

SOLE PHILOSOPHY

Mindfulness

MINDFULNESS is the AWARENESS that comes from PAYING ATTENTION on PURPOSE in the PRESENT moment to things just as they are NON-JUDGMENTALLY.
(Kabat-Zinn, Williams, Teasdale, Segal 1994)

Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy or MBCT is a third wave of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and uses both CBT and secular practices related to Buddhism from over 2,500 years ago. The work you will be doing in MBCT is based on the latest psychological research on what factors make people vulnerable to inadvertently maintain difficult moods such as depression and anxiety, resulting in poor performance of tasks.

The good news is that mindfulness is a very simple tool – you can and have already used it in your life, even though you didn't know that that's what you were doing. It's entirely portable, you don't need anything special to wear or place to sit, or even quietness around you - you can do mindfulness walking, sitting, lying down, with your eyes open, or closed. It's as simple as breathing in and out. The good news is that you do not have to be unwell to benefit from choosing to live mindfully. We can do this to enhance our lives as to help us deal with pain, stress or anxiety. If you can play an instrument or sport to any degree of competence you will have benefited from living in the present moment as part of a state of flow, or being in the zone, getting your mind out of the way and just concentrating on the physical actions required to play.

The other thing that mindfulness will introduce you to is kindness to your inner critic. You have been doing the best you can, and things you have tried may have worked to a certain extent, but they may not have helped as much as you had hoped they might. Because you have had no other options, it has felt risky to stop doing what you habitually do. However, some of the ways we try to cope are rather like digging to get out of a hole – the hole just gets bigger and we start to beat ourselves up for how badly we are performing.

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 cocreators of MBCT Professors Williams, Teasdale and Segal, coined the terms DOING mode and the BEING mode of mind. 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 getting out of this thought mess we can start to perform actions in a zen like manner "in the zone" like sportsmen.

By learning how to BE with what is going on for you, and to be KIND to ourselves 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.**

There is no place to get to, no special thing to be done, or special way of doing things – in Mindfulness we use our attention to light up everyday things in the spotlight of the present moment and by doing so we connect with the little things in life which can in turn bring us greater happiness and good mood. Life is going on all around us, and nothing will change – just your perception of what is happening around you moment by moment. You will fall awake.

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Here are some of the things that learning and practicing Mindfulness on a daily basis can help you connect and acknowledge new things within your everyday experience.

Cultivate a new relationship to experience

Step out of automatic pilot – move from DOING to BEING

Handle each moment as best you can with BEGINNER'S MIND

Notice habitual patterns of thinking and feeling and how the body reacts

Use all five senses to gain awareness

See thoughts as mental events "metacognitive awareness" rather than a fact or the truth

Observe and acknowledge thoughts without reacting to them

Adopt an attitude of interest, curiosity, friendliness to your experience

Accept what is here, even if its unwanted

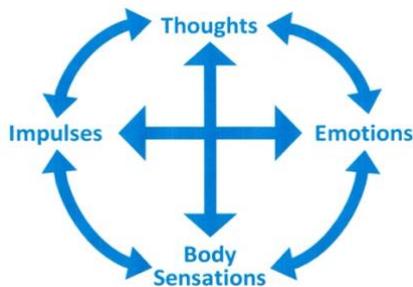
Notice the wandering mind, acknowledge where the mind went

Return the wandering mind back to the intended point of focus with kindness and compassion

Approach difficulty and explore it through its expression in the body and emotions

What do I need for myself right now? How can I best take care of myself right now?

Become aware of your reactions that tend to deepen distress and contribute to its persistence



A useful way to describe how thoughts, body sensations, actions and emotions affect each other is the hot-cross bun model – the bun itself being the context in which you are living life. This visual image shows us how to pay attention and look into changing one aspect and the others will respond accordingly. In mindfulness we get to choose which one to pay attention to, at any given moment (a thought a body sensation or an emotion) and stand back and watch the rest of the system compensate.

Breaking old habits and making new ones takes practice

Because we will be working to change your well-established habits of mind, you will be putting in a lot of time and effort to creating some new habits and ways of being. The effects of this effort may become apparent only later. In many ways, it is much like learning a new language, learning how to play a musical instrument or a new sport, and even gardening—we have to put in the practice to prepare the ground, plant the seeds, ensure that they are adequately watered and nourished, given space and light to grow and then wait patiently for results. This doesn't come easily, but neuroscience now proves that we can create new neural pathways or habits in just 21 days of doing something repetitively.

Here's some mindful practices you may have tried out with Sophie in a taster session.

You can try these out at home safely. Don't worry – you can't get mindfulness wrong!

Mindful Meditation

There are lots of different types of meditation practice. The state of Mindfulness is most closely related to vipassana or "insight" meditation and involves the study of two things described in Pali words as "sati" mindfulness and "metta" compassion. Again there is no intention that you empty the mind or try and put things out of reach – mindfulness is about the study of paying attention to the world around us (inside and out) and watching the mind wandering (which all minds do) before bringing it back patiently to the focus of what you are concentrating on at this time in this practice (movement/stillness/visual/auditory/touch/taste/smell). The head full of thoughts can be visualized like a snow-globe all shook up, when the thoughts settle in mindfulness meditation then we can reveal our best access to the prefrontal cortex and solve the problem "we are meditating on".

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Purists will tell you that mindfulness is best accessed with your eyes closed in a seated position, not moving. But mindfulness is so much more than sitting meditation (as described above). The time will never be perfect to not be distracted by what is going on around us – so rejoice in that and fall awake to the little things that bring us joy each day – like the feeling of a soft breeze across the face on a spring day, looking up on our daily walk and noticing the trees in blossom or being present to the joy as your dog rushes around on a walk. These too will pass, so pay attention in the present moment and share those joys in life.

Breathing consciously

Getting in touch with the present moment is as easy as taking an intentional breath. In automatic pilot so much of life goes on in and around us without us paying attention to it – we breathe approximately 22,000 times a day. The easiest way to get into the present moment is to stop and take a deep breath in and out. As we intentionally take a deep breath in, we notice how our body moves to accommodate the new oxygen, and to expel the waste carbon dioxide on the out breath. We can't remember what the breath felt like 5 minutes ago and we can't imagine a future breath – we can only breathe in the present tense. Scientists tell us that by taking a deep intentional breath in, we are exercising the Vagus nerve (the superhighway from the brain to our body organs) and by doing so we move from fight & flight (where the sympathetic nervous system is hijacked by the triggering alarm in the amygdala) to rest and digest (the parasympathetic nervous system allowing access to the whole brain's databanks to resolve that issue). The term BEGINNER'S MIND comes from us getting access to the whole experience of something – instead of being on automatic pilot as we have done many times before, and without clouding the action with what we expect to be there, or how we think it is going we can become present to how it actually is in the moving process of life. Using the beginner's mind teaches us zen in each and every moment.

Allowing difficult thoughts, feelings and body sensations just to BE AS THEY ARE and watch them slowly change with time

This is a good practice for being with chronic pain or illness. As we start to pay attention to our pain, using the spotlight of the present moment, rather than attempting to numb the pain or turn it off in some way, we begin to notice how it ebbs and flows and changes over time. The Buddhist maxim "This too will pass" allows us to pay attention to times when things are good as well as bad, so we can rejoice in being pain free sometimes, or choose to pay attention to the other knee that doesn't hurt so much as a way to help us be with the pain in the other knee. The idea here is to be kind to ourselves ...

Kindfulness

How often is it that we berate ourselves for forgetting to do something? Or call ourselves or others names? Far too often. This neologism allows us to remember that being mindful means that we should be kind to ourselves and others in our moments of suffering. The Buddhists tell the story of the two arrows. Pain is obligatory, but emotional suffering is optional. The first arrow causes the pain to be there, but we shoot the second arrow of emotional suffering into the same wound all by ourselves as we say "why me... if only... it's all his fault..." With mindfulness we can get on and work out how to heal the pain, by being kind to ourselves and compassionate that we have just been injured so don't expect too much of me right now...

Walking/exercise meditation

This one is good for anxiety and patience. Paying attention mindfully can help us to be with our bodies. You may already do yoga or other Chinese arts of movement. If you do you will know already that what you are doing is paying minute attention to the muscles in the body moving and stretching during the exercise session. By becoming aware of what our body is doing during movement of any kind (and yes that includes walking the dog) we are falling awake to the world around us. Try starting slowly, picking up one foot and noticing how the body shifts the weight over to the other foot so you can pick it up and slowly move forwards.

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By paying attention to each of the muscles in our bodies move we can be present to our exercise. If you are anxious, on the other hand, try starting off at a fast pace, then as you become present to your body moving, gradually slow down until you can feel each and every muscle move.

Using all five senses to everyday experience of something using BEGINNER'S MIND

I like to take a **mindful shower** in the morning. Instead of brooding over what the day might hold (the past and the future) and wasting time thinking about things I can't change right now, I now dedicate 5 minutes purely to nourishing myself – one sense at a time - bringing the touch and warmth of the shower on my skin, smelling the scent in the shampoo, paying attention to looking at different places in my body as I wash them, and every time my mind wanders, just noting where it went to and returning to the focus of the exercise – paying attention in the present moment.

You can do this with a **mindful cup of coffee** too – just like the intern in the film “The Devil Wears Prada”. Rather than downing your first cup of the day, try bringing mindful attention to the warmth of the cup in your hands, the aroma of the beverage, thinking about the people and work that has brought this everyday beverage to you this morning, to taking time to really taste the first two or three sips and feeling the warmth spread slowly inside as the liquid goes down into the stomach. Again when the mind wanders, just notice where the thoughts went and bring it back kindly to the focus of the exercise – being present as you sip your chosen beverage. You'll find you no longer need 3 or 4 cups to get that same feeling of wellbeing.

Some recommendations:

Mindfulness is best cultivated with a skilled professional teacher who can guide your practice, and help you understand what is happening. My Favourite go to book for beginners is “The Art of Breathing” by Dr Danny Penman. He co-wrote another book available in the high street stores with MBCT founder Dr Mark Williams called “Finding Peace in a Frantic World”. This book takes you through the 8-week MBCT course traditionally taught in Groups. MBCT can also be taught 1to1.

Disclaimer

Sophie is neither a meditation master nor guru of any sort or sect and will not be preaching or converting people to Buddhism. Neither will you be converted to Buddhism by practicing mindfulness or any meditation. She is however highly trained by Oxford University through their Master of Studies Course in MBCT and is qualified to teach mindfulness and registered with the British Association of Mindfulness Based Activities (BAMBA).

For beginners with any sort of physical or mental ailment we always recommend that your medical doctor, psychologist, or psychiatrist is consulted before embarking. Meditation will never replace your prescription therapies. Meditation effects in the brain are rapid but not permanent, they will remain states of mind unless consistent practice transforms them to traits. You cannot sustain any effect or benefit from meditation unless you practice regularly. What you practice you get good at. So if your practice is rumination, then learning mindfulness may be just for you!

About Sophie Jane



I first learned to practice mindfulness following a stress related breakdown. As a result of that life event I learned how to teach others the skill of mindfulness 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. In addition to a degree in Experimental Psychology from Cambridge University, I am a member of the British Psychological Society and was called to the Bar by Lincoln's Inn working for many years in pharmaceutical 'Life Sciences' law. 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.