

Looking After Our Wellbeing:

An introduction to Mindfulness during lockdown for young people and adults.

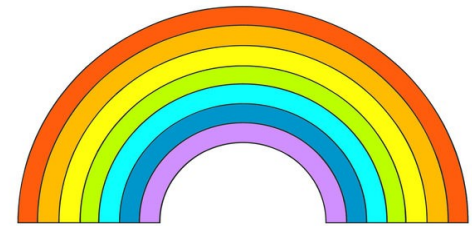
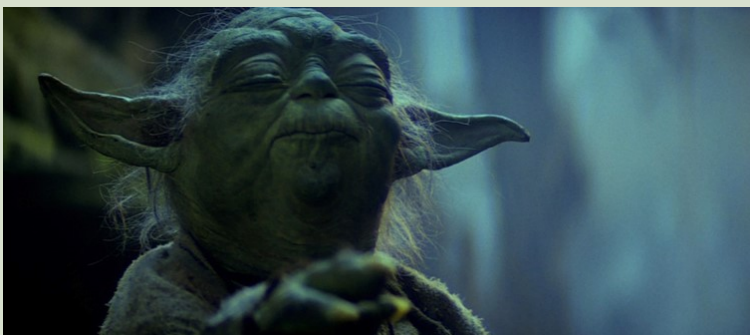
Psychology and Wellbeing Service

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We are all experiencing changes in our lives currently, and considering what we can do to look after ourselves and our own mental health and wellbeing. Time is precious, but on the days when you feel like you can move towards taking greater care of your own wellbeing, try to plan to include something from each of the 'Five Ways to Wellbeing' (developed by the New Economics Foundation).



It is true, there are many options available to us when thinking about what new thing we want to learn, or how we can take notice, but Mindfulness is one of the ways in which we can possibly do both.



During this unique time we are all considering the changes we need to make to keep ourselves and our families safe. Check out our range of wellbeing grab packs online, offering helpful tips on a range of subjects including the importance of sleep, parenting children with ADHD, wellbeing for children and many more.

In this grab pack:

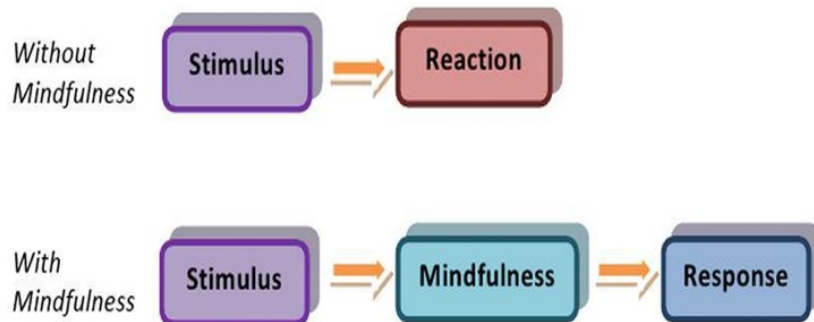
- What is mindfulness?
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What is mindfulness?

“Mindfulness means paying **attention** in a particular way: on **purpose**, in the **present moment**, and **non-judgementally**”

(John Karat-Zinn 1994)

Paying attention to our present moment in a mindful way allows us to make choices, based on our values (those things most important to us) rather than reacting automatically, based on our thoughts, emotions and urges.



The emotional brain (the science bit)



The most primitive brain, our brain stem, is sometimes called the lizard brain. In this diagram it is represented by the fleshy part of the palm.

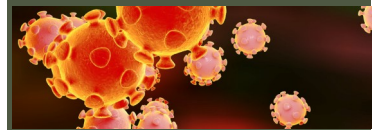
The thumb, tucked away, represents the mammalian brain (or limbic part).

The fingers represent the neocortex or the primate brain.

One of the areas affected by mindfulness is represented by the finger nails of the middle two fingers. These are part of the prefrontal cortex but have connections with both the limbic system (thumb) and the brain stem. Mindfulness practice strengthens these connections and helps with integration, and therefore, regulation.

Mindfulness during lockdown

The measures that have been put in place during the Coronavirus pandemic, such as social isolating and physical distancing, can feel very challenging. It can lead to a whole range of emotions such as loneliness, fear, frustration, boredom and sadness. At the same time it is an opportunity to slow down; to be grateful for many things usually taken for granted; and to meet these challenging emotions with acceptance, kindness and patience. This is where mindfulness can help.



Mindfulness, wellbeing and safety

There have been thousands of research studies demonstrating the effectiveness of mindfulness training for wellbeing, including reducing stress and anxiety, improving mood and lowering chronic pain. Despite this, like any wellbeing practice, mindfulness isn't for everyone.



Grounding and anchoring

Grounding ourselves can be particularly helpful when feeling overwhelmed. It allows us to shift attention from our thinking part of our brain and into our sensing part of the brain. Awareness of our direct experience, rather through the lens of [often unhelpful] thinking, can prevent difficult emotions from escalating.

Consider being on board a boat at sea. You can see a hurricane is approaching and there is no way you can escape in time. What you can do is drop an anchor to hold the boat steady until the hurricane comes and passes.

Examples of grounding / anchoring include: pushing your feet into the floor; pushing palms together; noticing the environment, using all of your senses.

Using the senses

5 things you can see

4 things you can feel / touch

3 things you can hear

2 things you can smell or imagine the smell of.

1 thing you can taste or imagine the taste of.

Mindfulness is not...

Relaxation - Mindfulness is not about creating a particular state. The intention of mindfulness is not to relax but rather to be aware.

Relaxation can sometimes be a by-product of mindfulness and being aware of that is good. It is just as mindful, however, to be aware of feeling anxious, angry or sad. As long as we respond with curiosity, acceptance and kindness we are being mindful.

Stopping thoughts / blanking the mind - We cannot blank the mind and the more we try the harder it is to do. For example, try everything you can to not think of a white bear...

'What we resist, persists'.

A religious practice - Although mindfulness has its roots in Buddhism, there is no religious content. It can be taught as a secular, scientific practice.

Just formal meditation - Mindfulness can be practiced formally (such as sitting meditation or the body scan whilst lying) or informally such as when walking, eating, and interacting with others.

Fast or easy - Mindfulness is about pausing and appreciating what is going on for you in the moment. Some days that will be easy to achieve, some days it won't. Mindfulness takes practise and patience, but even with that it can be challenging some days. The good news is that if we acknowledge the challenge we are still being mindful.

Bringing mindfulness into everyday activities

You can try being mindful anywhere, any time. Why not try being mindful while you're eating, or walking, or even brushing your teeth?

Mindful Eating

- 1 Choose a convenient mealtime when you won't be expected to socialize.
- 2 Eat slowly. Focus on each sensation of your first bite in turn: smell, sight, touch, sound, taste.
- 3 Immerse yourself in the richness of the practice of eating and try to eat your whole meal slowly.



Health Benefits:

- Reduced stress
- Improved digestive functioning
- Reduced overeating and weight gain

Why it works to reduce stress:

Taking time to appreciate the small things we often miss can liberate us from ruminating on our daily concerns.



Grounding and anchoring

A common anchor for the practice of mindfulness is the breath. However, some people do not feel comfortable to focus on the breath. It is therefore fine to use a different anchor, such as sensations in the body or awareness of sound.

The breath is a great resource for mindfulness, as we carry it with us wherever we go! With mindful breathing we observe the breath, just as it is with a quality of curiosity. We are not attempting to change the breath but sometimes when we focus on the breath it does change, and that's okay too.

The longer we spend focusing on the breath, the more we will notice how the mind wanders away. This is normal. The important skill is that when we notice the mind has wandered, we bring our attention back in a gentle and understanding manner – not with fierce criticism.

The three R's

- Rest attention lightly
- Recognise when the mind wanders
- Return attention back gently

The Three R's remind us of the attitude we adopt with mindfulness. We can visualise our attention as being a butterfly, lightly landing as we rest on our focus of attention. There is a gentleness in our practice. And just as a butterfly will at some point fly away to something new, so will our mind. As soon as we recognise that our attention has wandered we are being mindful.

Remember to stop

- **Slow down** – connect with the body through pushing the feet into the floor, stretching or breathing.
- **Take note** – ask yourself what am I aware of in this moment? This may include outer awareness, such as what we can see and hear; and inner awareness, such as our thoughts, emotions, body sensations and urges.
- **Open up** – if possible seeing if you can allow your experience to be just as it is without pushing it away or clinging onto it. Giving it space to be, moment by moment.
- **Pursue values / proceed** – once you have acknowledged your experience and allowed room for it, you can connect with what is really important for you. This might be to ask yourself 'what is it I need right now?' or 'how can I best take care of myself?' Or despite these uncomfortable feelings that are present, 'can I still take meaningful action in line with the person I want to be?'

An example is feeling frustrated by the behaviour of someone you live with.

An automatic response might be to shout. Instead, you chose to pause.

You push your feet into the floor and stretch your arms. You take note of your inner experience and become aware of a feeling of frustration; the thought 'he / she never listens to me'; a feeling of tightness in the stomach; and an urge to shout at them.

You decide to make room for these experiences, allowing the sensations to ebb and flow. Then you check in with your values, such as being respectful and caring.

As a result you decide to make yourself a cup of tea and then to speak with them later about how you would like them to behave.

One of the difficulties of mindfulness is remembering to do it! We are so used to being on autopilot. The STOP acronym above is one way of taking a pause before checking in to our outer and inner experience. This mindful pause can help us choose our next step.



Resources

There are so many books now on mindfulness and mindfulness-based approaches. A selection have been listed below, based on ease of application.

During physical distancing many mindfulness teachers are offering free virtual classes / audios, such as Tara Brach, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Christopher Germer and Sam Himmelstein.

Books

Collard, P. (2014) The Little Book of Mindfulness

Germer, C. (2016) The Mindful Path to Self-compassion

Harris, R. (2012) The Happiness Trap: stop struggling, start living

Harris, R. (2011) The Confidence Gap: from fear to freedom

McCurry, C. (2009) Parenting your Anxious Child with Mindfulness and Acceptance

Puddicombe, A. (2011) Get some Headspace

Williams, M. & Penman, D. (2018) Mindfulness: a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world

Teens and children

Bluth, K. (2018) The Self-compassion workbook for teens

Greenland, S. (2016) Mindful Games: sharing mindfulness and meditation with children, teens and families

Snel, E. (2013) Sitting still like a frog: mindfulness exercises for kids (and their parents)

Stewart, W. & Braun, M. (2017) Mindful Kids: 50 Mindfulness activities for kindness, focus and calm [boxed card set]

Thich Nhat Hanh (2008) Mindful Movements: Ten exercises for wellbeing

Vo, D. (2015) The Mindful Teen: Powerful skills to help you handle stress one moment at a time



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