



## **FALLING AWAKE: MINDFULNESS AND MENTAL HEALTH**

Mindfulness is described by Jon Kabat-Zinn, the originator of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, as “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally”. We all have the capacity to be mindful, but we may spend a lot of time on ‘autopilot’, carrying out daily activities while our mind is elsewhere. When we are lost in thought in this way, we are far more likely to get trapped in unhelpful patterns of thinking and behaving that trigger anxiety or depression. We may also find that we feel stressed because we are rushing through life, thinking about the next thing on our mental “to do” list.

Another disadvantage of being on “autopilot” is that we may overlook those things in our lives that have the potential to be enjoyable and to lift our mood. Life can then become rather grey and uninspiring.

Mindfulness can help you to bring your attention back to where you are right now, teaching you to relate to your thoughts, feelings, body sensations and the world around you in a calm and accepting way. A particular form of mindfulness, known as Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy, has been recognised by the National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) as an effective way of reducing the risk of relapse for people who suffer from chronic depression. There are many other proven benefits, including:

- Improved ability to focus and concentrate
- Resilience to stress
- Greater capacity to enjoy and appreciate life from moment to moment
- Better quality of life for people suffering from pain and illness
- A more compassionate and understanding attitude towards yourself & others

A Mindfulness course will generally include meditation exercises of varying lengths, focusing on body, breath, thoughts, feelings and sense impressions, together with “daily living” exercises that help to bring Mindfulness into everyday activities. You will do the meditations together in the group, with opportunities to reflect and learn from your experience. You will also be expected to practise between sessions, using audio recordings that guide you through the meditation.

## Try a few mindfulness practices – right here, right now!

It's important to realise that Mindfulness isn't a "magic bullet" or a "quick fix". It will take time, and commitment to doing the practice regularly, before you may notice any difference. Think of it as a way of being, rather than a technique that you apply from time to time in order to feel better.

If you are currently feeling severely depressed, or if there is a lot of stress and disruption in your life right now, it might be better to wait until things have settled down before you embark on a Mindfulness course.

In the meantime, here are a few exercises to give you a taste of Mindfulness:

### The Mindful Check-In

Stop what you're doing, and bring your attention to your body. Gently explore the sensations as they come and go. If there's tension, invite it to soften. Notice what's running through your mind, and the mood that you're in. Follow your breath for a short time. Don't try to change or deepen your breathing: Just notice where you can feel it in your body. Follow each in-breath and out-breath as best you can. Ask yourself: Is there anything you need to do to care for yourself and be more comfortable? Get into the habit of doing this exercise a couple of times each day.

### Mindful eating

Next time you eat a meal, see if you can give it your undivided attention. Look at the colours and textures of the food and how it's arranged on your plate. Savour the aroma. Really focus on the taste. Notice when your mind is jumping ahead to the next mouthful, and gently return it to the mouthful you're eating right now

### Mindful tasks

We tend to go on autopilot when we're engaged in familiar tasks. Take something you do every day (having a shower, brushing your teeth, doing the washing-up). Each time you do it, focus as fully as you can on the task. For example, feel the temperature and hear the sound of the water, smell the shower gel, feel the water on your body. Each time your mind wanders, gently bring it back. Notice how many times this happens!

### Need more help?

- Oasis-Talk runs a [workshop on mindful living](#)
  - Find [Jon Kabat-Zinn on YouTube](#)
  - Visit the Mental Health Foundation's website [Be Mindful](#)
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