

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Workbook

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ISBN-13: 978-1517597801



“Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way:

*on purpose
in the present moment
and non-judgementally”*

John Kabat-Zinn 1996

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Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction

Mindfulness is a popular subject in the press as a way to improve wellbeing, and the NHS has adopted mindfulness approaches in clinical care and in the workplace. This course is intended to help you understand what Mindfulness is, but much more importantly to experience Mindfulness.

These sessions will provide practices and insights that can help people to be less reactive to life's challenges, to be more aware and responsive, and to have more choice in dealing with difficulties. The sessions will be experiential and use a range of awareness practices including simple movement practices. The aim is to become more in touch with thoughts, feelings and body sensations so we can respond with less stress. Mindfulness will be introduced from a secular perspective without any assumption of prior knowledge or practice.



So, what is Mindfulness? In the late 1970's Jon Kabat-Zinn established a "stress reduction clinic" at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. He was inspired to take a number of Buddhist practices and teach them to people who had chronic and persistent medical problems that clinicians were unable to cure. The intention was not to cure those illnesses, but to help people live more effectively with their problems. The programme developed and was remarkably successful, and a protocol called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) was created and used extensively, both within Massachusetts hospital and more widely.

Over the next two decades, alongside good anecdotal evidence, studies started to show that there were significant benefits arising from MBSR. A development of that protocol, Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) was developed, and studies showed that as an intervention this was marginally better than drug therapy for helping people with certain depressive illnesses to avoid relapse, and it is now an NHS recommended treatment.

John Kabat-Zinn originally defined mindfulness as "paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally". That is an easy thing to express, but not easy to do. Mindfulness has become very popular and the media is bringing a lot of attention to it. This course should leave you much more informed and give you a rich experience.

You should follow the course rigorously through use of the home practices, where much of the experiential learning will take place. You are not marked on your compliance with home practice, but it is daily practice that cultivates mindfulness even if it can be difficult at times. If you miss a day or more of practice, or do not meet the target times for practice, note that in your diary and bring that experience with you to the next session.

Whatever you do, take care of yourself. Mindfulness is about learning to be kinder to yourself and exploring personal boundaries, not pushing yourself beyond your limits. If you have any concerns or problems, speak to a tutor privately.

Warmest regards

Ken

Guiding Principles

This course is meant to be a learning experience for each individual. Everyone will take away different things from it. The learning is co-created by the group, and will come as much if not more from the participants as from the tutors. It is important to protect that group experience. Therefore as a group we ask participants to observe a few simple principles.

1. People will be invited to share their experiences. Learning will come out of the group, as we all have different experiences of the present moment. Please treat anything that is shared as confidential.
2. No-one is obliged to share their experiences - you are welcome to just listen.
3. We will be working with our “edges”, and exploring our personal boundaries. However, if there is anything about a practice you are really uncomfortable with, you need not follow it. You can discuss it privately with a tutor. Do not do anything that is likely to cause you harm.
4. If you need anything for your own comfort, please sort yourself out. There are blankets and cushions provided. If you need the bathroom at any time, just take time out.
5. If you are going to leave the session before the end, or need to miss a session, please let one of the tutors know. The course is progressive, and builds on earlier experiences.
6. If there is anything you think the tutors should know, please speak to them privately if necessary.
7. A register is kept, please put your name down before you go.
8. If you can't make a session, please can you let us know in advance.
9. Please turn up in good time for the class.
10. Mindfulness is a label that is widely used, and it means many things to many people. Rather than define it, we will be exploring it throughout the course. Your experience should enrich your personal understanding.
11. The course is experiential, and not theoretical. The tutors would be happy to discuss theory outside of the class and recommend reading for those wanting to explore further.
12. Mindfulness is developed through practice. To benefit from the course, you are encouraged to try the practices yourself on a daily basis. Personal learning will come from regular practice, including the struggle to do that practice. Each week there will be some home practice which is an important part of the course.
13. The course is secular and not tied to any particular religion or world view. There will be strong overlaps with some Buddhist practices, and if you have any questions on that the tutors would be happy to clarify to the best of their abilities. Buddhism has a strong emphasis on ethics and wisdom that are not so explicit in mindfulness practices, and different Buddhist schools have subtly different uses of the term “mindfulness”.
14. Please respect the environment we are working in.



Course Outline.

Week 1: Coming to our senses

The first week will introduce mindfulness and some exercises that are intended to make us much more aware of what is going on in our bodies. The intention is to start to move away from automatic pilot, where we are driven by our inner thoughts and feelings, and to become more in touch with the world around us.

Week 2: Exploring our edges, and coming home to our bodies

By being more in touch with our body and feelings, and noticing how we react, we can start to take a little more control. Our natural tendency to challenges is the "fight or flight" response. That might have worked well in more primitive times, but in modern times the tendency is to contain our reactions which creates stress. In this session, we start to explore the edges that we have, and understand a little more about how our reactions.



Week 3: Being present

Staying in the present moment and not getting lost in thoughts or daydreams is an important skill to practice. This session looks at meditation practices that can be long or short. There will also be some mindful movement practices that help us to gently wake up to our bodies.

Week 4: What is stress?

This session we look at how we respond to stress. Stress is not just caused by the events in our lives, but also in the way we deal with them. Different people respond to the same events in different ways. By now we will have explored some useful tools, and now we will see how they can be applied.

Week 5: Responding more effectively to stress.

This session looks at how we can transfer the skills we develop in practices such as meditation into daily life and deal more effectively with difficult situations. By bringing greater awareness of our thoughts, feelings and sensations to bear, we can waste less energy and approach problems more effectively.

Week 6: Dealing with others.

Often it is our relationships that cause the most stress, and mindful communication can help us deal more effectively with others. This session looks carefully at some aspects of communication in stressful situations, and through some simple practices learn how to deal more skilfully with ourselves and others.

Week 7: Taking more care of ourselves.

Life is a game of snakes and ladders, but if there are too many snakes and not enough ladders it can be a tedious game. We often pile pressure on ourselves, and forget to relieve that pressure. We can do that until we come to breaking point. This session looks at how we can mindfully rebalance our lives.

Week 8: Keeping it up.

"Well that 8 week course really made me feel better. What next?" How often have we been on some course, felt wonderful after it, and then a week later been back to square one? Before we finish, we will look at how each of us can keep up the practices we have learned, and grow in awareness.

Practice day

Experience a range of practices over a day, in silence. This helps to cement the practices in a "mini-retreat".

Week 1: Coming to our senses

In the first week we will introduce mindfulness and some exercises that are intended to make us much more aware of what is going on in our bodies. The intention is to start to move away from automatic pilot, where we are driven by our inner thoughts and feelings, and to become more in touch with the world around us.

The principle we start with is one that Jon Katab-Zinn applies: “there is more right with us than wrong with us”. From where we are, we can grow in patience, acceptance, wisdom and understanding. Whether you are a long term meditator, or new to meditation, bringing an open mind to the practices will help you explore them.

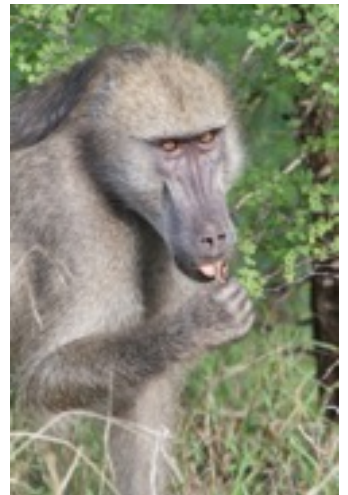


Why are we here?

“Beginner’s Mind”

Thank you for joining this course on mindfulness. We would like this to be an enjoyable experience as well as an important learning experience. There is a lot we can say about mindfulness but we think the most important thing is to show you. There will be plenty of opportunities for discussion, and we welcome questions, but the emphasis will be on learning to be more mindful, using a number of practices that you can take away and apply in your own life.

If you like, there are plenty of books around so that we can read more about mindfulness, and we can recommend some. There is a lot of theory, but like many useful things it is possible for you to use mindfulness without studying the theory. Most of us have been walking or talking or listening most of our lives without necessarily understanding the theory behind what we are doing. It can be just like that with mindfulness. We would encourage you to focus on experiencing the class, seeing what arises, and not come with any preconceptions or expectations. After the course, some deeper reading and study might be appropriate for you.



We all arrive at a class like this with different expectations. So the first thing we would like to do is to explore and share those expectations. Some of us might have an established mindfulness or meditation practice. Some of us might be completely new to the experience. No matter how much experience we have, we can all share and learn from each other. Sometimes the novices teach the experts more than the experts teach the novices.

One of the ideas or attitudes that mindfulness tries to develop is what is known as “beginner’s mind”. That means bringing into an experience an attitude where it is treated as if it were completely fresh. It means leaving behind prejudices and seeing things as new. So throughout all of these classes we invite you to bring along a beginner’s mind. You may have been meditating for years, but when we introduce a particular technique, we suggest that you follow it as if it were for the first time.

So, in this spirit, let us do a very short exercise exploring for each of us why we are here, and what we are hoping to learn.

Mind Wandering and Mindfulness

This practice is not about a state, it's not about getting somewhere. A couple of common misconceptions are that mindfulness meditation is about not thinking, or relaxing, or achieving a particular pleasant state of mind. Such states of mind and body may arise but that is not the goal, and mindfulness practice is not about not thinking or trying to get anywhere in particular.



Research shows that there is a correlation between mind wandering and unhappiness. In mindfulness meditation we take an object, like our breathing or sound or body sensations, and use it to help us to remember to return to a mindful awareness of the present moment. We do this over and over again, building our “attention muscle”, patiently and non-judgementally

Each time you recognise being caught up in mind wandering, and return to a caring and curious awareness of the present moment, is a moment of mindfulness. Awareness itself is non-judgemental, and notices what is happening in the present moment without evaluating it. The more practice we have at returning to the present moment, the more natural that becomes.

Even though you intend to keep your attention resting with your breath or sound or a particular part of your body your mind will naturally wander. The mind thinks, and you will notice that you've become caught up in thinking. Please don't make thinking the enemy. Thinking is an amazing, creative, and brilliant capacity we have. When you notice you've been caught up in mind wandering, rest assured you haven't done anything wrong and you're not falling short. This is a moment of mindfulness: a moment of remembering. Remembering what? Remembering to return to presence. Remembering to give your attention to what's happening in this moment with curiosity and care.

Automatic pilot - paying attention

We spend a lot of our time with our attention being drawn from one thing to another. In the mindfulness world, it is often said that we spend a lot of our lives on automatic pilot. To a large extent that doesn't matter. We wouldn't want to have to think about everything we do in fine detail; we certainly would not want to be like the proverbial caterpillar confused about how it walks by having to pay attention to each leg individually. Automatic pilot has a role to play.



Sometimes however we need to take the controls back from automatic pilot. Much of meditation or mindfulness is really about taking over the controls and switching off automatic pilot, at least for a little while. By doing so, we can start to break some of our bad habits and create some good habits.

In the early stages of developing mindfulness skills, we begin to recognise when we are on automatic pilot and when it's appropriate to switch off automatic pilot. You can do this from time to time throughout the day. Just deciding to do some simple thing, such as brushing your teeth, with

full attention on what you are doing helps to develop the skill of paying attention and moving away from automatic pilot.

A useful exercise is to take a pause from time to time, and just check in with yourself. It might not be for more than a few seconds. Just stop what you are doing and ask yourself in a way meaningful to you: “what is going on for me right now? How am I feeling?”. Then go on with your day.

Automatic pilot can become very damaging when it is programmed badly. For example, if your mind is programmed to look out for verbal threats, then automatic pilot can start to treat even innocent comments as a potential threat. Similarly, if automatic pilot is switched on most of the time to worry about work, then you might be distracted whilst driving and drive dangerously.

Our aim is not to switch off automatic pilot, but to recognise when it may become a problem, and to learn how to take over the controls, and then to reprogram it.

Getting in touch with our bodies

We can be surprisingly out of touch with our bodies.

Our thoughts and feelings often dictate our lives, and sit in the centre of our attention. However, our thoughts and feelings are often mirrored through sensations in our bodies. By bringing more attention to our bodies, we can get more of an insight into how we react to events that surround us, and to the effects of thoughts and feelings on our lives.

By bringing thoughts, feelings and body sensations together in our awareness, we begin to realise how much tension and stress is felt in the body. Often sensations arise in the body before they are reflected in our thoughts and feelings.

The body scan is meant to bring us more in touch with our bodies. It is an exercise in attention, focusing carefully on different parts of the body. However it is also an exercise in awareness, usually bringing into awareness sensations that are routinely hidden by our habit of focusing on thoughts and feelings.

The exercise can be done very quickly, and it is quite common in some meditation practices to do a short body scan at the beginning of the practice, and it can be a useful exercise in calming and settling the mind. In an MBSR course, it is done very slowly with the intention of bringing participants much closer to awareness of sensations in the body.

This exercise can be easily done anywhere you are able to sit or lie still undisturbed for a period, and done at whatever pace the time you have allows.

Throughout the exercise, the intention is to notice the sensations in the body and not to change them. Changes will naturally occur in the sensations, but the object of the exercise is to become aware of what is there rather than striving to change what is there. Sometimes you will hear guidance suggesting that you even embrace uncomfortable sensations.

The Body Scan

Find a comfortable place to lie or sit for about 30 minutes. Settle into your position, adjusting so that you can stay still in this position for the whole practice.



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Begin by becoming aware of your surroundings, then bring attention to the sensation of your body in contact with the floor, or your seat if you are sitting, or anywhere that your body is in contact with the outside world. Then for a short while bring attention to the rhythm of your breath entering and leaving the body.

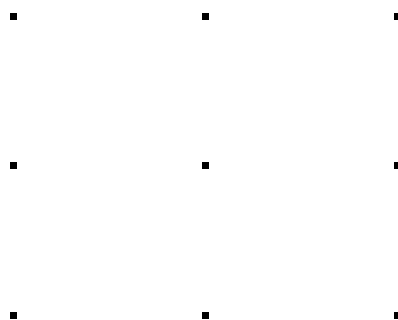
Starting with the left foot, focus your attention on your toes, noticing the sensations there. Notice whether sensations are pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. You may have no sensations where your attention lands, but that is okay too. Move attention to include the sole of your left foot, noticing what sensations are there in the same way. In this way the guidance will take you all the way through your body, at each stopping point just noticing sensations without trying to change them.

Throughout the exercise, inevitably your mind will wander. That is natural, and if you are listening to guidance just resume where the guidance is at the point that you noticed your mind wandered. Mind wandering is natural. If you are lying down, you may drift off to sleep too. That too is natural. Do not judge yourself negatively for any of these.

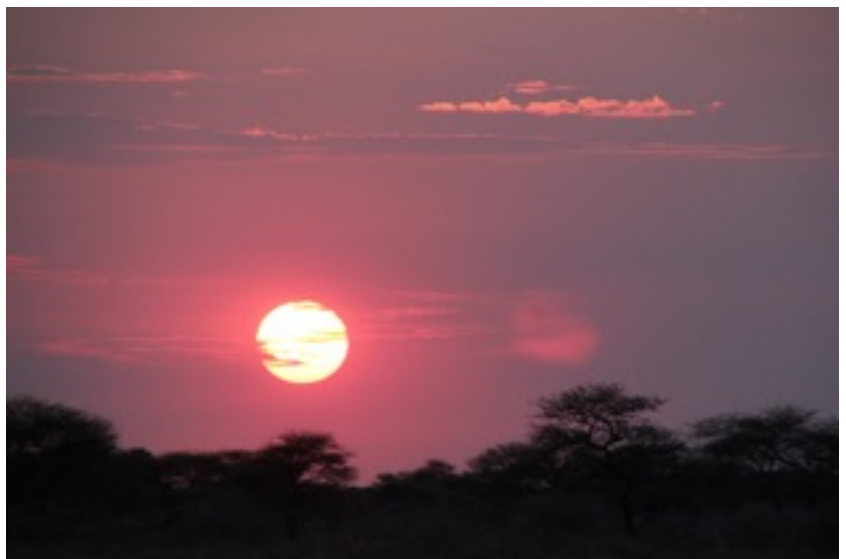
Home Practice - Week 1

Home practice is an important part of learning mindfulness. We have busy lives, but if possible try the following in the coming week.

1. Each day, set aside 30 to 45 minutes to follow the guided body scan that we used to close this session. Use the CD provided, or download one from the web. Don't expect anything in particular, just notice your experiences.
2. Eat at least one thing mindfully. Ideally, eat a meal by yourself mindfully, but if that is not possible maybe a piece of fruit or even a chocolate bar.
3. Choose another activity to do mindfully - showering, brushing your teeth, washing up, trying to bring all of your senses and awareness to the activity.
4. Throughout the day, find opportunities to pause and check in with yourself.
5. Try the "nine dots exercise". The objective is to draw four straight lines through the dots without taking your pencil off the paper:



6. Make notes on anything you noticed, keeping a regular journal of experiences.
7. Before coming to the next session, reflect on your week and complete the weekly summary below.



Weekly summary

Before coming to the next session we invite you to make a short summary below of your week. You might want to consider the following questions to guide you:

What came up for you this week arising from the course and your practice?

What difficulties did you have?

What questions arose for you?

Week 2 - Exploring our edges, and coming home to our bodies

By being more in touch with our body and feelings, and noticing how we react, we can start to take a little more control. Our natural tendency to challenges is the "fight or flight" response. That might have worked well in more primitive times, but in modern times the tendency is to contain our reactions which creates stress. In this session, we start to explore the edges that we have, understand a little more about how our reactions, and stay more present.



By getting a greater sense of our direct experience, we start to build skills that will eventually help us to learn to move away from automatic pilot, take the controls and begin to steer more skillfully around the obstacles we all face. In this session will explore further practices that help us see and know experiences more fully, and help us stay more in the present.

We will continue with the body scan practice. This is will help us to develop our sensitivity to our emotions and become more aware of our reactivity. It will help us understand more the links between our body sensations, feelings and thoughts. We often find areas of difficulty in the body that we have previously blocked out, and becoming aware of them with open hearted and wise attention is a skill we can build on more generally in our daily lives.



A note on attitude in practice and about practice

Mindfulness exercises focus heavily on attention and awareness. All of the time we are being bombarded by stimuli that, if we tried to be fully aware of, could overwhelm us. Our minds are therefore very selective in what we pay attention to. Mindfulness practices help us to strengthen our ability to pay attention and be aware of what is happening in the present moment, and can bring more or different things into our consciousness.

Mindfulness practices also usually include guidance into our attitude towards things that come into our attention. A particular attitude that is often mentioned is judging. Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as paying attention, on purpose, with a particular attitude; there are many attitudes that he discusses, but in particular he emphasises a non-judgemental attitude.

By being non-judgemental, it does not mean that we become indiscriminate, and do not take action to prevent bad things from happening. What it means is that when things come into our attention as thoughts, feelings or sensations, we notice and accept them without acting on them, developing a sense of curiosity about them. Negative thoughts may arise, and we notice them without judging ourselves for the fact that we have had those thoughts; we should not act on negative thoughts, but suppressing them can simply bury them until a stimulus causes them to arise again, often when we are less able to deal with them in a constructive way.

Another perspective on mindfulness is described by Shauna Shapiro, who considers mindfulness in terms of intention, attention and attitude. Like Kabat-Zinn, she strongly emphasises attitudes that are kind to ourselves and others. In mindfulness practice, and as far as possible in daily life, when thoughts feelings and sensations arise, we can acknowledge them in a non-judging way.

Whatever your practice, it is useful and interesting to ask "What am I practicing for? Where is this practice taking me?" You may be practicing to deal with some difficulty in life or get a little more comfortable, or to cultivate presence and to use that presence to explore your experience, or you may be seeking some form of personal transformation. This is part of Shapiro's view on intention in mindfulness, which must complement attention and attitude. However, as we shall discuss below, being goal driven in our practices can be counter-productive, so in mindfulness practice our hopes and aspirations are something we note, rather than something we aspire to.

Being clear about intentions will help inform practice and choice of practice, and perhaps help you in gaining benefit from practice. Mindfulness can support the development of greater kindness towards ourselves and others, in a secular or a religious context. This often comes out implicitly in the contemporary mindfulness exercises, rather than as an explicit instruction. Often a guidance will touch on attitudes, which promote openness and compassion, towards ourselves and others.

We all come to practice with some expectations, and it can be difficult to bring a beginner's mind to practice. It can be easy to see a particular practice as being the best way, but we are all at different stages in our individual journeys, and we all have different needs and expectations. Indeed, there is good research to show that an individual's expectations from practice, and practice itself, tend to change over time. It is important as you work to develop trust in your own practice but notice mindfully (with curiosity and care) if you find judgment forming about other ways of practicing. Trust takes time, and can be slow to develop, but with care and persistence it is likely to come. Though it may be difficult, try letting go of expectations and stay with the experiences of a particular practice. The experience of a particular practice may change over time.

In this course we are introducing a range of practices that may or may not be of value to any particular individual, and which should not challenge your personal beliefs. Try them during this course, check out your experience, and if they are useful to you now then persist beyond this course. If not, set them down - they may be helpful another time. This is an exploration, an opportunity to try different practices, and an opportunity to find out more about yourself.

Non-striving

It may sound odd, but striving in meditation can be very counter-productive. Striving is about goals, trying to get somewhere. Mindfulness meditation is about being here, with whatever is arising. Of course, we meditate because it is beneficial. Paradoxically, the harder you try the harder it can become. Maybe you had an experience with that learning to ride a bicycle - the more you tried at first to balance, the more you wobbled, until you learnt to trust your instincts and began to balance without trying.

Sometimes learning to meditate is likened to training a puppy to sit. If you encourage the puppy, speak kindly to it, celebrate when it sits a while, then with patience it will learn. If you get cross with the puppy, then it might sit for a while, but it will build up resistance and become rebellious or mischievous.

Likewise, do not measure your practice by how well you follow the guidance. Sometimes a meditation can be very haphazard. Comparing yourself with a goal can become very discouraging. Even the most experienced meditators have difficulties with their practice. In fact, practice is often about finding the "edges", those things that are difficult for us, and being aware of them, not going beyond them until you are ready.

Being mode and doing mode

In mindfulness we often talk about two orientations to the world: being mode and doing mode. Being mode is very much based on accepting what is there for you, not striving to change it, not judging the current situation, experiencing what is there. Doing mode is very much about "getting

somewhere”, achieving a goal, changing what is, improving things. One is not necessarily better than the other, though in some circumstances one mode may be preferable.

We all live somewhere on the spectrum between being and doing. Work is usually a doing activity, with much to achieve. In fact, that is usually why we get paid! But we all need to step off the treadmill from time to time, and rest from doing mode. That is when being mode can be of most value.

Doing mode, however, can be very addictive. “If only I could do just a bit more ...”. Recognise that? At the end of the day, tired from a day’s work, you sit on the sofa with a cup of tea and put your feet up, and immediately your mind switches to something you need to do. Instead of enjoying your cup of tea, you start to plan. A few minutes later the tea is gone, perhaps with a few biscuits to “give you some energy,” and you are off on your next task.

Doing mode at its most extreme becomes “driven doing mode”. When that happens, we simply never stop doing things until exhaustion takes over. Our lives can become goal oriented, and even when we have achieved a goal there is another one to replace it. Driven doing mode can be very addictive, and if it becomes a permanent way of living it can be very harmful - we will consider that more later in the course.

Breath meditation - stepping back into the present moment

“the more conscious we are of the interconnectedness of our thoughts and emotions, our choices and our actions in the world, the more we can see with eyes of wholeness, the more effective we will be when faced with obstacles, challenges and stress”

Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Full Catastrophe Living”, 2013



A key effect of mindfulness practices is to help us gain more insight into what is going on for us in the present moment. We often feel that we are in the middle of impossible and unchangeable circumstances without really examining them. By taking time out, we can get a fresh perspective on our circumstances, and build a foundation that will help us to respond thoughtfully rather than react automatically.

A mainstay practice for many is breath meditation. The breath is always with us, and though we hardly notice it for much of our daily activity, we can always return to it. So doing, we can temporarily become aware of our thoughts and sensations in a more detached way, and turn back and take a view of what is happening to us.

By taking a regular time out to practice noticing and returning to breath, over time we can gain abilities to see a little bit more clearly what is happening around us and within us.

Breath meditation is not intended as an escape. Rather, the breath should be seen as an anchor that can help us avoid being tossed by the storms of life and blown into more dangerous waters. The breath is very much in the body, and using the breath we are stepping out of auto-pilot and coming back to our senses, back to what is here for us now.

Exercise

Find a place where you are unlikely to be disturbed for the period of your practice. Ideally a quiet place, at least while you are learning the practice; as you gain experience you may find it possible to meditate in more noisy environments such as on a bus or train.

Make yourself comfortable. Choose whether to meditate with your eyes open or closed; at first eyes closed can be easier.

Get a sense of where you are. Perhaps the short body scan may help you settle. Note any particular sensations around you such as contact with your seat and noises. Then gently bring your attention to your breath, not trying to change the breath, just noticing the sensations of the breath where they are most vivid for you.

When your mind wanders, as it certainly will, then notice the wandering and without judging yourself return your attention to the breath. Each noticing of mind wandering is a key part of this meditation. Notice what took your mind away, but do not judge the thoughts or sensations that you wandered into. Simply return your attention ever so gently to the breath, over and over again.

Home Practice - Week 2

Home practice is an important part of learning mindfulness. We have busy lives, but if possible try the following in the coming week.

1. Continue with the body scan practice daily.
2. Choose a different activity to do mindfully.
3. Make notes on anything you noticed.
4. At points through the day, stop and bring awareness to the breath.
5. Each day, add to a "pleasant events diary" (see below).
6. Before coming to the next session, reflect on your week and complete the weekly summary below.



Pleasant Events Diary

Make notes below each day of particular events which you found pleasant. Prompt yourself with the following questions:

1. Where were you when you had the experience?
2. Were you aware of pleasant feelings at the time?
3. Did you notice any body sensations? What were the details of them?
4. What was your mood, thoughts, feelings at the time of the event?
5. What thoughts and feelings are with you as you write about the event?

Weekly summary

Before coming to the next session we invite you to make a short summary below of your week. You might want to consider the following questions to guide you:

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What difficulties did you have?

What questions arose for you?

Week 3: Being present

Staying in the present moment and not getting lost in thoughts or daydreams is an important skill to practice. In this session we will look at meditation practices that can be long or short, still or moving. There will be some mindful movement practices that help to gently wake us up to our bodies, and some short breath meditations. These can be integrated into our daily lives.

Mindfulness is about connecting better with our daily lives, not a special set of practices that are just done for a few minutes a day. The practices are important, as they help us to train ourselves to come more regularly into the present, and to experience what that present moment feeling is like. Using the breath and movement as a way of stepping out of automatic pilot and into the present moment is a useful skill for daily living.



Mindful movement

Mindfulness is not just about sitting on a cushion or a chair, or doing exercises in a class. It is something that you can develop throughout the day. So much of our time is spent on automatic pilot that we hardly notice much of what is going on in the world around us, and also in our own thoughts and feelings and bodily sensations.

The raisin exercise illustrates that something as simple as eating can be done very differently and bring in different sensations and experiences. Likewise, something as simple as walking can be done more mindfully. We can bring more attention to any activity, and notice our thoughts, feelings, and sensations in the body as we undertake that activity. By so doing, our awareness and understanding expands, and we begin to develop more abilities to respond rather than react.

It can be surprising to some people that movement is a key practice in mindfulness. There are many reasons for this. It is one way of coming to the present moment, exploring our experiences physically as well as cognitively. It is a way of finding boundaries, and learning to deal with edges. And it is a way of bringing present moment awareness into everyday life, whether it is mindfully walking to work in the morning, or mindfully standing in the queue at the supermarket.

If you can take up a regular mindful movement practice such as yoga, tai chi, pilates, that can be very beneficial both physically and mentally. However, any physical activity can be done more mindfully, by paying attention to it. Thich Nhat Hanh is a great fan of washing up as a mindfulness practice - when washing up try to focus on what you are doing rather than seeing it as an activity to be rushed and got out of the way, being present with the washing up rather than the next activity. When you are out for a walk, give yourself a little more time, knock 10% off your pace and consciously notice what is going on around you.

Any activity can become a mindfulness practice. In a formal practice we will often slow things right down, but in daily activity just taking our foot off the mental accelerator can be enough.

Finding our edges

Throughout life we have a natural tendency to put up barriers, to create edges. Often, those edges are unconscious, and we naturally avoid approaching them. Physically, if we have pain in a joint, we will try and compensate to reduce that pain even if that locks the joint and reduces its mobility. Emotionally we often behave the same way, avoiding things that we find unpleasant, and distracting ourselves when unpleasant things arise.

Mindfulness can make us more aware of our edges, and help us to understand better the choices we have in dealing with them. Though it can sound odd at first, in a mindfulness practice you are often invited to stay with an edge, explore it, and bring some kindness and compassion to it, including it as part of the practice. Equally, are not be encouraged to cling to it, but to see it as part of the bigger picture. Nor should you try to push yourself beyond your edges. Whether physical or emotional, experience the difficulty as best you can, turn towards it if possible, but notice if things get too hard and consciously back off.

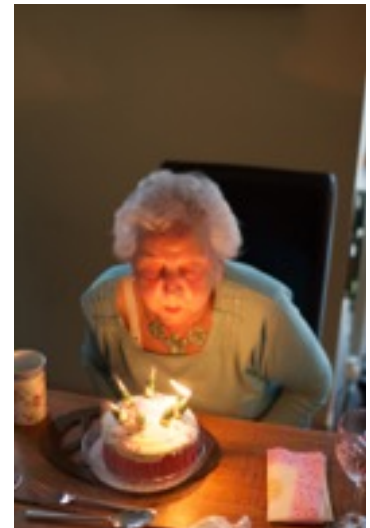
So, be aware that mindfulness may introduce you to some edges, which can be difficult at times. At all times treat yourself with compassion, do not hurtle towards your edges or obsess about them. Note them, learn and move on. Patience, kindness and compassion are things that are important for you to bring to yourself.

Three-step breathing exercise

It can be useful to introduce small exercises throughout the day to bring us more in touch with our feelings. The three-step breathing exercise is a short exercise that can be done very quickly, either as a response to a stressful activity, or as a preparation for a stressful activity, or just simply as a way of calming ourselves in bringing us in touch with the immediate moment.

The image of an hourglass is sometimes used to describe this exercise. It begins with a wide awareness, narrows down to the breath, and expands out to a wider awareness again. It is a way of using the breath to anchor yourself into the present moment.

Integrating practice like this, that is short and simple but done regularly, is one way of integrating mindfulness into your daily activities. To begin with, choose some routine activity you can link it to - boiling the kettle, turning on the computer, anything that is a natural interlude or transition. It need not be, and indeed sometimes should not be, something that is large and obvious to others.



The three-step breathing exercise for example can be used as a response to a stressful event, say in a meeting just before you are expected to speak on an important topic.

Exercise

1. Stop whatever you are doing. Consciously bring your awareness to what is going on around you. Then bring your awareness into your body, noticing what is going on for you at this moment. How do you feel? What is your emotional temperature? What thoughts are going through your mind?
2. Bring awareness to your breath. Notice how your breath is. Do not consciously change your breath, but staying with your breath and notice its changes. Stay with it as long or as short as you have available. If you are sitting, you may chose to close your eyes.

3. Widen your awareness to your whole body, feeling perhaps that the whole body is breathing. Then expand your awareness back into what is going on around you. Notice the sensations that are coming in. Notice how you feel. Then continue with your day.

Home Practice - Week 3

Home practice is an important part of learning mindfulness. We have busy lives, but if possible try the following in the coming week.

1. On alternate days, do a body scan and a mindful movement activity. For the mindful movement, try some simple yoga or stretching exercises, or take a mindful walk.
2. At a different time, do a ten minute breath meditation, following the one on the CD provided.
3. Choose a different activity to do mindfully this week.
4. Choose three points in the day when you can use the three step breathing space.
5. Complete an unpleasant events diary with one unpleasant event a day. It need not be a dramatic event - something simple you did not like is enough. When such an event occurs during the day, jot down your thoughts and feelings about it. How did you react, what actions did you take?
6. Before coming to the next session, reflect on your week and complete the weekly summary below.

Unpleasant Events Diary

Make notes below each day of a particular event which you found unpleasant. Prompt yourself with the following questions:

1. Where were you when you had the experience?
2. Were you aware of unpleasant feelings at the time?
3. Did you notice any body sensations? What were the details of them?
4. What was your mood, thoughts, feelings at the time of the event?
5. What thoughts and feelings are with you as you write about the event?

Weekly summary

Before coming to the next session we invite you to make a short summary below of your week. You might want to consider the following questions to guide you:

What came up for you this week arising from the course and your practice?

What difficulties did you have?

What questions arose for you?

Week 4: What is stress?

In this session we will look at how we respond to stress. Stress is not just the events in our lives, but the way we deal with them. Different people respond to the same events in different ways. By now we have explored some useful practices, and we will see how they can be applied in daily life.



Responding rather than reacting



Naturally we all think our view of the world is accurate and correct. However our moods, our sensations, our thoughts, our experiences, all shape the way we view the world. There is nothing wrong with that. However, sometimes we jump to conclusions that can be inaccurate and unhelpful.

Mindfulness can help us examine our perceptions, enabling us to be less reactive and more responsive to the things that are going on in our lives. That does not mean being detached from the world. Rather, it means waking up to our reactions, and sometimes learning to respond more effectively.

In the exercise below, we will examine a simple and common experience, and look at how people in the group respond to the situation.

Exercise

Close your eyes.

Imagine you are walking down a street. Across the road you see a friend walking towards you. Naturally you wave at them and smile. They continue walking and do not look at you. There is some traffic, so you cannot cross the road towards them.

How do you feel? Do you notice any sensations in your body? What thoughts are coming to mind?



Feelings

When we first come into contact with an object or a thought, there is a feeling tone associated with that contact. That feeling seems to be immediate. So, when we taste chocolate, there is an immediate feeling of liking or disliking the taste. Our sensations can be divided into pleasant sensations, unpleasant sensations, and neutral sensations. Often we are oblivious to neutral sensations.

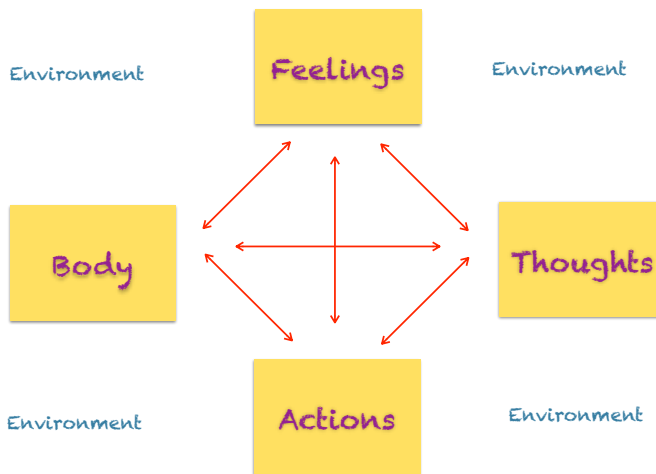
In mindfulness practice, either in formal practice or in day-to-day activity, we try to come a little bit closer in awareness to the immediate feelings associated with sensations that arise. There is good reason for this. Like a snowball rolling down a steep mountainside, our initial feelings are often added to rapidly, and can become an avalanche of emotions. So liking can quickly turn to desire, and maybe even an unhealthy thirst for more feelings of the same type. Similarly, dislike can quickly turn to aversion and even hatred.

Our minds work so quickly that we often do not notice the move from our immediate sensations and feelings through to stronger emotions. That move in itself can be harmless. However, sometimes it can be very unhelpful, and occasionally harmful. Often we are only aware of the development of emotions when they become very prominent.

Examples like the raisin exercise can show us that we miss so much of our experience. Automatic pilot can guide us blindly through the day, and we can miss out on much of the journey. Mindful movement can bring much more in touch with the sensations in our bodies, and help us notice any areas of holding or tension that we block out of consciousness. Formal meditation practice gives us a space in which to look more carefully at how our thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations are linked and how they develop.

The intention to come closer to our raw experiences, and notice more carefully the development of our emotions based on our initial feelings, can be very helpful in working with strong emotions. It is the development of awareness of our immediate feelings that is a core part of bringing ourselves into the present moment and learning to respond to situations rather than react. It is not about blocking out negative feelings, but understanding more fully what is there before we act upon them.

Once you have started on the journey, this level of awareness will grow, sometimes slowly, sometimes a little faster. This is why mindfulness encourages regular formal practice to strengthen our awareness, and encourages mindful activities during the day to integrate that awareness into our daily lives. Then throughout the day using the breath as an anchor for our attention, either as a periodic reconnection with the present or in a more formal way with a three step breathing space, can give us a little space to deal with daily matters more effectively and with less wear and tear on ourselves.



Body, Feelings, Thoughts, Actions

We often have a limited view of ourselves. Our body, thoughts, feelings and actions are much more tightly linked than we think, and they all respond to or engage in different ways with the environment.

Consider a day when you wake up tired and in a weary mood. Perhaps you had a broken nights sleep. Your thoughts are likely to be more negative on such a day. Your body might feel heavier, and you might be a little more snappy with people, or at least you are likely to be less cheerful.

Imagine a happier day, when you have had a good nights sleep. You are more likely to meet people with a smile. You may be lighter on your feet, and you may greet challenges with a lighter heart.

Take this a little further, have ever noticed how on days when you feel down the world seems to gang up on you? On days where you are happy the world seems to go more smoothly, and the bumps are easier to ride over? There is no magic in this. Smile at people, and they are more likely to smile back, frown and you will get more scowls. If you hurry things or are distracted, you are likely to make more mistakes. Take more time, and you are more likely to do things well.

We often feel that if only we could change our environment we would be happy. Sometimes that is true, but changing our response to the environment can also be very helpful.

As we become more mindful, we get a better sense of how external events impact on our thoughts, feelings and body sensations. We become more and more aware of how things are interlinked. With that skill, we can start to come off automatic pilot and learn to respond.

Mindfulness is not intended to encourage particular strategies beyond awareness. A kind awareness itself can be very helpful. However, that awareness begins to allow the ability to respond rather than react, to see the bigger picture. Waking up to body sensations, to feelings and how they link into thoughts, is often enough to give an opportunity to respond rather than simply react. You might feel angry or hurt by something, but by acknowledging the whole experience you may choose not to lash out, or if you still need to respond in a firm way you might do so without losing control.

Your Stress Barometer

We often hold stress in particular areas of the body. For many of us it is in the shoulders, but it might be in the lower back, the legs, the tummy area. Now you are familiar with the body scan, you might be more aware of exactly which areas of your body are most reactive to stress.

Where is your stress barometer?

Try checking in with that area throughout the day. Do not make an effort to change it, but bring some kind attention to it. If you have time, just stay in awareness of it for a few moments. Note how it changes through the day, what the sensations are, what thoughts seem to be linked to it.

I did not expect this ...

Bringing our stress more fully into awareness at first can be quite challenging. Our natural tendency is to run away from difficult situations, or to block them out. Switching to automatic pilot and letting our minds drift off elsewhere is one strategy. Turning towards it can be a little daunting.

It is common during an MBSR to find the body scan in the early weeks brings into awareness aches and pains, and often a great deal of emotional resistance. Working with that patiently and persistently is a skill that we can develop and also apply to stressful situations.

So, be prepared for surprises. But with all practices, take care of yourself. It is good and helpful to find our edges. It is not so helpful to push beyond our edges or to hurtle towards them. Go gently with yourself.

The physiology of stress

The effects of challenging events can be immediate, but the after-effects can be long lasting. The response of the body to threats stimulates hormones such as cortisol and adrenaline. These are intended to raise our abilities to deal with challenges, often referred to as the fight or flight response. That is all positive.

However, either as a response to a very traumatic event or to continuous events, there can be changes in physiology that raise the levels of certain hormones, putting us on high alert for much of the day. That can increase reactivity, damage our sleep patterns, create a feeling of anxiety with no immediate cause, lead to depression, and even trigger cardiac and vascular diseases. Once someone gets locked into such reactivity and heightened sensitivity, it can be very hard to break the cycle.

Research is beginning to show that mindfulness practices can be very effective at reducing stress response. An understanding of the mechanisms involved is starting to develop. There is enough evidence for the NHS to recommend mindfulness for prevention of depressive relapse under certain conditions, demonstrating that it is comparable to or more effective than drug therapies.

The understanding of mind-body interaction is evolving, and there is growing evidence that the mind, and practices such as mindfulness, can change our physiology just as our physiology can influence our minds.

Establishing a regular sitting practice

Practice is a word used in mindfulness to cover many things.

Practice is something that we can do all the time as we try to become more mindful in our day-to-day lives. By simply being more present each moment of our lives, we are practising mindfulness. In this way, our lives are our practice. We can only live in the present, and as we notice more and more our tendency to worry about the past or the future, and bring ourselves into the present moment, we become more and more mindful.

Practice is commonly used as a term to cover specific exercises such as meditation, body scans, mindful walking, or any specific activity that we set out to do in order to develop our skills in mindfulness. Although it is possible to improve mindfulness in day-to-day life without such exercises, most people find a formal practice useful, and it enables



them to develop their skills if they set aside regular time to practise formally. Even the Buddha, on achieving enlightenment, continued to practise meditation regularly. Just as an Olympic athlete needs to continue to train, so someone who has developed a high degree of mindfulness in day-to-day life can benefit from a regular practice.

For those new to a meditation or mindfulness practice, finding space and time to do such practice can be an enormous challenge. It can seem as if it is just another thing to do. With busy lives, it is often the taking care of ourselves items that drop off the agenda.

Ideally finding a regular time in the day where you can be quiet, alone, undisturbed, and settled will help you develop a good formal mindfulness practice, and on this course you are encouraged to find 45 minutes over a day to follow practices. Many people find the best time for a formal sitting practice to be early in the morning, before the challenges of the day begin. Some people like to practice morning and evening, to set up for the day and to clear up at the end of the day. However, one regular time is a good start, and two regular sessions is a great aspiration. It is best to plan the meditation or mindfulness exercise, and put it into your daily schedule at the same time each day. Aiming to practise formally at least six days a week, and doing this continually, is the best way to develop practice.

In time, many people find that they look forward to their practice, and miss their practice when they cannot find time in a crowded schedule. It can become like brushing your teeth, freshening your mind, and something which you notice if you miss. More than that, people can begin to find that practice means they are less tired and harassed the rest of the day and so more effective, and they find themselves less involved in distractions. What seems like an added burden on our time can actually be a huge benefit.

Home Practice

1. On alternate days do some form of mindful movement for about 30 minutes - yoga, walking, simple stretching, or whatever suits you.
2. On alternate days do the long sitting practice on the CD.
3. Introduce the three step breathing exercise into your day as a regular activity at least three times.
4. Whenever a stressful situation arises, if possible use the three step breathing space to respond either in anticipation of an event or after an event.
5. Check in with your "stress barometer" from time to time.
6. Whenever you find yourself agitated or stressed, spend a little time examining how that arose. See if you can get closer to the original feeling that triggered the reaction. Notice the sensations in your body.
7. Continue with your unpleasant events diary. Notice any changes in the way you are dealing with stressful events.
8. Review where you are in the course using the guide below.

Mid-Course Review

Answer these questions for yourself. Write them down below.

1. What have you found helpful so far?
2. What have you found particularly challenging?
3. What are you still hoping to find from the course?
4. If there is one thing that stands out for you so far in terms of your learning, what is it?

Week 5: Responding more effectively to stress

In this session we will look at how we can transfer the skills we develop in practices such as meditation into daily life and deal more effectively with difficult situations. By bringing greater awareness of our thoughts, feelings and sensations to bear, we can waste less energy and approach problems more effectively.

More on edges



By now you are probably finding lots of “edges” with your mindfulness practice, and beginning to notice them more in daily life. These edges are important for us, and exploring them is very much part of mindfulness practice. By learning more about our edges, we begin to learn more about ourselves. The more aware we are, the more our limits come into view, and the more we begin to explore those boundaries and sometimes find we can move them a little.

That can be quite a surprise for people coming to a mindfulness or meditation practice for the first time.

Probably you signed up to become a little calmer, and at times you feel anything but calmer. Practice can make you calmer, and often formal and informal practices will do that for you, but sometimes they don’t and sometimes the road can be a bit bumpy. Oddly, when things are not going so smoothly that is often where the real learning comes. Why is this?

Well, to start with, coming off automatic pilot means you actually see where you are heading. Moving from reacting to responding brings things into awareness that were previously passing you by. You see things earlier, and you miss less. The clenched teeth and tight shoulders were probably there before, but now you notice them. You perhaps felt justified before at snapping back at someone, and now you notice your reaction before you snap and think twice about it, but that is uncomfortable too.

You are beginning to be more aware of difficulties, and notice them when you arrive instead of blindly bumping into them. Sometimes a thought or feeling is too difficult to work with when you first meet it, but finding it is there can be useful. Slowly you start to map out your physical and emotional boundaries, the confines within which you feel safe.

We all set up those boundaries and edges. One bad experience with something can be enough to put you off for life. Being sick after a meal can put you off an item of food you once enjoyed, even if it was something else that caused the sickness such as a virus. If we don’t examine them from time to time, bringing awareness to them as they arise, our lists of dos and don’ts get longer and longer, and our habitual ways of thinking and behaving can get more engrained. As that happens, our sense of freedom diminishes.

Charlotte Joko Beck uses the image of people freezing themselves into ice cubes. As people bump into each other, they chip bits of ice cube off, so ice cubes tend to want to freeze themselves harder and harder. Some ice cubes however start to melt, and mindfulness practice can help us to melt our barriers slowly over time. Melting ice cubes become mushy, and less prone to damage when other ice cubes bump into them, and in turn do less harm to other ice cubes. Some ice cubes melt altogether and become puddles, and become immune to damage from other ice cubes bumping into them.

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Workbook

Another image of hers is of people as whirlpools in the river of life. Free flowing whirlpools have fuzzy edges, are expansive, take things in, spin them a while, and release them. Tight, vigorous whirlpools suck things in and hold onto them within their tight and rigid boundaries, becoming clogged and in the end stagnant.

Mindfulness does not break down boundaries or by magic melt away difficulties. It makes you aware of what edges you have. When you find an edge, there is no mindfulness recipe to deal with it other than to look at it and note it is there. Sometimes you might see an edge as an illusion, and realise it is a restriction that you need not adhere to. Sometimes you will find a firm edge that you need to respect; even if you would like to be able to stand on your head, it might be best to avoid that without long and skilful yoga instruction.

Knowing our edges is important. Moving up to them can be helpful. Exploring an area of pain in the body can be a way of changing our relationship to the pain - the pain may not go away, but our emotional hurt or frustration with it may change. So, finding our edges may not be comfortable, but it can lead to far less distress and difficulty in the long run.

Approach and Avoidance

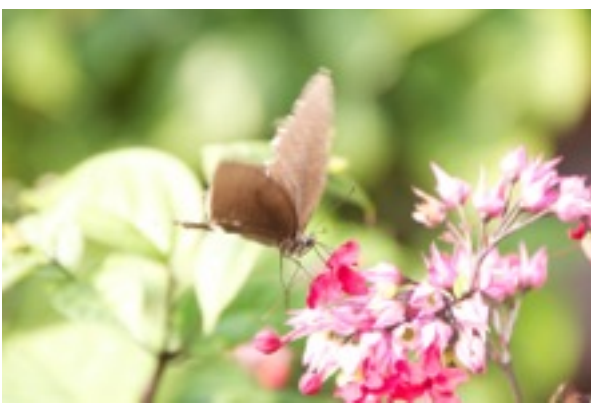
Our natural way of dealing with the world is to avoid unpleasant things. Mostly that is a sensible strategy. However, when something is a problem then avoidance can just make the problem worse. Not seeing a doctor when you have an unusual symptom that you don't understand can mean the difference between a simple treatment or a chronic and painful disease. Not dealing with emotional problems can lead to depression or anxiety. Not dealing with a conflict can lead to resentment and even breakdown of a relationship.



A metaphor by Charles Handy is that we spend our lives stumbling backwards into the future. We don't see the things that hit us until they hit us, and we live our lives in a mixture of fear and relief watching the things that fly past us. Turning around can be a bit scary at first. But if we want to reduce the number of things that hit us, turning to face them is important, and even if we cannot avoid some things at least we can prepare.

Mindfulness encourages us to turn towards our difficulties, to walk into the future with open eyes. That can be challenging at first. However, in that turning it does not invite us to drive headlong into them. Mindfulness is about becoming aware. Out of that awareness you use your own wisdom to determine the right course of action.

The common assumption is that mindfulness makes you calmer. Actually, it is more that mindfulness enables you to navigate the world more effectively without bumping into things so much, which in turn makes you calmer. Cultivating awareness means that we can respond more fully, and often avoid a difficulty or reduce it, and where we cannot we can learn to live more peacefully with it. Out of that less stressful way of living comes a deeper calm.



I like your attitude ...

Earlier we looked at how our attitudes are a key to our practice. During mindfulness practices we encourage a particular orientation. For example, instead of criticising ourselves when our mind wanders, we are encouraged to accept mind

wandering and to patiently return to the practice. That open, patient, accepting, non-judging attitude is something we can widen more into our daily lives.

Jon Kabat-Zinn defined mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally”. He openly says that this is not a hard and fast definition. In fact, he sometimes talks about it as being like a Zen koan, something the mind can chew on but which, when you examine it is full of paradoxes. You cannot use the definition to determine whether you or someone else is mindful, or measure how mindful someone is. So, why have it?

He elaborated on this by talking about foundational attitudes: beginner’s mind, non-judging, non-striving, trust, patience, acceptance, letting go. These too can be paradoxical. For example, we cannot come completely to a situation with a pure beginner’s mind - we always carry into a new situation some history. However, if we use beginner’s mind as an attitude to check out our prejudices and assumptions, we might see a situation in a different way. Say, for example, someone you know rings you up to complain about something that you are responsible for. If that person is a natural complainer, you might discount everything they say, or get defensive with them. Alternatively, you might treat them as if they had never complained to you and make a note and check out the complaint if it is not too difficult to do so. So a foundational attitude can help you question your initial reaction, which may lead you to a better response.

Non-judging is not meant to be indiscriminate, but an attitude that you can use to check out whether your automatic response is judgemental. Non-striving does not mean you never try to do something, but by now you have probably already found that trying too hard with a meditation practice can be counter productive. Trust does not mean blindly doing things because someone said, but is more a process of learning where to trust. Patience does not necessarily mean waiting forever for something. Acceptance does not mean being a doormat. Letting go of an emotional reaction does not mean becoming indifferent.

The foundational attitudes can be used to move you out of your normal reactions and look more carefully at situations. They are not ideals to be imposed, but viewpoints to help you see the world differently, and perhaps sometimes move you away from the opposite attitudes when they threaten to take over: closed minded, judgemental, striving, mistrusting, impatient, resistant and resentful.

Exercise - exploring a space

Choose a space you know that is not overly familiar to you. It might be a garden, or room, or a small area near a familiar walk. Now, with no agenda to look for anything in particular, begin to explore. Move at your own pace around the space, noticing the fine detail or the broad shape of things. Do this for about ten minutes.

Finally, settle on one thing, noticing how you choose it, and begin to look at it in detail. Notice how your mind sometimes wants to take you away from the object, and then bring yourself back to the object, each time gently returning and bringing back a sense of curiosity towards what you are looking at. Do this for about five minutes.



Home Practice

1. Continue a formal practice daily, either sitting, body scan or movement.
2. Try one exploring a space meditation for 15 minutes, settling on one object for the last 5 minutes.
3. Keep using mindfulness in daily life, doing tasks more mindfully, pausing, coming to the breath.
4. Keep a stressful communications diary.

Stressful Communications Diary

Whenever you have a difficult communication during the day, make a note of the following:

1. Who it was with and what the issue was.
2. What were your expectations from the communication, and what was the outcome.
3. What were the other person(s) expectations, and what did they get out of it?
4. What were your thoughts, feelings and body sensations at the time.
5. How did those affect your actions?
6. Have you resolved the situation? If so, how?

Week 6: Dealing with others

Mindful communication can help us deal more effectively with others. Often it is our relationships that cause the most stress. We will look carefully at some aspects of communication in stressful situations, and through some simple practices learn how to deal more skilfully with ourselves and others.



Mindful communication



We are social animals, and our interactions with each other very much determine our happiness or distress. On the whole, we like to surround ourselves with pleasant individuals who speak nicely to us, and avoid those who speak harshly, but that is not always possible. Apart from being careful about the company we keep, there are things we can do to make our dealings with others less stressful.

Mindfulness helps give us space to respond rather than react in social situations. When someone upsets us, having a small space to choose how to respond can mean the difference between an argument or a constructive, if difficult, conversation. Also, by being mindful of what we say, we can often be more constructive in our relationships. Going back to our consideration of body, feelings, thoughts and actions, by bringing more awareness to this complex network we can choose more wisely how to respond.

For example, if you notice whenever a particular person starts to speak, you already have started to tense up, you might connect with your breath and start to notice your feelings and thoughts before you react to what they say. This early noticing can help us to choose more wisely how we respond.

It is useful to consider the foundational attitudes. Maybe someone is a persistent irritant to you, but you cannot do anything about it because of circumstances so you can consider what aspects of the situation you have to accept. Can patience help a little? Maybe someone has wronged you in the past, and that taints all the dialogue, so can you bring a beginner's mind to the conversation? How can curiosity help - if someone is difficult, perhaps you can give some time to wondering why they are like that. After a conversation that repeats over and over in your mind, maybe you might consider letting go of it. Can you be more non-judging? How might you build more trust with the person? These are not exhortations, but different perspectives for looking at a communication.

Mindful listening

In our earlier exercises, such as the raisin exercise, we learnt to bring full attention to an everyday activity. This can be done with listening. When someone is talking to you, try to bring a little more attention to it. Listen to their intonation, their speech patterns, look for clues about the emotions behind their speech. At the same time, listen to your own inner commentary, and be aware of your own body language, of any inner sensations or feelings.

There can be a tendency in dialogue for us to be planning what to say next. Keeping more of a focus on what someone is saying can help to reduce that inner commentary. Often the right

response comes from a more wholehearted attention to what someone is saying. If something is not clear, then maybe a question rather than a statement might help.

Being in the present moment with someone is what mindfulness encourages. This dialogue, this exchange, is what is relevant. That is not to ignore history, to blindly accept everything that is said to you, but to bring full awareness to what is going on.

Mindful speech

When you are speaking, you have choice. If someone has said something you disagree with or that is upsetting, you can take a fraction of a second to notice your feeling tone before you respond. That small gap can be enough to allow you to choose more wisely what you say. Give yourself time to be clear about your thoughts and feelings.

Experiment a little. If someone says something that you disagree with, instead of expressing the disagreement immediately maybe probe back and ask for more insight into what they have said. Find ways of giving yourself time to respond, rather than relying on habitual reactions. The tree that bends in the wind is less likely to be blown over.

Again, do the foundational attitudes give some clues to how you are dealing with someone? Are you habitually judgemental of them? Are you impatient with them? These might be useful perspectives in the way you are speaking.

Thoughts are not facts

We all think our view of the world is in some sense “right”, but with mindfulness practice we can come to see that sometimes our perspective is not “right”. That is not to say that our view of the world is “wrong”. Paradoxical as that sounds, it is this growing awareness of our thoughts that helps guide us in our daily communications. Our thoughts are important. They give us a clue to our deeper feelings, to our habits. But they may not always be the accurate representation of the world that we sometimes think them to be.

Our conceptual minds are very good at justifying things, and claiming they are in charge. If we burn our hand, the reflex to move it away is faster than the time it takes for the message to reach the parts of our brain associated with cognitive thought. Nevertheless, our conceptual mind might assume it made the sensible decision to pull the hand away, as well as the response to put the hand under the cold tap.

Going back to our model of body, feelings, thoughts and actions interacting with the environment, we have spent a lot of time getting closer to our feelings and body sensations, and how they are interlinked and influence each other as well as our thoughts. We have seen in the “walking down the street” exercise how differently we may react to apparently the same situation, and how our reaction might be conditioned by many factors.

With growing awareness, our relationship to our thoughts can change. That is not to denigrate or devalue them in any way. Rather, it is to help us see our thoughts as just part of our world, and not the whole of it. Our thoughts are mental events that arise and are conditioned by many factors. They come and go. What we think about a situation today may be very different from what we think tomorrow.

Mindfulness helps us to become more aware of our habitual thought patterns, and where appropriate to consider whether they are the right way to respond to a situation. Often they are, but sometimes they are not. Mindfulness of our feelings and body sensations can give us a clue to where our thoughts might be worth examining further - when we get tense about something, how are our thoughts flowing?

Moving out of automatic pilot is an important part of recognising our thoughts and understanding the direction they are taking us in. Automatic pilot is not wrong, but sometimes we need to re-program it. The short practices we have explored, such as the pause or checking in to our breath, can help us to recognise when we are on autopilot. The longer practices will often bring back, time and again, the thoughts that our autopilot wants us to follow, and give us more insight into just what is going on with them. Ultimately that insight helps us to change, using our own wisdom.

Acts of kindness

We cannot all be Mother Theresa, but we can probably all improve things a little for ourselves and for others. One way of doing so is to find ways of introducing acts of kindness into our days, towards ourselves and towards others.

Starting with ourselves, we are often our harshest critics. In doing mode, we can spend a great deal of time berating ourselves for not achieving our goals, irrespective of how important those goals are. So, instead of taking time out we drive ourselves faster. Climbing a mountain, sometimes it makes sense to stop, turn around and look at the view, enjoying a rest that can refresh us for the rest of the climb. Likewise in life, stopping to acknowledge what we have done and to take a mental rest can be very refreshing. Deferred gratification is a skill we learn early in life to enable us to get greater rewards by resisting immediate ones, but the habit of deferring can become all consuming, and like misers we keep all our pleasures locked away.

So, take time to enjoy life, as well as driving to succeed. When life is beginning to feel like a grind, check in with yourself and ask when you last did something pleasurable. It can feel selfish at first, but this is not an invitation to selfishness, rather it is an invitation to be more kind to yourself, to nurture yourself. It can be very simple - a short walk in the sunshine, a relaxing cup of tea. Or you might organise a trip to the cinema or theatre. Making a habit of taking a short break can actually help you to become more productive.

Moving on to others, our relationships are very much influenced by our actions. Have you ever been struck by someone else's act of kindness. How did you feel? What did you think of that person? Were you surprised?

One way of changing relationships for the better is to consciously introduce an act of kindness from time to time. It does not have to be huge - just making someone a cup of tea, or even greeting someone with a "hello, how are you" and giving a bit more time to exchange pleasantries can be enough. Consciously doing this, and watching thoughts and feelings can be very informative.

Do not be put off if acts of kindness are rebuffed. Often if we change our behaviour, it can create surprise that is not always welcomed. Notice the rebuff, how it feels, and then find another kind act for that person.

The intention here is not to make you into a saint. Rather, it is to stimulate your awareness, to move you from your habits, to move you off of automatic pilot. You may not improve your relationship with someone this way, but you will learn. And even if things remain difficult, perhaps you are able to develop some more insight into it, and at least from your own side start to resolve some of the stress.

Just as we use our breath to de-centre from our thoughts, we can use our actions. Consciously being kind to yourself or to others can help to get us out of habits that are wearing us down. It does not have to be huge, or magnanimous. A small step, though, can change things.

Metta or loving kindness meditation

Settle into a sitting meditation, perhaps spending a few minutes stabilising yourself using your breath.

Now, bring to mind as vividly as you can a close friend or loved one, and begin to consider their good qualities. See if you can feel a sense of warmth and kindness towards them. Notice how easy or hard it is to feel generous towards them. Notice any tendency of the mind to wander, and gently bring it back to the exercise. Note any sensations in your body.

Now, choose someone you hardly know and have no particular feelings towards, perhaps the driver on the bus or someone who works in the supermarket. Try the exercise above, bringing an attitude of kindness towards them. Notice thoughts, feelings, sensations as you do this.

Now, if you can, choose someone you dislike. Again, notice thoughts, feelings, sensations.

Now, bring to mind yourself. Again, see if you can feel a sense of warmth and kindness towards yourself, noting thoughts, feelings and sensations.

Now, bring everyone you have ever encountered into your practice. Visualise them all around you if you can. Notice thoughts, feelings, sensations as you do this.

Finally, move back to your breath for a while and end the meditation.

What did you notice about your thoughts, feelings and body sensations? How easy or hard was it? Were there any surprises for you?

Home Practice

1. Continue a formal practice daily, either sitting or body scan.
2. Try one metta (loving kindness) meditation.
3. Try one act of kindness each day towards yourself.
4. Try one act of kindness each day towards someone else.
5. Try bringing mindfulness to at least one communication activity.

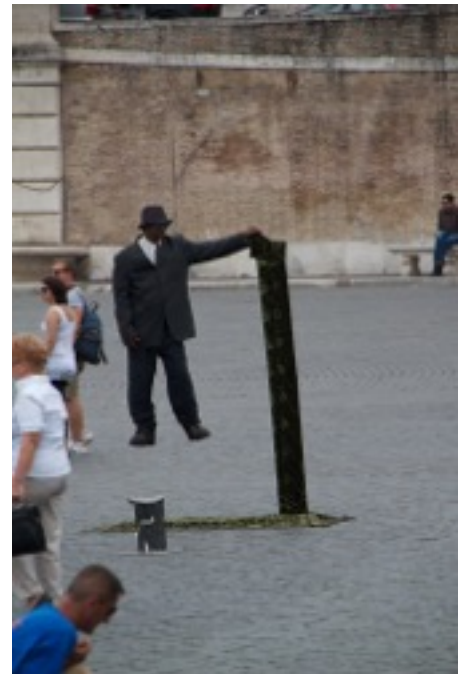
Your notes on home practice:



Week 7: Taking more care of ourselves

Life is a game of snakes and ladders, but if there are too many snakes and not enough ladders it can be a tedious game. Often we pile pressure on ourselves, and forget to relieve that pressure. We can do that until we come to breaking point. In this session we will look at how we can mindfully rebalance our lives.

Having looked at stress and how it affects us, at some of the mechanisms that create stress, at some practices that help us deal with stress, and at some aspects of communication, it is time to turn towards ourselves. What can we do to make our lives more manageable, less wearing?



Looking with a child's eyes at the world



When you were a child, did your parents teach you how to play in the garden? Did you have to study long and hard to learn to blow the seeds off a dandelion, and were you made to watch them float in the wind until they landed or had blown out of sight? A child might watch a beetle or a worm with more intensity than any zoologist. That connectedness with the world around us is something we often lose as we get older, perhaps occasionally glimpsing it momentarily when the world wakes us up with a beautiful sunset, or an unexpected delight when we are out walking.

Beginner's mind is inviting us to be like that, to treat each moment afresh, and not dress it with our opinions and prejudices. The practices of connecting with the body, through sensations or breath, the anchoring into the present moment, are all invitations to wake up to the present moment *as it actually is* and not as we think it is.

In our goal-driven lives, we can lose the poetry of life. Look carefully at a photograph or a piece of art, and instead of just labelling what is there, really examine it. Listen to a poem, and instead of looking for literal meaning and trying to mentally explain it to yourself, instead see if you can feel it. Listen to a piece of music instead of having it as background noise. Enjoy a meal, take delight in friends. Find any way you can to connect with the present and let go of the past.

We are so much more than our thoughts. Our thoughts are like waves on a deep ocean - they only represent the surface. As we focus on the surface churn, we lose track of the depth of our minds. This is not mystical, this is about practicality, about living with ourselves as a whole rather than just as our thoughts.

With mindfulness practice, we can become much more connected to the world, and be more childlike in our appreciation of it. All our wisdom and learning need not be thrown away. Rather, we can bring more freshness into our experience, see things a little more clearly, without throwing away our wealth of past experience. The movement towards responding instead of reacting is one

that allows us to hold a bigger view of ourselves and the world. When we switch off autopilot, we become more aware of the landscape, more engaged with what is going on around us.

Self-judgement

Often we are our own greatest critics. Why is this so?

We learn to respond to danger by withdrawing or putting up a barrier. It is often called the “fight or flight response”. Those dangers are often real, and our natural response is sensible and effective. We learn our responses to danger quickly, and this helps our survival. Such responses are imprinted as habits, and they can be useful habits.



However, our mind often imagines dangers, and we can get locked in rumination over what may happen or how we could have prevented something that happened. There are few real tigers out there wanting to eat us nowadays, but we often act as if there were. Our automatic reaction to real danger can often be awakened by imagined dangers. This is natural, but carried too far it can lead to unnecessary sadness or even depression.

Our tendency to criticise ourselves is based in part in this self-protection, looking at ways we can make ourselves safe, blaming ourselves for past mistakes, and endlessly planning to avoid future mistakes. We want to control things, and if things go wrong, or seem likely to, we take the blame.

In this self-protection, we often forget to enjoy the present. The very behaviour that is meant to protect us can actually make us miserable. Mindfulness, with its non-judgemental quality, by making us more aware of our reactivity and habits of rumination, can help us recognise the processes of self judgement, and help us see ourselves with more kindness and more equanimity. It gives us more perspective, more discernment, and more choice.

With mindfulness practice, we can begin to notice our habits of self-judgement, hold them carefully, and learn how to respond. This is not self-affirmation, but self-awareness. It is not avoidance, but approach. By examining our habits of self-criticism, our negative thoughts about ourselves, we can begin to unpick the tangled knots. It is not instant, and it takes effort, but it is the way out of suffering.

Working on our attitudes

It is possible to change the relationship we have to ourselves. Let us go back to the foundational attitudes.

We said a little earlier about beginner’s mind, learning to take moments afresh. When we react to something that causes us difficulty, can we try experiencing it afresh? Is it the bracing ourselves that hurts more than the actuality of the experience? Does that change our perspective on difficulty?

Patience is something you can cultivate with yourself. If you want to become skilled at something you need to practice, and that requires patience and persistence. A musician needs to practice, practice, practice to become competent. But if in each practice there is irritation, then discouragement quickly follows. Maybe you want to be a little less irritable, and the next day you snap at someone, well maybe being patient with yourself is better than beating yourself up for that - of course, apologise if possible, but then let go of it.

Acceptance of ourselves, as we are, is difficult. Usually we have a list of things we would like to change. That list can become overwhelming. We set up an ideal, and judge ourselves on how far

we are from that ideal. It is fine to have a list of things to work on, but not fine to be constantly criticising ourselves for our inadequacies. Jon Kabat-Zinn's favourite introduction to those arriving on his MBSR courses is "if you are breathing, there is more right with you than wrong with you", irrespective of whatever they are suffering from. Can you take a more balanced view?

Letting go can be very hard. That mistake you made with someone that you cannot correct, observe how often you go back over it, rehearsing how you could do it better. Of course it is right to be concerned about the effects of our behaviour, but it is important to learn and move on instead of getting stuck.

There is a paradox in non-striving, in that the more we try to do some things the harder they become. Have you never noticed that? The more you try to get on with something, the more distractions you find? The more you try to get to sleep, the more you stay awake at night. Effort is fine, but when all of your effort goes into striving and measuring how far off the goal you are, the further away the goal seems. It is sometimes worth recognising that a journey is made up of a lot of individual steps, and the only way to get to the end is to take each step one at a time, and to enjoy the journey instead of hurrying unnecessarily towards the goal.

Curiosity may sound strange to apply to yourself, but hopefully you are getting some insight into how your mind works, and how it relates to your body. When the same set of thoughts or feelings come up over and over again, moving towards them and examining them with curiosity, looking at how they link to feelings and body sensations, will help to defuse cycles of unhelpful thinking. Curiosity about our bodies makes us more aware of where we are carrying stress, and when we are tired and need a rest.

And all of these are wrapped up in the attitude of non-judging. Going back to the earlier definition of "mindfulness is paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally", that non-judgemental attitude develops a wider and richer set of attitudes. Non-judgemental does not mean non-discerning or indiscriminate. Rather, it is an invitation to note what is there. Mindfulness can be a first step towards change, but if mindfulness is judgemental then that change will not be fully informed. Noting what arises non-judgementally, and then responding gives space to change that instant reaction often precludes.

But beware of setting out to "change your attitudes". The mindful way is to examine attitudes as they arise. With increasing awareness you can become more sensitive to the unhelpful attitudes, and find space to deal with them. Mindfulness is not about "self development", but about "self awareness". It does not set goals and challenges, rather it invites you to be more aware of where you are and what you bring with you. Foundational attitudes are not ideals, but beacons along the way, landmarks to guide you and not goals in themselves.

Mindfulness slowly awakens you to a wider sense of self, to building trust in your own judgement. It helps you realise when you are stuck in a rut. Developing that trust in yourself, that you can deal with life's challenges, that you have options, that you can choose, all take time. Trust is slow to build, but with it comes confidence.

Changing our habits

Take some time to consider your daily habits and how they impact on your life.

Do you watch late night TV, and stimulate your mind before you go to bed? Do you keep yourself busy even when your body and mind are tired? When did you last do something different? When did you last go for a walk, just for the pleasure of going for a walk. When did you last do something just because you enjoy it?

Our habits, our reliance on automatic pilot, can get us through the day. But they can be wearing. They can also be changed.

Try choosing to do something different every day. Take a different route to work. Go for a walk at lunchtime instead of sitting at your desk with a sandwich, or have lunch with a friend. Decide to go to the cinema one evening. Book a theatre trip. Sit in the garden and enjoy it for ten minutes.

And, of course, we have some valuable practices we can weave more and more into our days. Formal practices are nourishing, but it is after the formal practices that the real work of mindfulness comes in. The pause, the breath, the taking time to notice, all are about mindfulness in our daily lives.

Looking at ourselves exercise

1. Write down a list of the things in a typical day.
2. Now write down next to each one the letter N if it is nourishing and D if it is depleting.
3. What do you notice?
4. Are you happy with it?
5. What might you do to change it?

Home Practice

1. Continue a formal practice daily, either sitting or body scan.
2. Each day, do one thing differently.
3. One evening, do something new.
4. Review what you have learnt from the course, and bring it to the final session.

Your notes on home practice:

Week 8: Where do we go from here?

Well that 8 week course really made me feel better. What next? How often have we been on some course, felt wonderful after it, and then a week later been back to square one. Before we finish, we will look at how each of us can keep up the practices we have learnt, and grow in awareness.

If the course has been of real value, then it will be the beginning of a deeper exploration of mindfulness. There are many ways that can happen. But from hereon, you are in charge of the journey.

A little science

This has been an experiential course, and that is where the value comes. From yourself, and from the group, there should have been a great deal of learning. Everyone arrives with a different history to these courses, and everyone takes away something different. The course was about you.

However, it is worth looking a bit at the science behind mindfulness. It may be a popular topic in the media, but there is real depth to it.

Jon Kabat-Zinn set out in the 1970's to bring two world views together - the scientific world view that focusses on hard evidence, and the more holistic world view that come from spiritual practices such as Buddhism and Yoga - Einstein once said "science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." Out of that vision, came the MBSR course that is now taught widely and that has been adapted into many different mindfulness courses. Since then the academic literature on mind-body interconnection has grown exponentially.

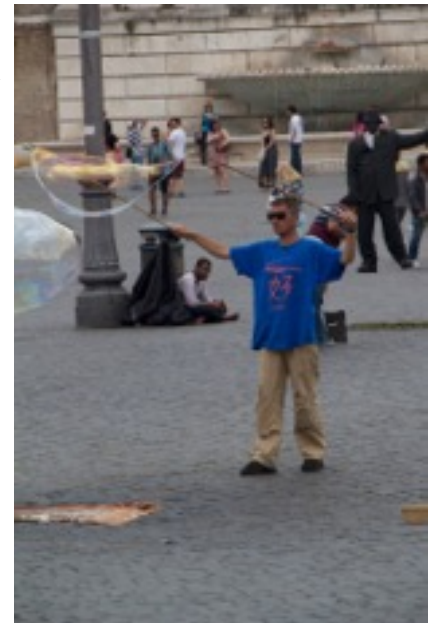
At the turn of this century, Zindel Segal, Mark Williams, John Teasdale developed a course called Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which built on MBSR and Cognitive Based Therapy. Controlled trials then showed that it was effective at preventing depression relapse in patients with three or more depressive episodes. Based on that evidence the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommended that the NHS adopt MBCT as a psychological therapy.

Investigations are now underway to examine many aspects of mindfulness, with new academic journals and papers in established journals: in April 2015 *The Lancet* published a paper on MBCT demonstrating that it matches drug therapy for maintenance to prevent depression relapse. Scientific experiments show that there are physical as well as behavioural changes within brains from meditation that can be measured after only one 8 week course. Controlled trials with patients show that mindfulness can reduce depressive relapse as well as drugs. There are even studies showing that mindfulness has a measurable effect on gene expression and gene replication.

Why is that important?

Science is a dominant world view. It has provided us with so many breakthroughs and insights, and its methods have advanced human knowledge. Its demands for a sound evidence base before accepting anything are a key to its success. So, living in a scientific age, it is vital to back up propositions about anything that is claimed to have clinical value with sound evidence.

As science progresses, it challenges assumptions. For a long time it was assumed that the mind was a product of the brain. Now science is challenging assumptions about the mind-body connection as it is shown that mental processes can change not only behaviour but our physiology. The notion of "plasticity", that suggests that our whole body, including our brains, can develop and



change throughout life as a result of mental activities, is eroding the traditional dualistic mind-body view.

Science has brought us technologies that are of tremendous value, but which are also a tremendous strain. Science, though, thrives on paradox. Einstein's theory of relativity grew out of the paradoxes around the measurements of the speed of light. Newton's theories of gravity and calculus arose from Cantor's puzzling observations about the motion of the planets. We now have some new paradoxes, such as the process of "doing nothing" in meditation causing significant changes both physically and mentally, and even at a molecular level.

It was tremendous insight and wisdom that led Jon Kabat-Zinn to develop the mindfulness courses that are now growing fast in both acceptance and use. It was great courage of him and many others to persist.

The relaxation response

Back in the late 1960s Herbert Benson responded to a request from the Transcendental Meditation (TM) community to measure the effect of TM on blood pressure, and the results were surprising - TM could reduce blood pressure. Subsequently he researched other methods, and found that certain forms of guided attention with particular attitudes could reduce various stress markers, and he published a book in 1975 titled "The Relaxation Response". Since then he has led a wide range of mind-body research at Harvard University.

The relaxation response, he argues, is the opposite to the stress response. With the stress response, heart rate increases, blood pressure increases, and various hormones are released. The relaxation response reduces heart rate, blood pressure and the production of stress hormones. Even a short meditation can have a positive effect, but the strength of the response increases with regular practice. Physiological changes can be measured after only 8 weeks of practice. He notes that practices have appeared in all cultures that induce the relaxation response. It is not tied to any particular beliefs or cultural settings.

Regular practice

This course has introduced mindfulness through a set of practices, both formal practices and informal practices. The intention was to provide a number of ways of bringing mindfulness into our daily lives. To use the analogy of physical exercise, to maintain the benefits you will need to keep up your practice in some form. Herbert Benson would argue strongly that the more you do it, the more effective it will become.

By now, you should have some idea of what works best for you. If mindful movement is helpful, maybe a yoga or tai chi class is something you could introduce. If sitting meditation works, is there a meditation group you can attend? Look out for local groups that organise such things.

A day of practice every few months can be very beneficial. They are a good way of refreshing practice.

If you are interested, there are longer retreats on meditation and mindfulness. However, before committing to a long retreat you might be best advised to discuss with someone who has been to that form of retreat.

Finally, there are many good books out there.

Continuing the journey

Hopefully this course has led you to a deeper understanding of mindfulness and some insights into how it applies to you and your life. With luck you have found what you wanted, or perhaps changed your view of what you want. Probably there were a few surprises on the way.

Whatever you have taken from the course, may it benefit you in years to come.

Whatever you do, enjoy the adventure.



Further reading and research

The following book is a good general introduction to mindfulness.

Williams, M., & Penman, D. (2011). *Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world*. London: Piatkus.

The following book is probably the definitive text, first written in 1990 and updated recently. It can be hard going, but is full

of insights.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2013). *Full catastrophe living, Revised Edition: How to cope with stress, pain and illness using mindfulness meditation*. New York, NY: Delta.

There are lots of talks on youtube. Look for Jon Kabat-Zinn, Shauna Shapiro, Chade-Meng Tan., Ajahn Brahm, Pema Chodron, Jack Kornfield, Mark Williams.

Finally, keep an eye on www.jamyangleeds.co.uk for further courses on mindfulness, meditation and Buddhism.

Home practice: it's over to you!