

making sense



mindfulness

Making sense of mindfulness

This booklet is for anyone who wants to know more about mindfulness. It explains what mindfulness is, how it works, how you can try it and deciding if it's right for you.

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What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a technique which can help people manage their mental health or simply gain more enjoyment from life. It involves making a special effort to give your full attention to what is happening in the present moment – to what’s happening in your body, your mind or your surroundings, for example – in a non-judgemental way. Mindfulness describes a way of approaching our thoughts and feelings so that we become more aware of them and react differently to them.

👉👉 *Practicing mindfulness makes me feel more connected to my body and gives me a breathing space between thought and action.* 👉👉

Where does mindfulness come from?

Mindfulness originates in Buddhism, but being mindful is a skill that anyone can learn. You do not have to be spiritual, or have any particular beliefs, to try it.

It was adapted into structured programmes – like mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) in the 1970s and then mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) – to help people manage long term health conditions and enhance their general wellbeing. This is usually what people mean when they talk about mindfulness being used to treat mental health problems.

How can mindfulness help?

Mindfulness can help you to:

- increase your awareness of your thoughts and feelings
- manage unhelpful thoughts
- develop more helpful responses to difficult feelings and events
- be kinder towards yourself
- feel calmer and able to manage stress better
- manage some physical health problem, like chronic pain.

Does mindfulness work for mental health problems?

Studies show that practicing mindfulness can help you manage mild depression, anxiety and other common mental health problems. The National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) – the organisation that produces guidelines on best practice in health care – recommends:

- using mindfulness, including MBCT, to treat mild depression and to help prevent further episodes of depression
- not using mindfulness, including MBCT and MBSR, to treat social anxiety.

👉👉 *Mindfulness does help me with my mental health issues. It's not the cure and it won't work every single time, but it has helped me to alleviate anxiety and depression by centring my thoughts.* 👉👉

Research into whether mindfulness could help more complex conditions, such as psychosis and bipolar disorder, is still in the early stages – so it is not clear how beneficial mindfulness could be in helping people to manage these conditions. In some cases, mindfulness has made the symptoms worse for people suffering from trauma.

For more information on deciding whether to try mindfulness, see 'Is mindfulness right for me?' on p.8.

👉👉 *When I'm in a particularly unwell state mindfulness is not beneficial, as I cannot bring myself into the present at all.* 👉👉

How does mindfulness work?

In mindfulness you try to become more aware of your thoughts, emotions and physical feelings. This can help you:

- notice when you get caught up in negative thoughts, so that you can manage them
- become aware of the effect that thoughts or events have on your body, so that you can look after yourself
- feel able to make a choice about how you respond to your thoughts and feelings
- observe that thoughts come and go and do not have to define who you are or your experience of the world.

The Oxford Mindfulness Centre has more information about mindfulness and how it works (see 'Useful contacts' on p.17).

🌀🌀 *When I feel anxiety building, mindfulness helps me to keep calm by becoming more in touch with the situation.* 🌀🌀

Why do my thoughts affect my feelings?

Our emotions do not automatically distinguish between what we think about the world and what is occurring in reality. For example, if you spend time thinking about unpleasant past events or worrying about future ones, you might feel sad or anxious and experience some of the signs and symptoms of depression or anxiety.

This can lead to more difficult thoughts and feelings, and you could end up feeling worse and worse. Mindfulness aims to help you focus on the present and let go of these thoughts.

Mindfulness uses different terms and ideas to help you become aware of your thoughts and feelings. You might read or hear your instructor talk about:

Automatic pilot – this describes those times when we're not really paying attention to what we do in our daily life. This can be useful, as it allows us to remember and complete routine activities easily; but we can also get caught up in unhelpful thoughts and reactions when we are 'on auto pilot'. Mindfulness encourages you to pay more attention when doing everyday tasks such as eating, showering or walking somewhere.

Doing mode and being mode – these are two ways of thinking. 'Doing mode' is when you are constantly busy and responding to demands around you. This helps you to solve problems and achieve goals but it can also leave you feeling stressed and anxious. Mindfulness tries to help you develop a different way of thinking, called 'being mode', where you're happy to accept things just as they are and not put too much pressure on yourself.

Acceptance – in mindfulness this means paying attention to difficult feelings without judging yourself or trying to find a solution straight away, you are just accepting them as they are. Accepting your difficult feelings doesn't mean putting up with bad situations – it means paying attention to your feelings and seeing if they pass or if there's something you can do to feel better.

👉👉 *On the worst days [I get] the temptation to withdraw further, but mindfulness teaches you to accept that it is as it is that day.* 👉👉

How does the theory work in practice?

Mindfulness uses various techniques and exercises to help you apply these ideas, usually focusing on your body and your breathing. This aims to help you:

- **create space between you and a stressful situation**, and choose how to respond. For example, if you're in a stressful situation and feel overwhelmed with negative thoughts, you can stop and focus your attention on your breathing or notice the sensations of your feet on the floor. This can help you take a step back from the negative thoughts and observe them with more objectivity.
- **detect negative emotions and look after yourself before the feelings get worse.** For example, tension or anxiety is usually felt in certain areas of your body, such as your heart beating faster, muscles tensing or as shallow breathing. If you notice this, you can take steps to help look after yourself.

👉👉 *Sometimes when I get the urge to binge, using a mindfulness technique can give me enough thinking space to stop myself.* 👉👉

See 'Can I practice mindfulness by myself?' on p.14 for more information on putting theory into practice.

Is mindfulness right for me?

Although many people can benefit from mindfulness, not everyone finds it helpful. Some people find mindfulness can help if you:

- struggle with negative thoughts and feelings that you would like to have more control over
- find it hard to switch off and relax
- worry a lot about events you cannot control
- would like to reduce stress.

However, you might find that it just doesn't suit you or doesn't meet your needs. Before you decide to try mindfulness, it might be helpful to think about these questions:

Am I comfortable being aware of my thoughts and feelings?

Mindfulness involves becoming more aware of your thoughts and feelings, which can sometimes make people initially feel worse. If you are concerned about this but still want to give mindfulness a try, you might want to attend a course delivered by a qualified practitioner or check that the practitioner has experience of different mental health conditions.

●● *Sometimes it puts me in touch with feelings I've been pushing away. In the long term that's better but at the time it can be really distressing.* ●●

How well am I feeling?

It's not usually a good idea to start learning mindfulness when you're very unwell because it can be hard to get the most out of it, and you may find it distressing at first. If you're currently experiencing a serious episode of a mental health problem, you might want to seek treatment and support for that, then try mindfulness when you're feeling better.

Would I prefer one-to-one support?

If you're attending a mindfulness course, you're likely to be in a group and there may not be time to get individual support to discuss your problems in detail. You might also not feel comfortable exploring your thoughts and feelings with a group of people. See 'How can I learn mindfulness?' on p.10 for different options.

Do I want support for a specific issue?

Mindfulness tends to focus on thoughts and feelings more generally. If you want help with a specific problem, then you might find a more focused treatment is helpful. It is also possible that the person leading the mindfulness session may not have specialist skills or knowledge in mental health.

Am I able to put the work in?

Learning mindfulness can take time. Attending a mindfulness course usually involves committing to practicing in between sessions, which can be quite demanding.

How can I learn mindfulness?

What types of mindfulness programmes are there?

Mindfulness can be learnt in the following ways:

- in a group setting on a structured course
- drop in classes or taster sessions
- one to one
- online course or app
- self-help books.

If you attend a course, you might encounter a specific mindfulness-based programme:

Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a structured programme tailored to help you manage depression• run over eight weeks in two-hour sessions• delivered by a qualified practitioner• aims to help you manage unhelpful thoughts and feelings that are part of your depression <p>See the MBCT website in 'Useful contacts' on p.17 for more information about the programme.</p>
Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• a structured programme tailored to help you manage general stress• usually run over eight weeks in two-hour sessions• delivered by a qualified practitioner• can also help you manage the impact of long-term health conditions
Mindfulness practiced in Buddhist centres	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• includes traditional Buddhist practices of mindfulness meditation and other mindful techniques• taught at Buddhist centres• usually taught in the context of Buddhist teachings• not tailored for specific health problems
Other mindfulness-based approaches	<p>These include courses that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• focus more on movement• emphasise mindfulness in daily life• are tailored for other specific health conditions or chronic pain. <p>Breathworks offers mindfulness courses to manage pain, stress and illness. See 'Useful contacts' on p.17.</p>

What happens in a mindfulness course?

Different courses will each have their own structure but you're likely to find that your course:

- lasts a fixed number of sessions, or across a specific time frame such as an afternoon or weekend
- involves a mixture of meditation practices and daily mindfulness exercises – sometimes exercises may involve discussing things in pairs or small groups
- involves you sharing your experiences of practicing mindfulness – you can usually contribute as much as you feel comfortable with
- asks you to practice mindfulness meditations or apply mindfulness techniques in your daily activities between sessions.

What should I do before learning mindfulness?

Before starting a mindfulness course or seeing a practitioner for a one-to-one session, you might want to think about the following things:

- **Your instructor's qualifications.** If you want to try a structured course, like MBCT or MBSR, it should be delivered by a qualified practitioner. Check that your instructor has attended training and has a relevant qualification.
- **Your mental health.** It could be a good idea to let the instructor know about any mental health problems you experience, so they can be aware of how you're feeling during the sessions.

🧘🧘 *Sometimes it makes you turn towards things you would normally avoid. That can be challenging. But if you have an experienced mindfulness teacher they can help you to pace yourself.* 🧘🧘

- Things you might find difficult, like breathing exercises. Some people may find sitting for long periods of time and focusing on your breath uncomfortable. If this is the case for you, you could try shorter breathing meditations or explore different mindfulness practices.

- Any costs involved. Check with the instructor if there is a cost for the course, and if there are any materials you are expected to buy, like audio recordings, books or comfortable clothing for meditation sessions.
- Any homework you might have to do between sessions. Check with the instructor before you start, so you can allow enough time to do this.

See 'Is mindfulness right for me?' on p.8 for more information.

How can I find a course or practitioner?

You can find a mindfulness course or practitioner through:

- NHS services. Speak to your GP about services in your area or search through NHS service finder.
- Local Minds. Get in touch to find out which courses your local Mind offers.
- Private practitioners.
- Be Mindful has a list of qualified teachers who offer courses and one-to-one sessions.
- A local Buddhist centre. If you have a Buddhist centre near you they may run mindfulness meditation sessions or courses. See The Buddhist Centre for details.
- Online courses or apps like Headspace let you learn mindfulness wherever suits you.
- Taster sessions or drop-in classes. You might find these are offered through your workplace or local community centre.

See 'Useful contacts' on p.17 for details.

Can I practice mindfulness by myself?

If you don't want to attend a mindfulness course, or you're unable to, it's possible to practice mindfulness by yourself. In fact, many mindfulness courses ask you to practice mindfulness by yourself between sessions.

●● *Mindfulness makes me feel safe because even when I can't access my counsellors, carers, medication and relapse prevention plan, mindfulness is still there. Nothing can take it away.* ●●

How can I get started?

- **Set aside some time.** Consistent short periods of mindful meditation can be better than occasional long ones. It can help to commit to a regular time every day to practice. If you struggle to find the time, it might suit you to focus on finding ways of being mindful in your daily life.
- **Go slowly.** Try to build your practice slowly. Remember, you're learning a new skill so it'll take time to develop. Most people find it hard to sit and meditate for long periods of time at first, so try to do a few minutes and gradually build up to more.
- **Be patient.** There is no need to set goals when practicing mindfulness. Putting pressure on yourself may make it harder to be mindful. Mindfulness simply means noticing what is going on for you right now. It is impossible to get it wrong.

What exercises can I try?

As mindfulness involves paying more attention to what you do in your daily life, it can be a good idea to decide on one or two routine activities which you will try to do mindfully each day. For example, this could mean focusing on:

- the taste, sight and temperature of drinking a cup of tea or coffee
- the sounds and smells of having a shower
- the taste and sensations of brushing your teeth

- the sound of the kettle boiling
- the sensations of your body as you sit in a chair
- the feel of your feet and body moving as you walk.

Different things work for different people, so if you don't find one technique useful, try another. If you want to try a mindfulness meditation exercise, you can find examples at Be Mindful (see 'Useful contacts' on p.17).

You can also try mindfulness exercises like:

- guided meditation from an app or CD
- mindful colouring
- mindful walking in nature.

🌸🌸 *The mindfulness colouring really helps me unwind and relax in the evening. It promotes better sleep and I go to bed feeling ready to rest rather than anxious and wired.* 🌸🌸

When you do any mindfulness exercise, the key steps are:

- **Pay attention** – for example, when you shower in the morning, make a special effort to really pay attention to the feel of the water on your skin.
- **Notice** – when your mind wanders, which is just what minds do, simply notice where your thoughts have drifted to.
- **Choose and return** – choose to bring your attention back to the present moment, usually by focusing on your breath, body or something in your surroundings.
- **Be aware and accept** – notice and be aware of emotions you are feeling or sensations in your body. Try to observe and accept these feelings with friendly curiosity and without judgement.
- **Be kind to yourself** – remember that mindfulness is difficult to do and our minds will always wander. Try not to be critical of yourself, and gently escort your mind back every time it wanders.

What if I encounter a problem?

Try not to judge yourself if you find mindfulness hard, or if it's simply not for you. Different things work for different people, and there are lots of alternative things you can try to look after your wellbeing and your mental health. For example, you might want to try talking treatments, arts therapies or ecotherapy.

(See Mind's online resources *Making sense of talking treatments*, *Making sense of arts therapies* and *Making sense of ecotherapy*).

●● I found it very difficult to clear my mind and sometimes ended up feeling frustrated and upset. ●●

Remember to look after yourself. If you find that practicing mindfulness brings up any difficult feelings for you, you might want to think about how you can look after yourself. This might be through using your support network, or using self-care tips that work for you.

Useful contacts

Local Minds

web: mind.org.uk/information-support/local-minds
 Directory of Local Minds across England and Wales.

Be Mindful

web: bemindful.co.uk
 Information about mindfulness and an online course, as well as a facility to search for mindfulness practitioners in your area.

Breathworks

web: breathworks-mindfulness.org.uk
 Provides mindfulness courses for managing all types of long term health conditions, including pain- and stress-related illness.

The Buddhist Centre

web: thebuddhistcentre.com
 Information about the Triratna Buddhist community in the UK and the location of their centres, which teach mindfulness breathing meditation as well as structured mindfulness approaches such as MBCT.

Headspace

web: headspace.com
 An app that teaches you mindfulness gradually through guided sessions.

Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy

web: mbct.co.uk
 Information about mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) including online resources.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

web: nice.org.uk
 Reports and guidelines on various mental health problems and treatments.

NHS service finder

web: nhs.uk/service-search
 Search facility which enables you to look for a health service, including a GP, in your area.

Oxford Mindfulness Centre

web: oxfordmindfulness.org
 A charity and academic research centre with information and research about mindfulness. It also runs sessions and offers training for mindfulness teachers.

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If you found this booklet useful, you may be interested in the following titles:

- Understanding depression
- Understanding anxiety and panic attacks
- How to improve and maintain your mental wellbeing
- How to manage stress
- The Mind guide to seeking help for a mental health problem

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Published by Mind 2016 © 2016.
To be revised 2019.

ISBN 978-1-910494-07-3

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References available on request
Mind is a registered charity No. 219830

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Mind

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