

Introduction to Mindfulness

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What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to, and clearly noticing, whatever is happening in our lives at a particular moment. It involves removing our attention from thoughts of what has happened in the past or what might happen in the future and instead focusing on what is going on right now in the 'here and now'.

"Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."

Jon Kabat-Zinn

When we are **not** being Mindful

Have you ever started to eat a snack - taken a couple of bites and then noticed all you had left was the empty packet in your hand? Or perhaps you were driving somewhere and arrived at your destination realising that you remember nothing about your journey? These are common examples of "mindlessness," or going on "automatic pilot."

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We are often "not present" in our own lives. We might fail to notice the good things going on, fail to hear what our bodies are telling us, or

even more damaging, we may engage in unfair self-criticism when our thoughts 'run free' in this way. Left to itself, the mind can wander through all manner of thoughts and these can often be of the negative kind. If we engage with these thoughts, we can reinforce negative emotions.

What about Planning and Reflecting?

Being mindful is about being present to what is happening at a particular moment. This doesn't mean being separate from the past nor does it prevent us from planning future goals.

Mindfulness is about seeing and accepting things as they are in the moment, not as we would like them to be! Such clarity leads to wiser decision making capacity and allows for more focused action in whatever task is undertaken. This can contribute to greater self-empowerment.

N.B. Planning for and worrying about the future are two very different things. When you are engaged in planning and you notice your mind has drifted off into daydreaming or worrying, keep bringing it back to the task at hand. (Using the breath can be helpful to harness you in the present moment.)

Why Practice Mindfulness?

Mindfulness teaches us a kindness to self and an attitude of noticing what we are focusing on without judging it.

Mindfulness won't eliminate life's pressures, but it can help us respond to them in a calmer way. This benefits our health and wellbeing. It can help us to recognise and step away from habitual, often unconscious emotional and physiological reactions to everyday events. It provides us with an approach to cultivating clarity, insight, understanding and acceptance.

When practicing mindfulness, everyone, however much we practice, will experience uninvited thoughts creeping into our heads. This is fine - it is just what our brains do, however it is how we respond that is important. If we start to think about the thoughts, or get annoyed with ourselves for not being able to retain our focus, we stop paying attention and are no longer in the present moment.

If we just acknowledge the thought and let it go without judging or evaluating it, we retain our focus on being in the present moment.

How do I do this, what can help?

You can do this as you go about your daily life.

For example, you could notice what your senses are bringing you:

- what you are seeing and hearing

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- how you are breathing, standing, sitting or lying down
- how the ground feels under your feet

As you do this your mind will probably keep drifting out of the present so you need to keep bringing it back.

It is bringing your mind back to the present that is the practice of mindfulness.

Don't be harsh on yourself and don't criticise your mind for drifting away – just bring it back kindly and gently to the present.

Awareness of Breathing

As you go through the day, notice your breathing from time to time. You don't have to breathe in any special way. You could notice one or more of the following:

- Is your breathing different now to what it was a few minutes ago?
- Is it calmer or more laboured?
- Are you breathing into your chest or your abdomen?
- Are you aware of the air entering and leaving your nostrils or your mouth?

Mindfulness Cues

This involves using habitual behaviours to remind you to practice mindfulness. Some suggestions are – using the telephone, going up or down stairs or steps, tidying, washing up – feel free to use others you prefer.

Choose one or two and then decide that when performing them you will maintain awareness of what you are doing, rather than daydreaming or getting caught up in fears or anxieties.

Mindfulness and Sleep

We can't make ourselves sleep, we can only allow sleep to occur. The practice of mindfulness can help to reduce or eliminate worrying or fearful thoughts that may prevent sleep occurring. Fears and worries can often seem greater during the night. When you spot yourself lying awake thinking about problems, just note this fact and put your attention on something that is happening in the present moment.

A simple example is to notice:

- your breathing, follow the breath into and out of the body
- the feel of the bedclothes around you
- how your body is making contact with the bed

Even if you don't actually fall asleep this practice should help you relax as you move the focus of your thinking away from your worries.

The practice of being the observer of your thoughts, while staying in the present requires an attitude of detachment and forms one of the core principles of mindfulness. Like everything else this is a discipline and you have to practice it.

How can I find out more about Mindfulness?

There is a wealth of information on mindfulness websites. These include some very informative Irish-based sites. The number of books and CDs on the subject is growing and it is worth checking out your local library and/ or bookshop to find one that appeals to you.



What is the CSEAS?

The CSEAS is a support service which offers a wide range of free and confidential* supports designed to assist civil servants in managing work and/or life difficulties.

*see website for exceptions to confidentiality

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