

SOLE PHILOSOPHY

Mindfulness

Hands up -

- Have you ever felt like a human doing rather than a being?
- Have you ever got to the end of the day and wondered what you did today you were so busy?
- Have you ever got home from work and wondered how you got there?
- Have you ever gone for a biscuit and ended up eating the whole packet?
Or taken a glass then ended up drinking the whole bottle of wine?
(No – well maybe that's just me then...)
- Have you ever felt the experience of 'being in the zone' when life just flows smoothly?
- Have you ever needed to go to sleep but your brain is still switched on?
Have you ever wondered what you can do to rest your body?
- Do you have an inner critic who tells you off when times are tough or which demands perfection?
- Do you often find yourself in a bad mood thinking negative thoughts?
- Do you find difficulty in moving between work and home mode?
- Do you live in your head, thinking your way out of problems?
- Do you over-analyse or fret about things that may never happen?
- Do you do practice yoga or pilates?
- Have you ever heard of mindfulness?
- Do you practice it?

Well the good news is that you can already do mindfulness – it's a simple technique for bringing yourself into the present moment by following the sensations of breathing in and out. You have probably already experienced a state of mindfulness, but you didn't know that is what it was.

You don't need special kit or a space to do mindfulness in, or a cushion to sit on

- You can do it standing up, sitting down, lying down or moving,
- With eyes open or closed
- And all you need to know how to do is breathe...
- And to do that with a playful curiosity and kindness to yourself before anyone else and the world after

MINDFULNESS is the AWARENESS that comes from PAYING ATTENTION on PURPOSE in the PRESENT moment to things just as they are NON-JUDGMENTALLY.

(Jon Kabat-Zinn 1990)

Investigations into the modern secular art of mindfulness relate more to clinical neuroscience than to understanding its ancient roots in Buddhist culture – they were just the first to write it down following the experiences of one man 2,500 years ago Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha), who said don't just listen to me go and try it out for yourself.

We spend our lives living in our heads, using our brains to think up new ways to get out of life's troubles. Neuroscience tells us that how we relate to gloomy self-talk has a direct impact on our health. But the brain can't solve a problem like an emotion – it just wasn't built that way - so Williams Teasdale and Segal (who created MBCT) coined the terms DOING mode and the BEING mode of mind.

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The aim of mindfulness is not to intentionally clear the mind of thoughts, it is to understand how the mind works and to notice how unwittingly it ties itself into knots and creates emotional suffering, anxiety, stress, unhappiness and exhaustion.

By learning how to BE with what is going on for you, rather than trying to resist it or push it away, we can experience the emotion fully and so our bodies can process it and come out of the other side. As the Buddhists say "this too will pass".

Or you may be more familiar with it's modern cousin "shit happens". Mindfulness does not try and make everything negative into a positive, or to create an opportunity from someone's downfall. Mindfulness just removes the struggle and suffering after something untoward happens and provides the space to be creative about finding solutions. It teaches us to observe how thoughts feelings and emotions rise and fall like waves on the sea, and in the calm spaces provide us with creative insight. In this way we can rest our bodies, even if the mind is still on overdrive.

So learning how to process our emotions is a matter for the whole body, not just the head. Ruby Wax (who also trained to teach MBCT at Oxford like me) puts it that "if you pay attention to the sensations in your body you get a full readout of the emotional state you are in". From there we can pay attention to what is going on inside the body and using mindfulness skills we can learn to nurture ourselves with kindness and take appropriate actions to take care of ourselves.

MBCT is a combination of the ancient art of mindfulness with cognitive behavioural therapy CBT and is NICE recommended for recurrent depression although it helps lots of different issues such as -

Depression Generalised Anxiety Disorder Stress
support for carer's burnout and to enhance effectiveness in the workplace

That being said it isn't really a therapy at all – we don't do mindfulness "in order to" fix anything – we don't go into the content of the thoughts, like they do in talk therapy, we just note that thoughts are there and non-judgmentally return our attention back to the sensations of breathing in and breathing out.

Sounds simple doesn't it... So what's the catch?

- Practice is necessary!

When learning any new skill, you need to practice it little and often to create new neural pathways in the brain. Just like you would if you were learning to play an instrument or speak a new language. And what you practice you get good at ...

It turns out that like learning how to walk or talk another language or play the piano it takes a lot of effort at the first instance to master, but after then the brain takes over and turns the new neural patterns into a superhighway just like a habit, making it easy with little effort. Whether that's doing exercise or learning how to paint, practising things can be helpful, but the problem is that it works the other way too – if you practice drinking you'll become an alcoholic...

So what can I expect to learn through practising Mindfulness? Read on...

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You will cultivate a new relationship to experience

- Step out of automatic pilot
- Using all the senses to gain awareness
- See thoughts as mental events "metacognitive awareness"
- Adopt an attitude of interest, curiosity, friendliness to experience
- Accept what is here, even if its unwanted
- Notice the wandering mind, acknowledge where the mind went
- Return the wandering mind back to the intended point of focus
- With kindness and compassion towards the self

And approach difficulty exploring it through its expression in the body

- Notice habitual patterns of thinking and feeling and how the body reacts
- Handle each moment as best you can
- What do I need for myself right now? How can I best take care of myself right now?
- Become aware of reactions that tend to deepen distress and contribute to its persistence
- Observe thoughts without reacting and acknowledge them

The best way to learn mindfulness is part of a group led by a trained MBCT teacher traditionally taught over an 8-week period in 2-hour long classes. Learning this way, you get to see how your learning is reflected by others progress, and the class is a closed group, so confidentiality is always observed. Unlike talk therapy we don't go into feelings from past or future related events – we simply talk about the practice we have just done in class.

You can also choose to learn mindfulness in a one to one setting, which will still take 8 weeks of an hour-long session, but you can choose when each session is taken rather than needing to attend each of the 8 weeks of the group. However, eight weeks is a long commitment to learning a new skill if you just want to try it out, so there are other things you can do with mindfulness to help yourself before you decide to sign up –

- Plug into apps - like headspace or calm
- Read books you can find in the local bookstore like "the Art of Breathing"* or "Finding Peace in a Frantic World" by Dr Mark Williams and Dr Danny Penman. Or find any of Ruby Wax's latest books on mindfulness
- Join a meditation "sitting group" to practice, like the drop-in class at the Green Door Clinic in central London, or my Monday & Thursday noon zoom group
- Go to a one-day weekend retreat set up in a place of calm like the Green Door Clinic



About Sophie Jane Miller

I first learned to practice mindfulness following a stress related breakdown. Mindfulness helped me to recover and return to work as a lawyer. The same stresses surround me but I now know how to listen to my body rather than living solely in my head and relying totally on my intellect. As a result of that life event I learned how to teach others on the Masters degree course in Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) at the world renowned Oxford Mindfulness Centre, part of the Oxford University Department of Psychiatry. My mission is to help others learn this simple tool for living, so that no one need get as ill as I did before they find for themselves what wonderful things living mindfully can reveal about our everyday lives.

<https://smile.amazon.co.uk/Mindfulness-practical-guide-finding-frantic/>
<https://smile.amazon.co.uk/Art-Breathing-Secret-Living-Mindfully/>