Counselling and Wellbeing

Mindfulness

What is Mindfulness?

“Mindfulness is about observation without criticism; being compassionate with yourself. When unhappiness or stress hover overhead, rather than taking it all personally, you learn to treat them as if they were black clouds in the sky, and to observe them with friendly curiosity as they drift past. In essence, mindfulness allows you to catch negative thought patterns before they tip you into a downward spiral. It begins the process of putting you back in control of your life.”


In recent years there has been an explosion of interest in Mindfulness in both academic and the popular press and numerous research studies have highlighted the positive effects on the body of regular mindfulness. Mindfulness practice involves paying attention to the present moment by using simple meditation and breathing techniques that enable awareness of thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. Whilst it draws on Buddhist meditation, it is a non-religious form of meditation practice that encourages increased self-awareness, awareness of the world around you, and hopefully facilitates a calm mind and the ability to pay attention on purpose.

What are the benefits of Mindfulness?

- Reduction of anxiety and stress levels, depression and exhaustion;
- Improves working memory, creativity, attention span and reaction speeds;
- Enhances brain function;
- Improves the immune system, heart and circulatory health;
- Improves sleep quality

How does it work?
The brain is constantly growing and developing and able to adapt in response to everyday experiences, not just life-changing ones. Regions of the brain that are related to memory, emotion regulation and cognition amongst others have been demonstrated through MRI scans to show changes in people who are even only just starting to practice mindfulness. We are thus not stuck with unhelpful patterns of thinking or behaviours, but are able to change them through regular practice.

How do I do it?
There are many excellent apps, audio files and videos on-line that you can use to guide you in your meditation – have a listen to a number as it is important to find the right voice in order for you to relax and feel comfortable listening. Below is an example of a typical short meditation script.

The Three Minute Breathing Space

The three minute breathing space is a brief practice and can be used when we find our thoughts or mood spiralling in a negative direction. The first thing we do with this practice because we want to come into the present moment quickly is to take a very definite posture. The back is erect, but not stiff, letting the body express a sense of being present and awake. Now, closing your eyes, if this feels comfortable, take the first step of becoming aware of what is going on with you right now. Becoming conscious of what is going through your mind: what thoughts are around? Here again, as best you can, just noting thoughts as mental events…so we note them, and then we note the feelings that are around at the moment…in particular, turning toward any sense of discomfort or unpleasant feelings. So, rather than try to push them away or shut them out, just notice them, perhaps saying, “Ah there you are; that’s how it is right now.” Similarly, with sensations in the body… are there sensations of tensions, of holding, of letting go? And again, becoming aware of them, simply noting whatever is arising in this moment.

So, you have a sense of what is going on right now, having stepped out of automatic pilot. The second step is to collect your awareness by focusing on a single act - the movement of the breath. So now really gather yourself, focusing your attention down in the movements of the abdomen, the rise and fall of the belly as the breath moves in and

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Practicing mindfulness is a bit like taking regular mental exercise: the benefits can be seen from regular practice, using time set aside each day in order to establish meditation as part of your everyday routine. However, unlike going to the gym, don’t try to push yourself to your limits; be kind and compassionate to yourself and just practice for 10 minutes each day in order to build up your skill.

**Mindfulness is not just about meditation…**

It is also about paying attention to the world around you. For example, when did you last walk to a lecture without earphones in/talking to a friend/using your phone/rushing? Just taking time to pay attention to the sound of the wind, the traffic, the bird, the feel of the rain on your face, the feel of your muscles, your feet on the ground….all of this can help to ground you in the moment and enable you to achieve a sense of wellbeing and calm.

Another way to practice mindfulness is to pay attention to everyday activities such as brushing your teeth, doing the washing up or eating. For example, how often do you eat a bar of chocolate or packet of crisps and get almost to the end without feeling satiated, or that you couldn’t remember having eating it all? Paying attention to each mouthful can help not only increase your enjoyment of your food, but also by eating mindfully, you might also find that you are less inclined to ‘mindless’ grazing. You might like to try ‘The Chocolate Meditation’ overleaf.

**The Chocolate Meditation**

Choose some chocolate - either a type that you’ve never tried before or one that you have not eaten recently. It might be dark and flavoursome, organic or fair-trade or, perhaps, cheap and trashy. The important thing is to choose a type you wouldn't normally eat or that you consume only rarely.

- Open the packet. Inhale the aroma. Let it sweep over you.
- Break off a piece and look at it. Really let your eyes drink in what it looks like, examining every nook and cranny.
- Pop it in your mouth. See if it’s possible to hold it on your tongue and let it melt, noticing any tendency to suck at it. Chocolate has over 300 different flavours. See if you can sense some of them.
- If you notice your mind wandering while you do this, simply notice where it went, then gently escort it back to the present moment.

Classes on Mindfulness are also offered on Campus – check the Counselling and Wellbeing webpages, or the Chaplaincy for up-to-date information on these.

If you have experienced more than two episodes of clinical depression, you can also be referred for a free NHS Mindfulness course via Berkshire Talking Therapies (http://www.talkingtherapies.berkshire.nhs.uk/)

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