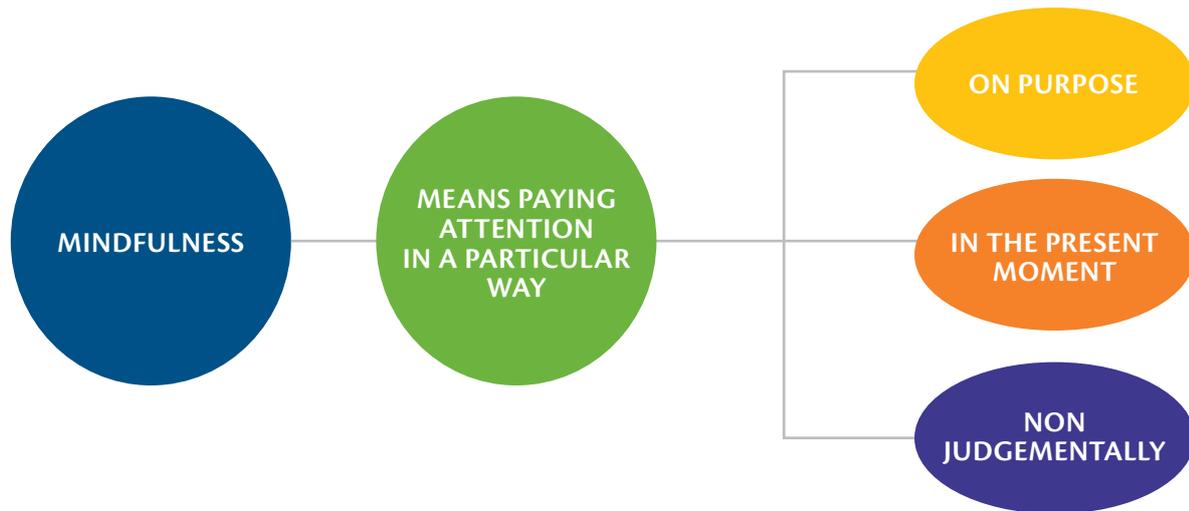


# Mindfulness

## What is Mindfulness?



Mindfulness is an ancient eastern practice which is very relevant for our lives today.

Mindfulness is a very simple concept,

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally.

Mindfulness does not conflict with any beliefs or traditions, whether religious, cultural or scientific. It is simply a practical way to notice thoughts, physical sensations, sights, sounds, smells - anything we might not normally notice. The actual skills might be simple, but because it is so different to how our minds normally behave, it takes a lot of practice. We might go out into the garden and as we look around, we might think "That grass really needs cutting, and that vegetable patch looks very untidy". A young child on the other hand, will call over excitedly, "Hey - come and look at this ant!"

Mindfulness can simply be noticing what we don't normally notice, because our heads are too busy in the future or in the past - thinking about what we need to do, or going over what we have done.

Being mindful helps us to train our attention. Our minds wander about 50% of the time, but every time we practise being mindful, we are exercising our attention "muscle" and becoming mentally fitter. We can take more control over our focus of attention, and choose what we focus on...rather than passively allowing our attention to be dominated by that which distresses us and takes us away from the present moment.

*Mindfulness might simply be described as choosing and learning to control our focus of attention.*

## Automatic Pilot

In a car, we can sometimes drive for miles on ‘automatic pilot’ without really being aware of what we are doing. In the same way, we may not be really ‘present’, moment-by-moment, for much of our lives: We can often be “miles away” without knowing it.

*On automatic pilot, we are more likely to have our ‘buttons pressed’: Events around us and thoughts, feelings and sensations (of which we may be only dimly aware) can trigger old habits of thinking that are often unhelpful and may lead to worsening mood.*

By becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, from moment to moment, we give ourselves the possibility of greater freedom and choice; we do not have to go into the same old “mental ruts” that may have caused problems in the past.

## Mindful Activity

If we wash the dishes each evening, we might tend to be ‘in our heads’ as we’re washing up, thinking about what we have to do, what we’ve done earlier in the day, worrying about future events, or regretful thoughts about the past. Again, a young child might see things differently, “Listen to those bubbles! They’re fun!”

Washing up or another routine activity can become a routine (practice of) mindful activity for us. We might notice the temperature of the water and how it feels on the skin, the texture of the bubbles on the skin, and yes, we might hear the bubbles as they softly pop. The sounds of the water as we take out and put dishes into the water. The smoothness of the plates, and the texture of the sponge. Just noticing what we might not normally notice.

A mindful walk brings new pleasures. Walking is something most of us do at some time during the day. We can practice, even if only for a couple of minutes at a time, mindful walking. Rather than be “in our heads”, we can look around and notice what we see, hear, sense. We might notice the sensations in our own body just through the act of walking. Noticing the sensations and movement of our feet, legs, arms, head and body as we take each step. Noticing our breathing. Thoughts will continuously intrude, but we can just notice them, and then bring our attention back to our walking.

*The more we practice, perhaps the more (initially at least) we will notice those thoughts intruding, and that’s ok. The only aim of mindful activity is to bring our attention back to the activity continually, noticing those sensations, from outside and within us.*

## Mindful Breathing

The primary focus in Mindfulness Meditation is the breathing. However, the primary goal is a calm, nonjudging awareness, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. This creates calmness and acceptance.

- ✓ Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed and your spine reasonably straight.
- ✓ Direct your attention to your breathing.
- ✓ When thoughts, emotions, physical feelings or external sounds occur, simply accept them, giving them the space to come and go without judging or getting involved with them.
- ✓ When you notice that your attention has drifted off and is becoming caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note that the attention has drifted, and then gently bring the attention back to your breathing.

It’s ok and natural for thoughts to arise, and for your attention to follow them. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing.

## Using mindfulness to cope with negative experiences (thoughts, feelings, events)

As we become more practised at using mindfulness for breathing, body sensations and routine daily activities, so we can then learn to be mindful of our thoughts and feelings, to become observers, and then more accepting of them. This results in less distressing feelings, and increases our ability to enjoy our lives.

*With mindfulness, even the most disturbing sensations, feelings, thoughts, and experiences, can be viewed from a wider perspective as passing events in the mind, rather than as “us”, or as being necessarily true. (Brantley 2003)*

When we are more practiced in using mindfulness, we can use it even in times of intense distress, by becoming mindful of the actual experience as an observer, using mindful breathing and focussing our attention on the breathing, listening to the distressing thoughts mindfully, recognising them as merely thoughts, breathing with them, allowing them to happen without believing them or arguing with them. If thoughts are too strong or loud, then we can move our attention to our breath, the body, or to sounds around us.