How to be Mindful

Why be mindful?

Do you want to discover what mindfulness is? Well, the best way to find out is to do some.

Many students find mindfulness a helpful way to deal with the pressures and expectations of a full-on student life. Students tell us that mindfulness makes a difference because:

- They feel more resilient, more able to deal with pressure and overwhelm
- Deadlines are met more easily and efficiently
- Difficult decisions are reached more smoothly
- Anxieties and worries have less ‘hold’ and diminish
- Happier and calmer feelings come to the forefront
- Life seems more enjoyable, satisfying and interesting

This leaflet describes mindfulness exercises you can try right now. These are mini-meditations which will give you a (small) taste of mindfulness practice. You can do them by yourself. Or you can do them with friends, with one of you reading the bullet points out loud while the other(s) meditate. Read slowly, leaving at least 30 seconds between each prompt.

Our minds naturally go in and out of focus, so whenever you’ve noticed your mind has wandered off (which may
happen often), give special attention to the moment when you become aware again – be curious about it, relish it. Then, decide afresh what you wish to do: whether to come back to the exercise, or to stop. Or if you wish, spend time with your thoughts and daydreams. A common misconception is that unintentionally drifting off is a mistake – whereas in fact it’s part of the process of calming down.

Everyday mindfulness

Being mindful means being aware. It’s the opposite of forgetting – losing track of where you are, what you are doing; getting caught up and entangled inside your thoughts and feelings. Being aware is the first step to being yourself at your best. Being aware, you can make considered and creative choices in your day. But mindfulness is not a sharp, self-critical kind of awareness. When we ‘mind’ someone or something, we feel genuinely caring and appreciative. Here is one way you can practice mindful awareness in everyday life.

- Pause wherever you are, whatever you are doing – stop for a few moments
- Look about you, notice what you see with fresh eyes
- Listen gently to the many sounds, far and near, high or low, rough and smooth
- Notice your sense of touch and smell, becoming alive to all your senses
- Feel ‘from within’ how your body feels and moves; do this in a kindly way, without trying to change it: it is just how it is right now
• Sense into your feelings and emotions, without trying to solve or understand: they have their reasons for being as they are

• Gently acknowledge what you find: “Here I am.” “This is what’s here.”

• As you go back to your usual activities, notice if you feel any different.

Grounding meditation

Learning to feel grounded, centred and whole in yourself is another aspect of mindfulness. You can do this mini-meditation anywhere, at any time, whether standing, sitting or lying down:

• Take time to settle, stretch, yawn; to become aware of your body as it is right now

• Feel your feet on the floor, or the weight of your body on a chair

• Notice where your body is supported by the earth, trusting the earth’s solidity

• As much as you can, enjoy the simplicity of being bodily present, here and now, just as you are

• Acknowledge your body-being kindly: “Here I am.” Or, “This is me.”

• Maybe repeat a phrase softly to yourself, such as, “Feeling my feet on the ground.” “My body supported by the earth.”
Becoming aware: meditation with the breath

As you ground and settle yourself, you may find your awareness naturally growing and broadening. You can use this fine-tuned awareness to help you calm and relax. One mindful approach is to follow your breathing. You may find it easier if you close your eyes. You are not trying to sleep, and you may even feel more awake (although feeling sleepy is also common). Choose for yourself whether to sit upright and alert in a chair, or to lie on your back on the floor, on a blanket or rug. There is no one right way (the effect will be different, that’s all, because your body posture affects your mind). You may wish to set a timer for five minutes, doing less if you want to stop, or more if you wish. Create a quiet, calm space before you begin, by turning off your phone, laptop, radio or TV.

- Settle yourself on a chair, or lying on your back on a rug or blanket on the floor
- Keep yourself warm, with muscles and joints uncrossed, and in a position where you feel relaxed, yet alert and alive
- Let your eyes close when they wish, or stay open and softly focused
- Spend time settling and arriving, sensing into your whole body
- Gently let your attention rest with your breathing – even if that is very subtle or hardly noticeable
- Breathe naturally as you are breathing at this moment
(not trying to change it to match your ideas of how you ‘should’ be breathing)

• Sense the way your body responds and moves as you breathe. Is there a part of the breathing cycle, or a place in your body, where you feel aware of your breath (e.g. your belly, your nostrils)?

• Is there a part of the breathing that you particularly enjoy?

• If your mind wanders off (which may happen often), decide afresh what you wish to do. You might come back to your breathing. Or you might prefer to stay with a sense of your body as a whole, or to listen gently to the sounds playing around you. You might even choose to spend time with your thoughts and daydreams instead.

**Being present – with whatever is there**

Mindfulness will help you to cope, and to thrive, because it teaches you to be ever more at ease with your experience, whatever it is. Whatever you are aware of, you learn to be present with it, just as it is right now. Not trying to change your experience may seem strange at first (perhaps even contradictory, if life feels bad). But by letting things be as they are, mindfulness teaches us how to respond more calmly and spaciously, with feelings of care and kindness. We may not be able to change what’s happening around us, and we can’t always change our feelings within us. But we can learn to respond differently, more resourcefully, to what is happening, whatever it is, inside or out.
Before doing this exercise, take time to settle and arrive (use the grounding meditation described above):

- When you have grounded and centred yourself (even a little), tune in to yourself as a whole

- Explore your overall sense of everything that’s here, right now (this may include your environment, your body, your feelings, your thoughts and impulses – or a felt sense of these altogether)

- If there are things you don’t want to feel or think, give yourself permission ‘not to go there’ (remember that even bad feelings are here, at root, to protect you)

- Give empathy to whatever you notice (e.g. if you want to change how you are, acknowledge your wish to change with understanding and kindness)

- Let everything inside you live and breathe – try saying “hello” to what’s there

- Gently breathe into any area of tightness or tension, as if your breathing too can be a soothing presence, acknowledging what is there

- Place your hand comfortingly on places of tightness or pain (e.g. your heart or your belly)

- Say a phrase softly to yourself, such as, “This is what’s here.” “This is how things are, right now.”
Finishing your meditation practice

If you have practised these mini-meditation exercises, they may not seem to have an obvious effect at the time – especially if your thoughts and feelings feel as frantic as ever. But many people notice (sometimes later in the day) that the practice has made a difference. So always finish your meditation gently and spaciously, for example:

- Take time to feel yourself as a whole, noticing how your practice builds up, which often starts by acknowledging just very slight differences or subtle shifts from the way you were at the start
- Accept that this is how you are right now (trying not to expect changes, allowing change to take happen in its own time)
- Broaden your awareness to include the environment around you (city sounds, people, nature, etc)
- Gently wriggle your fingers and toes, stretching, yawning – before you open your eyes
- If your eyes were closed, leave them closed a little longer still, and allow them to open in their own time.
Learning to meditate

The meditations described in this leaflet give only the briefest flavour of what you find in a full session or course. Learning to be mindful involves a dramatic shift from our busy *Doing* mode into *Being* mode. In *Being* mode, our natural human qualities are replenished and renewed, and able to shine more brightly. We become more resourceful, more resilient; better able to be ourselves at our best.

To learn about mindfulness, Cambridge University students are able attend one of the free courses or classes that run during term time. For more information, visit the Mindfulness at Cam website: [www.cambridgestudents.cam.ac.uk/welfare-and-wellbeing/mindfulness-cam](http://www.cambridgestudents.cam.ac.uk/welfare-and-wellbeing/mindfulness-cam). Here you will also find information on mindfulness books, apps and guided practice on the internet.

See also the University Counselling Service leaflet *What is Mindfulness?*