

# Mindfulness

## What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a type of meditation. Meditation is training for the mind and body that leads to greater mental and emotional freedom. It is commonly associated with the major spiritual traditions, especially Buddhism but more recently in the West, it has been adapted to secular settings, including healthcare.

Mindfulness is moment-by-moment non-judgemental awareness. Over time, mindfulness brings about long-term changes in mood and levels of happiness and wellbeing. Scientific studies have shown that mindfulness not only prevents depression but that it also positively affects the brain patterns underlying day-to-day anxiety, stress, depression and irritability so that when they arise they dissolve away more easily.

**“Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment”**

**Buddha**

## Myths about Meditation

- Meditation is not a religion. It is simply a method of mental training
- You do not need to sit cross-legged on the floor – but you can if you want to. You can meditate more or less anywhere
- Mindfulness practice does not take a lot of time, although patience and persistence are required
- Meditation is not complicated. Even when it feels difficult, you will have learned something valuable about the workings of the mind

**“You learn to watch your thoughts, rather than get trapped by their demands”**

**Ruby Wax**

## Benefits of Mindfulness Meditation

- Numerous studies have shown people who meditate regularly are happier than average
- Anxiety, depression and irritability all decrease with regular meditation. Memory also improves, reaction times become faster and mental and physical stamina increase
- Regular meditators enjoy better and more fulfilling relationships

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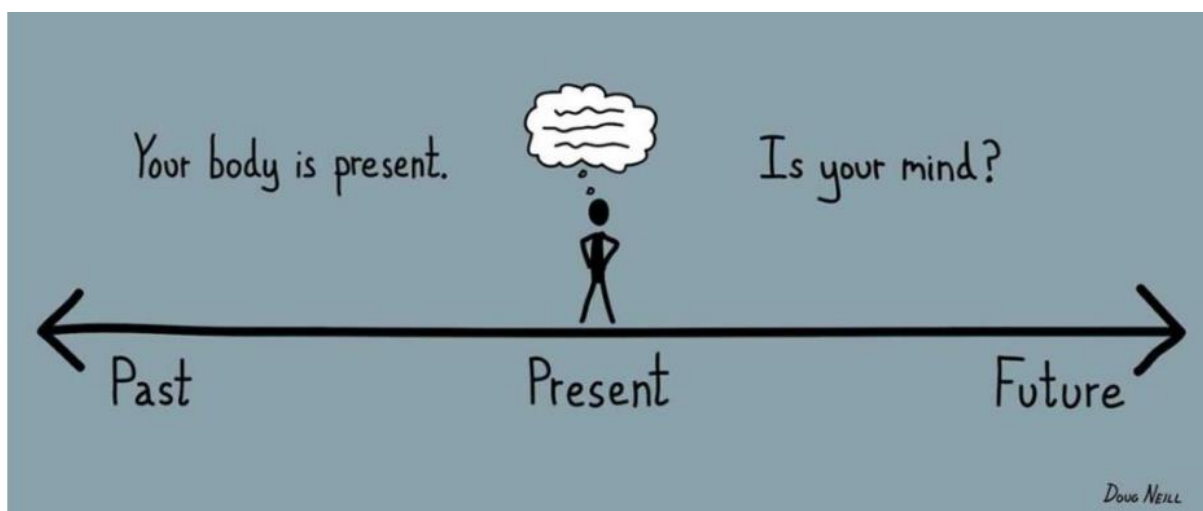
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- Meditation has been found to be effective in reducing the impact of serious conditions, such as chronic pain and cancer and even helps to relieve drug and alcohol dependency
- Meditation boosts the immune system and helps fight colds, flu and other diseases
- Mindfulness has been found to boost resilience (the ability to withstand life's knocks and setbacks)

## Principles of Mindfulness

Our moods naturally change throughout the day. Due to your thought patterns, often a brief moment of sadness, anger or anxiety can lead to you being in a 'bad mood' for the rest of the day. There are some important things to remember.

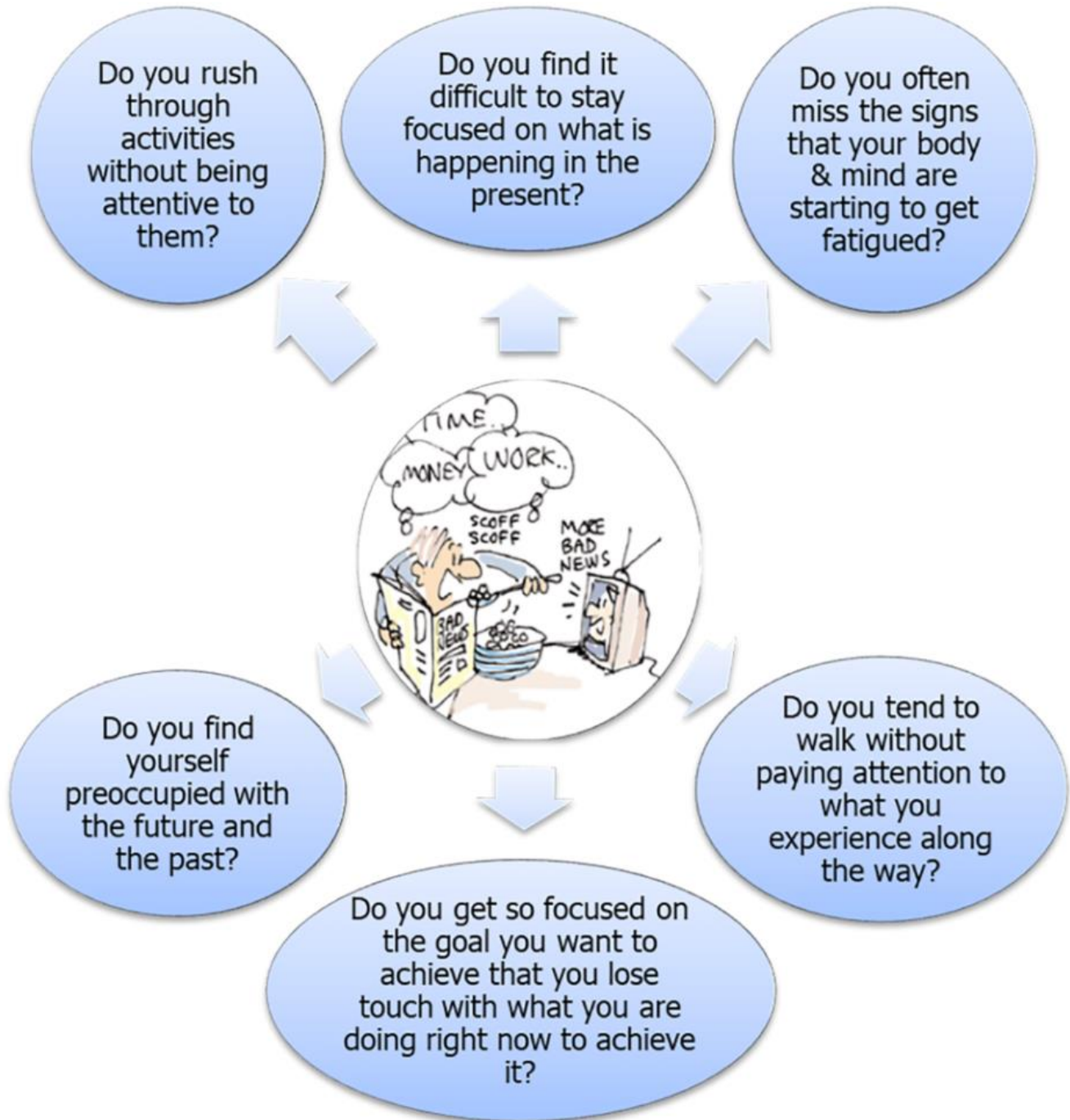
- When you start to feel a little sad, anxious, or irritable, it is not the mood that does the damage but how you *react* to it
- The effort of trying to break free of the bad mood often makes things worse. When we try to find a solution, it often dredges up past regrets and conjures up future worries
- Before long, you can be in an endless cycle of self-judgement
- Mindfulness meditation teaches you to recognise damaging thoughts as they arise. It reminds you that they are memories *and not real*
- With time, you can learn to observe negative thoughts as they arise, let them stay a while and then simply let them evaporate
- Mindfulness meditation does this by training our minds to work in a different way. Most of us only know the analytical side of the mind (judging, planning, trawling through memories, searching for solutions) but the mind is also aware. Mindfulness focuses on tuning into this awareness



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## Are you living on automatic pilot?



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## Automatic Pilot

**It is surprising how often we can work on 'automatic pilot' without really being aware of what we are doing. This is probably because we are thinking of other things and not really 'present' on the task at hand.**

Being on autopilot is vital for humans to function properly, for example, tying our shoelaces. The downside comes when we give too much control to our autopilot. We can easily end up thinking, working, eating, walking or driving without having a clear awareness of what we are doing. Mindfulness aims to bring us back to the present, over and over, to full conscious awareness. When we are more mindful, we are less likely to be sidetracked by our autopilot. Being mindful means getting back in touch with our senses.

Pain and illness are normally unpleasant sensations that we react to, causing a host of further problems and physical and emotional stress. We may not be able to do anything about the underlying unpleasant sensation, but we can train ourselves to lessen and/or overcome this reactive cycle. This means that in time we learn to manage our response to the suffering we experience.

### **Two key principles underlie all aspects of mindfulness:**

1. Learning to live in the present moment
2. Learning to 'respond' rather than 'react' to our life's circumstances

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

### **Practice Makes Perfect**

Becoming more mindful takes practice. There will be countless times that you feel like you have failed. Your mind will refuse to settle. No matter what you try within seconds your mind will become full of thoughts. These moments are not signs of failure. Gradually, with practice, the periods of calm will lengthen and the time it takes for you to realise that your mind has wandered off, will shorten. It is important to practice regularly rather than just on 'bad days'.

Think of mindfulness practice like putting up a tent. If you practice putting up in good weather it will be easier to do it when it is raining.

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The following sections contain some mindfulness activities to get you started. But remember, mindfulness can be practiced at anytime, anywhere. Find what works for you.

## Mindful Activity

Choose one activity normally done on autopilot (e.g. brushing your teeth, walking from one room to another, drinking tea or coffee, taking out the rubbish, loading a washing machine or tumble dryer). Whenever you do this activity over the next week, pay attention to how you are doing it. You do not have to slow it down, or even enjoy it. Simply do what you normally do, but see if you can be fully aware of it as you do it.

Try this experiment with the same activity each day for a week. See what you notice. The idea is not to make you feel different, but simply to allow a few more moments in the day when you feel 'awake'.

For example: Brushing your teeth. Where is your mind when you are brushing your teeth? Pay carefully attention to the sensations – the toothbrush in relation to the teeth, the flavours of the toothpaste, moisture building up in the mouth etc.

At the end of the week reflect on the activity and write down any thoughts or feelings you have.

## 3 Minute Meditation

Focusing on the breathing allows you to observe your thoughts as they arise in your mind. You come to realise that thoughts come and go of their own accord and we have a choice whether to react to them.

1. Sit erect in a straight backed chair. If possible, bring your back a little way from the rear of the chair so that your spine is self-supporting. Your feet can be flat on the floor. Close your eyes and lower your gaze.
2. Focus your attention on your breathing as it flows in and out of your body. Stay in touch with the different sensations of each in-breath and each out-breath. Observe the breath without looking for anything special to happen. There is no need to alter your breathing in any way.
3. After a while, your mind may wander. When you notice this, gently bring your attention back to your breathing, without giving yourself a hard time – the act of realising that your mind has wandered and bringing your attention back without criticising yourself is central to the practice of mindfulness meditation.
4. Your mind may eventually become calm – or it may not. Even if you get a sense of absolute stillness, it may only be fleeting, if you feel angry or exasperated, notice that this may be fleeting too. Whatever happens, just allow it to be as it is.
5. After around 3 minutes, let your eyes open and take in the room again.

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