

What is mindfulness and how can it help us?



What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness means deliberately attending to and becoming more aware of our experience: our thoughts, feelings and body sensations. This allows us to clearly perceive thoughts, physical sensations, emotions and events at the moment they occur without reacting in an automatic or habitual way. Experiences don't overwhelm us and we become steady through life's ups and downs.

Mindfulness is therefore simply a special kind of awareness which enables us to be fully 'awake' to life in each present moment; fully alive and vibrant.

Although mindfulness has its roots in Buddhism, it can be seen as an inherent human capacity akin to language acquisition; a capacity that enables people to focus on what they experience in the moment, inside themselves as well as in their environment, with an attitude of openness, curiosity and care. By relating to our thoughts, emotions, body sensations and events in life more skilfully, we can be less drawn into unhelpful habitual reactions and more able to make good choices about how to relate to our circumstances.

We can all be mindful some of the time, particularly when engaged in an activity which demands our full attention such as some forms of exercise; practicing art or music; or even walking in nature. We can also choose to cultivate this ability and refine it to ever-greater degrees through practice. Being mindful does not necessarily involve meditation, but for most of us this form of mind-training is required to strengthen the intention to stay present and cultivate an open and allowing quality of mind. What is often referred to as "Mindfulness", therefore, is a practice that anyone can do on a day-to-day basis. It is an integrative, mind-body based training that enables us to change the way we think and feel about our experiences, especially those that are stressful. It sounds and is simple, but can be hard to do, especially when we are really busy (although arguably that is precisely when we most need it!).

The evidence

There is a huge amount of scientific research on the benefits of mindfulness, in particular in reducing levels of stress, anger, rumination, anxiety and depression, while improving positive outlook, empathy, sense of cohesion, self-compassion and overall quality of life. The benefits of mindfulness extend to relationships so that we are more able to respond compassionately to someone in need, and enjoy more satisfying personal relationships, including relationships with our colleagues.

Neuroscientific studies into the effects of mindfulness indicate that it is associated with changes to the brain which reflect improvements in attention and emotion regulation skills, and that these brain changes are permanent.



Minfulness at work

We spend more of our time working than doing anything else, and research has shown that these hours are on average the least happy of our lives. Endemic stress at work accounts for a large proportion of workplace absence and represents a huge loss of productivity, not to mention the significant personal cost. Meanwhile, success in most organisations relies on the very things that unhappiness and stress erode – collaboration, creativity, cognitive flexibility and effective decision-making. The resilience and emotional wellbeing of individuals at work determines the health, resilience and future performance of businesses and institutions.

In this context, organisations are keen to develop the internal resources and wellbeing of individuals, much as businesses already invest in the development of employees' professional skills. In a work context, practicing mindfulness can help us deal with stress, as well as enhancing our ability to focus, be more open and less reactive, and work more collaboratively with colleagues. Ultimately, mindfulness can help unlock our potential for learning and growing so we are better able to respond creatively to life's challenges.

Resources

www.headspace.com

www.insighttimer.com

www.everyday-mindfulness.org

'Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world' by Professor Mark Williams and Danny Penman

'The Little Book of Mindfulness: 10 minutes a day to less stress, more peace' by Dr Patrizia Collard

'Mindfulness for Beginners' by Jon Kabat-Zinn

