What is Mindfulness?

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Most simply, mindfulness is ‘the art of conscious living’ (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), that is, the art of bringing into our awareness the whole of our experiencing, as it happens, in the present, immediate moment. Mindfulness has its origin in Buddhist philosophy and practice but is now commonly considered, taught and practised as a secular exercise. Evidence-based research has shown that it is an effective form of support and treatment for both physical and emotional health, notably depression and chronic pain.

The whole of our experiencing encompasses our thoughts, our feelings, our breathing, our bodily-felt sensations, as well as all the noises we hear, the sight we see, the smells we smell, etc.

Why is conscious living important?

Despite the potential wide range of internal and external experiencing, we are generally most conscious of only one part of it – our thoughts. It is these that we tend to most react to and these that we consider our reality, informing our subsequent thoughts and feelings. However, we are only responding to part of our story if we react to our thoughts alone.
We can get so caught up in following a ‘train of thought’ that we become distant from the present moment and the wholeness of our actual lived experience. However, if we can allow ourselves to be open to and experience the fullness of our actual ‘moment by moment’ direct experiencing just as it is (i.e. the whole picture, without needing it to be any different) we often find that it is not quite ‘as we thought’. By doing this, we offer ourselves the opportunity to respond to all our experiencing, rather than just a single aspect of it. Research\(^2\)\(^3\) indicates that when this happens there is a direct beneficial influence on our physical and mental health and sense of wellbeing.

**Consider this scenario**

It’s a cold, rainy morning and the bus is late, again; it’s the third time this week and you start to feel yourself getting annoyed. You have an important meeting today and you think you’ll probably be late. Your irritation grows and you wonder how much longer you’re going to have to wait. Perhaps you should have cycled. You start to think how hopeless the public transport system is. This then reminds you that fares are due to rise and you start to think about how you’re going to afford this. As the feelings of anxiety grow (you’re going to be late, financial worries) you start to berate yourself for not cycling in, and your agitation increases. You wonder whether you’ll be in any fit state for the meeting once you do finally get there, and wish you could just crawl back to bed.

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A mindful response to this scenario might be:

It’s a cold, rainy morning and the bus is late, again; it’s the third time this week and you start to feel yourself getting annoyed. You notice your heart beating slightly quicker and a tightening sensation in your shoulders and abdomen. You notice the low noise of the traffic and the slushy sound of the tyres on the road, and children’s voices. You notice the tingling sensation of the cold air on your nose and the wet of the rain on your face. You feel your weight sinking into your shoes, supported by the ground. You notice your thoughts, wondering again if you will be late, and the sensation in your abdomen growing tighter. You are consciously turning your attention to what is happening inside you, beginning to acknowledge your experience, as it is.

First, you relax into your breathing, finding that a source of calm and grounding. Then, you decide to sense into the feelings of worry and anxiety, giving them space inside, acknowledging them without trying to sort them out or make them go away. You are curious and kindly towards yourself, understanding that your anxiety is, at root, an attempt to protect and support you. After some moments, you notice you are feeling lighter and happier and, although your thoughts have come back, you find yourself chatting to your colleagues in your head, and usefully thinking through what you will say at the meeting.

Mindfulness, then, is not about good or bad experiences, or right or wrong ways of doing things. It is much more about the wholeness of events as we experience them (whatever their size or intensity), allowing ourselves to be with that,
however it is. In this way, although we may not be able to choose what happens or how we feel, we are more able to respond creatively to ourselves and the world.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, one of the leading experts in the field, says of mindfulness:

‘It is really about paying attention, about facing the actuality of things. It’s a new way of being in relationship with one’s experience. It draws on your own internal resources and offers great potential for learning, growing and healing. It helps us live lives that are more authentic and accepting.’

Qualities of mindful awareness

Non-judgment

Moving away from judging our thoughts and sensations as good or bad, allowing whatever arises to be there, just as it is without judgement.

Acceptance

Being as best as you can with whatever ‘is’ - ‘It is how it is’. Accepting thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Not bracing against them or resisting them but softening and turning towards them. Whatever is present is present – trying to pretend otherwise can be futile and set up greater distress and anxiety.

Beginner’s mind

Each moment and experience is new, no matter how many times we have done the same thing before - eaten the same food, walked the same route or breathed a breath. No matter how much we ‘think’ we know, our ‘knowledge’ can sometimes get in the way of our direct experiencing of things as they actually are in the present moment.

Patience

Honouring the natural rhythm of emergence and evolution, being patient with yourself through the learning process, not pushing, not forcing. There is nothing aggressive about mindfulness.

Letting go

Everything passes, whether we like it or not, both the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’. Not attempting to hold on to thoughts or feelings or sensations, being with them as they come and as they go, opening one’s self to the ebb and flow.

Trust

Holding the belief of our own inner wisdom, allowing yourself to become more fully yourself, rather than attempting to become more like somebody else. We are the best person to be us.

Non-striving

Not trying to get somewhere or achieve something in particular which can take us away from our direct experience
– ‘When I’m more relaxed then I’ll be ok’.

(Adapted from ‘Full Catastrophe Living’ by Jon Kabat-Zinn⁵)

**Learning mindfulness**

Meditation is about being with one’s experience, just as it is, and mindfulness teaches us several different ways to do this. Learning to meditate is a practice, much like learning a language or taking up a sport for fitness and wellbeing. You will need to practise over time to fully discover its benefits. One of the ways you can learn mindfulness is by joining one of the free courses or classes for Cambridge students that run during term time.

*Mindfulness skills for students*

An 8-week course that teaches you several different kinds of mindfulness meditations. You are encouraged to spend some time every day practising what you learn in the classes, supported by audio tapes, class handouts and the course book, ‘Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World’ by Mark Williams & Danny Penman (Piatkus, 2011).

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Mindfulness for exams and deadlines

Individual one-off sessions for anyone new to mindfulness, or for students who would like to refresh their mindfulness practice. Sessions cover aspects of exam and deadline pressure, such as how to stay calm, sleep better, improve your focus and make productive decisions.

Cambridge University Mindfulness Society

The student Mindfulness Society has a termly programme including talks, films and social events, and a regular practice session to support people who have already learned mindfulness and want to continue. Join the society’s mailing list or check out Cambridge University Mindfulness Society on Twitter, Facebook or Moodle: www.vle.cam.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=138631

For more information on any of the above, as well as information on mindfulness books, apps and guided practice on the internet, please see the Mindfulness at Cam website: www.cambridgestudents.cam.ac.uk/welfare-and-wellbeing/mindfulness-cam.

See also the University Counselling Service leaflet How to be Mindful