things. Mindfulness is very good for kids and adults.

#### Quotes from teachers

After mindfulness today, they were so focused in music. They're never like that in music.

The mindfulness classes are really good for me. I am under a lot of stress and they cool me out and then I am much better for my students.

Mindful Schools (2010). <http://www.mindfulschools.org/>

## How to become more mindful yourself

The future hasn't happened yet and the past is gone. So I think the only moment we have is right here and now, and I try to make the best of those moments, the moments that I'm in.

Annie Lennox

Mindfulness is really simple. Everyone can bring a little bit of mindfulness into their lives by doing some of the following:

- Be just as you are for a few moments each day – sit quietly doing nothing and observe your breath going in and out. Try to keep your mind clear - notice any thoughts as they arise and try to push them gently out of your mind.
- Have a go at yoga or Tai chi - these are forms of mindful movement that can help you become more aware of your body and how it really feels to be you.
- Take time to eat quietly and slowly, savouring every bite, thinking about where the food has come from and how it tastes and feels in your mouth.
- Take time to go for a walk outside, not going too fast and noticing everything around you – really looking at things, and hearing all the sounds around you, not getting caught up by your thinking.
- Watch young children or pets and notice how mindful they are, just being in the present moment and enjoying the world around them.

Some people find it easier to develop a mindful approach to life by attending a group and learning together how to be more mindful. You can look out for a group in your local area. See links below for further information about courses and resources.

## Activities to help children become more mindful

These exercises are quite simple, but it may take some time before children will feel comfortable with stillness and quiet and focused concentration. Be prepared for some frustration and comments that it seems strange. This is a normal response at first. It takes practice but the practice is worth it. Jon Kabat-Zinn (Executive Director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society, USA) describes the children's response to mindfulness in one classroom: "[Mindfulness] exercises went from seeming 'weird' and 'strange' to them in the beginning to being an important part of their day to them and something that many of them love and enjoy sharing with their parents and siblings."

### Quiet time focusing on breath



This exercise helps the child to be aware only of the present as the focus is on the current breath. It also has the effect of calming the mind and any anxiety in the body.

Arrange a daily time where you sit quietly and focus on your breathing. Young children should not be expected to sit for long. A general rule is that they can sit quietly for the number of minutes that matches their age. So a 5-year-old could be expected to sit for 5 minutes; a 10-year-old for 10 minutes and so on. When you first introduce this to children you should only do it for one or two minutes. You can do it sitting on chairs with feet on the floor or children may prefer to sit cross-legged on the floor. You could guide the quiet time as follows:

"Become aware of your breathing. Focus on the feeling of coolness at your nose when you breathe in and the feeling of warmth as you breathe out. Say 'one' as you breathe in and 'one' as you breathe out. Then say 'two' as you breathe in and 'two' as you breathe out, and so on, up to five. Then start back at 'one' again. Thoughts will come into your head. That's ok, just know that they are thoughts and just push them gently away and go back to counting your breath, beginning with one."

Children can be encouraged to use this focus on breathing in their daily life when they are feeling worried or angry or before starting homework or going to sleep.

When I am mad or sad I practice mindfulness. First you have to close your eyes. Then you breathe out and in.

Child on Mindful Schools Program

### Walking mindfully



This can be useful for children who find it difficult to sit still. It helps them become more aware of their body.

Ask the children to walk around a room. Ask them to lift one foot at a time slowly and carefully as if walking on eggshells or walking in slow motion. Ask them to place their foot down smoothly and slowly. Then ask them to take a step with the other foot the same distance ahead. Ask them to feel every muscle in their legs while they walk and every shift in body weight. Ask them to feel their hands and arms in space. You can ask them to move a bit faster, then more slowly again. Tell them that, if they begin to think about other things, they should gently allow these thoughts to pass, then return their attention to their body.

### Raisin awareness!



This exercise aims to make children more aware of an object in their environment - a raisin - then to become aware of their own experience of that object. This can be done with an individual child or with a group or class. Give each child two raisins.

You can use the following script, adapted from Jon Kabat-Zinn's book ("Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain and Illness") or an adaptation of this, depending on the age group you are working with.

"Look at the raisins carefully as if you have never seen one before. Pick up one raisin and feel it between your fingers and notice its colours. Be aware of any thoughts you have about the raisin. Be aware if you are thinking about liking or not liking raisins. Lift the raisin to your nose and smell it for a while. Then bring it to your lips. Be aware of your arm moving your hand into the right place for your mouth. Notice if your mouth is salivating to get ready for eating. Put the raisin into your mouth and chew it slowly. Experience the actual taste of the raisin. Hold it in your mouth. When you feel ready to swallow, feel your throat getting ready to swallow. When you are ready, pick up the second raisin and do all this again, as if this is now the first raisin you have ever seen."

## Paying attention to how we think



Becoming more mindful involves understanding that we produce our thoughts - they are not who we are, they are just something that we do. Once we understand this, it is easier to push any negative thoughts out of our mind. Once the child has learnt to keep awareness on the present moment by focusing on their breath, you can then help them become aware of their thoughts and feelings. You can use the following exercise:

"Close your eyes and say to yourself: 'I wonder what my next thought is going to be?' Then focus very carefully, waiting for the next thought - like a cat watching a mouse hole. I wonder what thought is going to come out of the mouse hole?"

## The WOW Factor



What are the things that fill you with wonder? Is it a rainbow, how you breathe, a newborn baby, a mountain, the sea, a butterfly, a forest of bluebells, a whale? You can do this next exercise in a group or on your own.

What you need:

- Paper or thin card
- Thick and thin felt tips.

What you do:

- Make a big cartoon-style 'WOW!' in the middle of your sheet of paper.
- Use bright colours to make your 'WOW!' and draw one of those zig-zaggy shapes around it with a thick felt tip so it looks like a word from a cartoon.
- Think about all the things that fill you with wonder and make you want to say 'WOW!' and all the things that give you a special tingly feeling when you think about them.
- Maybe your 'WOW!'s are things in nature, or being loved in a special way, or doing something amazing, or a new baby, or being in a beautiful place. Maybe they are rainbows or crashing waves, or bees, or being on a mountain. Maybe they are being close to a waterfall, being hugged, a special piece of music, a tree, or being in a place of worship.
- Write or draw your 'WOW!'s or moments of wonder all around your 'WOW!' word.
- Tell each other about your favourite 'WOW!' moments.

Things to talk about together:

- What are the things that give something a WOW-factor?
- What 'WOW!'s did you have that were the same as someone else's 'WOW!'s?
- What was the biggest 'WOW!' you experienced in the last week?
- When you think about yourself what is the biggest 'WOW!' about you?

Other ideas:

- Make a collection of pictures or objects that make you or the people in your family, class or group go 'WOW!'
- Go on a 'WOW!' walk together. Find a special place and look for as many things as you can that make you want to say 'WOW!' - even ants and daisies can be pretty amazing!

## Resources

You can get lots more ideas for developing mindfulness for yourself and for children in the following resources:

[www.bemindful.co.uk](http://www.bemindful.co.uk)

Be Mindful is a campaign led by The Mental Health Foundation, to raise awareness about the benefits of mindfulness. There are videos and resources on the website, as well as details of courses around the UK.

<http://youthmindfulness.org/>

Youth Mindfulness is a social enterprise devoted to developing and delivering mindfulness programmes for children, adolescents and young adults.