

Mindfulness for Stress - Overview

Mindfulness means deliberately attending to and becoming more aware of our experience: of our thoughts, feelings and body sensations. This allows us to clearly perceive thoughts, physical sensations, emotions and events at the moment they occur without reacting in an automatic or habitual way.

By developing a new relationship with the conditions we find ourselves in we begin to respond creatively. Experiences don't overwhelm us and we can remain steady through life's ups and downs.

Mindfulness isn't a cool and detached awareness though - it's warm, gentle, and kind. Towards the end of the course we'll introduce a kindness meditation, which will help you to develop this aspect of mindfulness further. Like mindfulness, kindness has been shown to reduce levels of stress.

During the course we will be engaging in various activities to foster mindfulness and kindness. These include formal meditation practices, as well as small things we can do in the midst of our daily lives, such as doing a routine task mindfully, taking a break, slowing down a little. In particular we'll be using the body sensations and the breath to help develop awareness. The aim of meditation is not to prevent the mind wandering off - which it will do, repeatedly - but to get into the habit of learning to check in with our experience.

The formal meditation is focussed practice at learning to check in, and the informal mindful activities are means to extend that learning into our daily lives. We need both. During the course you are encouraged to try out all the different practices fully, so that at the end of the course you can decide which practices work best for you.

Each week of the course has a theme:

- 1. What One Resists Persists.** Much of our stress is exacerbated by our resistance to unpleasant experience, and what we resist tends to persist. So we are caught in a trap: the more we resist the more it persists! Mindfulness allows us to accept experience rather than reacting to it, which - paradoxically - allows us to let go of it. This lightens our load considerably, allowing us to get on with our life quite happily, even though it's not completely sorted. (And will it *ever* be?)
- 2. Coming to Our Senses.** When we're stressed we naturally try to do something about it, and this usually entails thinking - problem-solving. The trouble with this strategy is that it doesn't work very well! In fact it's more often than not counter-productive. Thinking about our stress keeps us stressed! An important aspect of mindfulness practice is to pay more attention to our senses - body sensations, sounds, sights, tastes - which brings us back to our actual experience in the moment. This greatly reduces stress.

3. **A Penny for Your Thoughts.** Thoughts are one of the main causes of stress, trapping us in a loop in which we try to solve our problems, while the very act of trying to solve the problem keeps us tied to the problem. But what to do? We can't just stop thinking! One of the skills you'll learn is to notice thoughts as they arise in your mind and let them go. This is a liberating insight for people who attend the course.
4. **Your Buttons Don't *Have* to be Pressed.** Life, as you know, isn't easy. Financial worries, issues around the way we earn our living and with work colleagues, difficulties in our relationships with family and friends - who doesn't have them? Mindfulness doesn't make everything nice and smooth and easy. Rather, it enables us to develop skills and inner resources to cope better - in fact to flourish - in the midst of the sometimes difficult and messy aspects of life. Learning how to be with unpleasant, difficult experiences without allowing them to 'press our buttons' is a key skill that you'll learn.
5. **The Pleasure of Small Things.** Not that life is unremittingly difficult either! There's pleasure, enjoyment, beauty and love out there too. When we experience some difficulty in life we have a tendency to focus on it, often to the exclusion of all else, and especially the good things that are happening. On this week of the course we encourage you to widen your gaze a little and notice the small pleasures of life, which often go unremarked - the sun coming from behind a cloud and warming your face, a vase of yellow and blue flowers, a compliment from a friend, a job well done. We're not trying to 'think positive', just trying to level the playing field. By noticing the good things and letting them affect us we're working against what neuro-scientists call the inbuilt 'negativity bias' in the brain.
6. **The Tender Gravity of Kindness.** In a way the word mindfulness gives a wrong impression. People often associate the mind with the head, with the brain, with cool, analytical thought. Mindfulness certainly isn't that. It's simply awareness, and not a cool and detached awareness either - it's warm, gentle, and kind. We emphasise this all the way through the course but in this week we bring it right into centre stage and introduce a kindness meditation.
7. **Meanwhile the World Goes On.** When we're having a hard time it's easy to become preoccupied with our suffering, and this can be part of the trap we can find ourselves in. In the last part of the course we take the kindness meditation further, bringing others to mind and cultivating a warm, gentle, kindly awareness towards them too. This can be difficult, especially if some of them are the causes of your current stress. However, research has shown that developing a more kindly attitude towards others has a very beneficial effect on the state of our mind *and* body, including the reduction of stress.

- 8. Let Life Live Through You.** On the final week of the course we review everything we've learned and practiced, and we look to the future. The course only works to the extent that we practice. Now that we've come to the end of the course, how will you continue to practice and continue to benefit from it? We discuss ways of keeping inspired and reviving our inspiration when it flags. And we encourage you to look after yourself in the future. This isn't 'selfish', it's sensible. After all, if you're going to be any help to others, you have to be in pretty good shape yourself!

Each week we introduce a practice or develop one that you've learned previously.

The **Body Scan**, which helps us to pay attention to the various sensations in the body, enabling a more 'embodied' awareness of ourselves than we usually have. Paying attention to the body in this way has the effect of quietening down our thoughts.

In the **Mindfulness of Breathing** we rest our awareness on the sensations of the breath entering and leaving the body. This has a calming effect, stimulating the parasympathetic nervous system.

Mindful Movement is a kind of moving meditation. We do some simple stretches, not so much to get fit as to really pay attention to what each movement feels like. Like the Body Scan and Mindfulness of Breathing, this allows us to get out of our head and to have a more 'embodied' awareness of ourselves.

The Kindness Meditation is a development of the *feeling* aspect of mindfulness. Many people are critical of themselves and this is an added source of stress. If you can never live up to your high expectations, will you ever be able to relax? Research has shown that being strongly self critical does not help us to change for the better. On the contrary, developing kindness towards ourselves - and self compassion when we're suffering - helps to bring about the changes we wish to make. Then, when we've learned how to be kind to ourselves, we extend that to others. Kindness to self and others develops emotional resilience and is a great source of happiness.

One Small Thing. In addition to the more formal practices listed above, each week we introduce a small - 'micro' - practice that you can do in the midst of your everyday life. Doing something mindfully rather than without awareness, doing something slowly rather than habitually quickly, taking breaks (or at least a break!), accepting a difficult experience, noticing and letting in the good things that happen, trying to hold everything that happens within a wider perspective, responding rather than reacting to things and people.

We can't always choose what happens to us or how other people behave, but we *can* learn to have more choice in how we respond to life's events.