A Quick Guide to Mindfulness

Whether you're suffering from stress, fatigue or illness or simply want to regain some balance in your life, mindfulness can help. These handy bite-size chunks of hands- on advice will help increase your understanding of mindfulness, outline some short meditations and provide enough information to enable you to inject mindfulness into your life.

Discovering Key Attitudes to Nurture Mindfulness

Your attitude to life makes all the difference. Use these attitudes to develop your capacity to be mindful, enabling you to live a more mindful life:

- Curiosity – Become curious about your experience. How do you feel emotionally? What kind of thoughts are going through your head? What does your body feel like at the moment?
- Acceptance – Acceptance doesn't mean resignation. Mindfulness is about accepting how you feel right now, rather than denying it. Acceptance first, change comes later.
- Kindness – Bring a sense of warm and caring compassion to your moment to moment experience. Be aware of your moment to moment experience with your heart as well as your head.
- Letting go – You don't need to try and hold on to pleasant experiences and push away unpleasant experiences. Have a sense of a light touch to your experience.
- Non–judging – Observe whatever you are experiencing as it is, rather than classifying it into good or bad, like or dislike.
- Non–striving – Allow yourself to experience whatever your experience is rather than creating a goal for some other experience and then striving to attain that different experience.
- Patience – Change takes time. Foster your capacity to be patient.
- Trust – Have confidence in the practice of mindfulness and in your inner self to guide you.
- Beginner's mind – Nurture your sense of being a beginner rather than an expert. 'In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, in the expert's mind there are few.'

Trying a Short Mindfulness Meditation

Your capacity to be mindful is most powerfully developed through mindfulness meditation. One of the most popular mindfulness meditations is mindfulness of breath. This involves being mindfully aware of your breath. Follow these steps to try mindfulness meditation out for yourself:

1. Be aware of the sense of your own breathing. You don't need to change the rate of your breath. Just feel the physical sensation of your breath entering and leaving the body.

2. You can feel the breath in the nose, the throat, the chest or down in your belly. If possible, try and feel the breath in the belly as it's more grounding and is more likely to make you feel relaxed.

When your mind wonders off into thoughts, bring your attention back. It is the nature of thoughts to take your attention away from whatever you want to focus on, and into thoughts about the past or future, worries or dreams. Don't worry about it.

As soon as you realise that you've been thinking about something else, notice what you were thinking about, and gently guide your attention back to your breath. You don't need to criticise yourself.

That's it. Mindfulness of breath is as simple as that. Bring a sense of the mindful attitudes to your experience such as curiosity, kindness and acceptance. You can do this exercise for as short as a minute, or as long as an hour.

Understanding the Three Aspects of Mindfulness

Mindfulness has three different aspects that operate together seamlessly to bring about a state of mindful awareness. Print out and pin up this list to remind yourself of what these are.

- Intention – Your intention is what you hope to get from practising mindfulness. You may want stress reduction, greater emotional balance or to discover your true nature. The strength of your intention helps to motivate you to practise mindfulness on a daily basis, and shapes the quality of your mindful awareness.
- Attention – Mindfulness is about paying attention to your inner or outer experience. Your mindful attention is mainly developed through various different types of meditation – either formal, traditional, or informal – when talking, cleaning or driving, for example.
- Attitude – Mindfulness involves paying attention to certain attitudes, such as curiosity, acceptance and kindness.

Using Mindfulness to Cope with Difficult Emotions

We all have bad days; some are worse than others. When emotions become overwhelming, you can use this RAIN formula to help manage your feelings in a mindful way:

- R – Recognise the emotion you're feeling. Name the emotion in your mind if you can.
- A – Accept the experience you're having. Yes, you probably don't like the feeling, but the reality is the emotion is here at the moment.

- I – Investigate. Become curious about your experience. Where do you feel the emotion in your body? What kind of thoughts are going through your mind?
- N – Non-identification. See the emotion as a passing event rather than who you actually are, just as different images are reflected in a mirror but are not the mirror. Different emotions arise and pass in you, but are not you, yourself. The most powerful step is non-identification. Have the attitude 'anger is arising and will soon pass away' or 'sadness is coming up in me, and at some point, will dissolve'.

Sometimes you just need to do one step, whereas at other times you may want to work through the whole formula. Practise using the formula whenever you can, so when things become challenging for you, you'll find it easier to use.

Discovering the Core, Formal Mindfulness Meditations

To deepen your mindful awareness, you need to practise a formal mindfulness meditation on a daily basis. Familiarise yourself with some of the following mediations. In time, you will become more mindful in your day to day life.

- Body Scan Meditation – This meditation involves spending about half an hour or so, becoming aware of each part of your body from the tips of your toes to the top of your head, in a mindful way. This meditation is usually practised lying down.
- Sitting Meditation – This involves being mindful of your chosen object of attention whilst in a sitting posture. You can be mindful of your breath, your body, sounds, thoughts, emotions, or practise choice-less awareness.
- Mindful Movement – Taking time to do some yoga or stretching in mindful way is a powerful way of developing your capacity to be mindful, whilst at the same time becoming stronger and more flexible. Walking slowly and mindfully is also considered a wonderful way to practise formal mindfulness meditation. You don't need to be physically still to practise meditation.

Learning about True Mindfulness

Mindfulness is more than a set of techniques to practice. Mindfulness is about questioning your identity and relationship to the world around you. By understanding who you are at a deeper level, you are less affected by negative emotions, thoughts or physical sensations – you're tackling the root of the problem. For these reasons, it's worth spending some time and effort to find out for yourself who you truly are. Try this:

- Notice that your thoughts come and go. You are aware of your thoughts. You are that which is aware of thoughts – not the thoughts themselves.
- Notice that your emotions come and go too. You are aware of the emotion rather than being the emotion itself. You are the observer of the emotion.

- Observe that although your attention moves from one thing to another, your sense of being aware is always present. You're always aware of something. Awareness is always on, and completely effortless. You are that awareness itself.
- Reflect on the statement: 'I cannot be that which I observe'. Just as your eye is not the book, because the eye is observing the book, so you are not your thoughts, emotions, sensations, perceptions because you are observing them. You are the witness of them. As the witness you are completely free of them.
- Be as you are. You cannot become yourself, for you already are yourself! So, just relax and be as you are – effortless awareness. Awareness is your natural state – what you always have been and always will be.

One of the most famous sages of the 20th Century, Nisargadatta put it this way: "Discover all that you are not – body, feelings, thoughts, time, space, this or that – nothing, concrete or abstract, which you perceive can be you. The very act of perceiving shows that you are not what you perceive."

Practising Day-to-Day, Informal Mindfulness

The great thing about mindfulness is that you can practise it any time. Informal mindfulness meditation is when you practise mindfulness without carving out a special time for it. Here are ten examples of informal mindfulness meditation:

- Mindful communication – When you are speaking or listening to someone else, become aware of the sound of your own voice, or the voice of the other person. Each time your mind wonders off into other thoughts, kindly guide your attention back to the conversation without criticising yourself if you can.
- Mindful walking – The next time you're walking somewhere, notice the sense of touch between your feet and the ground. Observe how your weight seamlessly transfers from one foot to the other, almost effortlessly. Smell the roses. Be in the presence of the present moment.
- Mindful exercise – The next time you're in the gym, going for a jog, swimming or playing a sport, become mindful of what's going on. Focus your mindful attention on your own body, thoughts, emotions or the environment around you. Become curious about your experience.
- Mindful working – Whatever your work is, by paying more attention to what you're doing, you're bound to achieve better results. Try reducing the amount of effort you make to pay attention, and let the focus be effortless, relaxed and calm, as best you can.
- Mindful holidays – It's easy to spend half your holiday thinking about the next holiday rather than actually being there. Feel the gentle warmth of the sun, put the camera down every now and then and connect with the scenery with your own eyes. Breathe the fresh air. Be grateful for having the time and money to go on holiday.

- Mindful waiting – You need to wait in a queue in shops, in your car, on public transport. Instead of becoming frustrated, practise some mindfulness of breath. When you're in traffic, notice the colour of the sky or trees. When in a supermarket, feel the calming sensation of your own breath.
- Mindful listening to music – Get yourself comfortable, switch on your favourite piece of music and simply listen, moment by moment. As usual, after a while your mind will begin thinking of other things – just gently guide your mindful attention back to the sounds of the music. Be aware of both the sounds and the silence between the sounds. Notice how all sounds arise and fall back into the ever-present silence.
- Be accepting of others – Allow other people to be human and make mistakes. Be prepared to accept apologies and forgive others for their indiscretions.
- Stimulate your appetite for knowledge and experience – Stretch yourself by reading, studying and taking on new skills.
- Live in the moment – Pause to sniff those roses. Take a break from speculating about the future and sifting over the past. Instead, put the full weight of your attention into the here and now.