

## Mindfulness Exercises

### Mindfulness

#### *What is mindfulness?*

Mindfulness means to deliberately pay attention to whatever you are doing, right now. These pages can be read mindfully or with a mind not fully focused and aware that you are reading an article. Everything except sleep can be done mindfully. We can eat mindfully or we can think about past or future event without paying attention to our eating.

#### *What is mindfulness therapy?*

Mindfulness therapy means firstly to have a daily mindfulness practice and to use what we learn from it to remain mindful, aware, during the difficult situations in life. In particular we become aware of our:

1. **thoughts** “I must be stupid to do this”,
2. **feelings**: sadness, anger etc,
3. **behaviour**: aggression, withdrawing, doing a breathing exercise
4. **physiological changes**: fast breathing, weight in stomach, pins and needles, nausea.

These are the big four, we will be coming back to thoughts, feelings, behavior, physiological changes time and again. A range of mindfulness exercises addresses the different areas.

Mindfulness therapy means to simply observe what is happening to us in those four areas, particularly with difficult emotions. You may express what is happening either in a journal or to someone else but there is no intention to change anything. The aim is more to become familiar with how the mind works and its habit patterns.

#### *What are the benefits of mindfulness?*

Your mind is like any other part of your being, there are benefits from understanding how it works and you can train it to work better. Specifically a mindfulness practice has the following benefits:

1. **Stability of mind** – maintaining your mind in an alert clear space rather than at the two extremes of a dull or agitated mind.
2. **Flexibility of mind** – the ability to shift your mind to whatever object you choose, rather than having it bounce haphazardly between a number of issues
3. **Self awareness** – being aware of the contents of your mind and understanding the

- typical patterns of your mind
4. **Acting** rather than **reacting** – Becoming less reactive, e.g. when you are angry and choosing how you will act.

It's not called a practice for nothing. Like any other form of therapy real change will require hard work and commitment, in this case a commitment to maintain your practice six days per week.

### ***How does it work?***

While most of what we achieve is by “doing”, mindfulness achieves its ends by “not doing,” simply by observing. It seems to achieve its success by allowing us to see our thoughts and emotions for what they are, thoughts we are having at the moment and emotions we are experiencing.

Thoughts like “I must be stupid” are subtle and we generally believe them uncritically. By being mindful of our thoughts we gradually get the idea that they are just thoughts that we are having and there is no need to believe them uncritically. Similarly with a feeling like “anger” we start to realize that it is a feeling that is currently strong within us but no more than that, we currently have anger, but it doesn't define us and it will pass. We stop identifying with the thoughts and emotions. Our mind ceases to be in the control of strong feelings and thoughts and slowly comes under our own control.

## **Mindfulness of the Breath Exercise**

1. Settle into a comfortable sitting position, either on a straight-backed chair or on a soft surface on the floor, with your buttocks supported by cushions or a low stool. If you use a chair, it is very helpful to sit away from the back of the chair, so that your spine is self-supporting. If you sit on the floor, it is helpful if your knees actually touch the floor; experiment with the height of the cushions or stool until you feel comfortably and firmly supported.
2. Allow your back to adopt an erect, dignified, and comfortable posture. If sitting on a chair, place your feet flat on the floor, with your legs uncrossed. Gently close your eyes. It may help to imagine a light thread attached to the back of your scalp pulling your head gently upwards and allowing your spine to lengthen.
3. Bring your awareness to the level of physical sensations by focusing your attention on the sensations of touch and pressure in your body where it makes contact with the floor and whatever you are sitting on. Spend a minute or two exploring these sensations.
4. Now bring your awareness to the changing patterns of physical sensations in the lower abdomen as the breath moves in and out of your body (When you first try this practice, it may be helpful to place your hand on your lower abdomen and become aware of the changing pattern of sensations where your hand makes contact with your abdomen, Having "tuned in" to the physical sensations in this area in this way, you can remove your hand and continue to focus on the sensations in the abdominal wall.)
5. Focus your awareness on the sensations of slight stretching as the abdominal wall rises with each inbreath, and of gentle deflation as it falls with each outbreath. As best you can, follow with your awareness the changing physical sensations in the lower abdomen all the way through as the breath enters your body on the inbreath and all the way through as the breath leaves your body on the outbreath, perhaps noticing the slight pauses between one inbreath and the following outbreath, and between one outbreath and the following inbreath.
6. There is no need to try to control the breathing in any way—simply let the breath breathe itself. As best you can, also bring this attitude of allowing to the rest of your experience. There is nothing to be fixed, no particular state to be achieved. As best you can, simply allow your experience to be your experience, without needing it to be other than it is.
7. Sooner or later (usually sooner), your mind will wander away from the focus on the breath in the lower abdomen to thoughts, planning, daydreams, drifting along—whatever. This is perfectly OK—it's simply what minds do. It is not a mis-take or a failure. When you notice that your awareness is no longer on the breath, gently congratulate yourself—you have come back and are once more aware of your experience! You may want to acknowledge briefly where the mind has been ("Ah, there's thinking"). Then, gently escort the awareness

back to a focus on the changing pattern of physical sensations in the lower abdomen, renewing the intention to pay attention to the ongoing in-breath or out-breath, whichever you find.

8. However often you notice that the mind has wandered (and this will quite likely happen over and over and over again), as best you can, congratulate yourself each time on reconnecting with your experience in the moment, gently escorting the attention back to the breath, and simply resume following in awareness the changing patterns of physical sensations that come with each in-breath and out-breath.
9. As best you can, bring a quality of kindness to your awareness, perhaps seeing the repeated wanderings of the mind as opportunities to bring patience and gentle curiosity to your experience.
10. Continue with the practice for 15 minutes, or longer if you wish, perhaps reminding yourself from time to time that the intention is simply to be aware of your experience in each moment, as best you can, using the breath as an anchor to gently reconnect with the here and now each time you notice that your mind has wandered and is no longer down in the abdomen, following the breath. You may wish to focus your concentration by counting your breaths. On the out-breath say “one” quietly to yourself and then “two” on the next out-breath. When you reach “ten”, start at the beginning again, saying “one”, “two”, “three” on the out-breaths.
11. Mindfulness exercises are best done before eating or before breakfast or the evening meal. If you have had a drink or used any other drugs, allow their effects to wear off before trying to meditate

## ***Step out of Automatic Pilot Exercise***

This activity is designed to bring mindfulness into your everyday life.

**Choose one activity each day that you often do in automatic pilot.** Activities such as brushing your teeth, eating a meal, attending lectures, showering, preparing for bed, walking in the park are suitable. It is probably best to stick with one activity for a week or longer rather than changing the activity regularly.

**When the time comes for that activity, do it in a fully mindful frame of mind.** Pay attention to the activity itself, what is happening right now. With teeth brushing you might feel the touch of the brush on each tooth and the gum, note the noise it is making become aware of the taste of the toothpaste. Just like in the breath awareness, if you find yourself thinking of other things then note it for a second or two and return to the sensations associated with brushing the teeth.

If the activity is likely to be longer than a few minutes such as eating a meal or walking in the park then **practice the first two minutes mindfully.** Pay attention to what you see, the sounds you hear, the feeling of your clothes as you walk. What can you smell.

As a general aim, stick to the sensations present at the time, touch, sight, sound, taste, smell. You may also note what emotions and bodily feelings you have such as breathing faster or muscle tension.

At the end of the exercise continue the next activity mindfully for as long as that mindfulness lasts.

## ***Automatic Pilot***

In a car, we can sometimes drive for miles "on automatic pilot," without really being aware of what we are doing. In the same way, we may not be really "present" moment-by-moment, for much of our lives: We can often be "miles away" without know-ing it.

On automatic pilot, we are more likely to have our "buttons pressed": Events around us and thoughts, feelings, and sensations in the mind (of which we may be only dimly aware) can trigger old habits of thinking that are often unhelpful and may lead to worsening mood.

By becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, from moment to moment, we give ourselves the possibility of greater freedom and choice; we do not have to go into the same old "mental ruts" that may have caused problems in the past.

The aim mindfulness is to increase awareness so that we can respond to situations with choice rather than react automatically. We do that by practicing to become more aware of where our attention is, and deliberately changing the focus of attention, over and over again.