

Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the practice of becoming more fully aware of the present moment, in a non-judgmental way, rather than being preoccupied with intrusive thoughts, worries and concerns. It involves practicing some basic techniques in order to heighten awareness of the senses (for example, really noticing your breathing, feeling the sensations of your body), and being 'in the now'. Mindfulness has origins in Eastern philosophy and Buddhism. It has been used in the West as a means of personal development for many years, and is now being increasingly taken up in education and professional development, as a stress management technique, and for its psychological benefits in therapy and personal performance.

Mindfulness is developed through daily living. Any practice which helps to calm the inner thoughts, silence our inner voice, and focus on the present moment can be used to develop mindfulness. Here are some exercises to start.

MINDFULNESS EXERCISES

Meditation

Get into a comfortable position where you can relax completely but remain awake. Close your eyes and clear your mind (it gets easier with practice). When any thoughts come, simply put them aside. Keep letting go of thinking this way. It can help to visualise, say, a clear blue space with no details. At first your mind will be busy, with practice the quiet spaces will expand, enjoy the internal silence. Avoid judging yourself, just keep at it for a few minutes a day, extending the time in a way that seems right as you get more proficient. Congratulations, you've started meditating.

Visualisation

At a time when you can practice undisturbed, sit or lie comfortably. Then create a mental image of a time and place where you felt safe, warm, secure and peaceful, with only pleasant feelings. It can be based on a real experience, or you can create a 'special place' which is only available to you. Make it vivid. Use all your senses to imagine that you feel for example, the sunshine, the breeze, whatever feels enjoyable. Picture the colours, hear the sounds. Practise visualising this scene as often as you can. When you want to feel calm then think of this scene and imagine it for a short while. Then return your thoughts to the matter in hand. The sense of calm should stay with you and enable you to cope better with whatever comes.

Breathing

Focus on your breathing, use the diaphragm. Imagine your torso as a bottle, with water being poured into it. Breathe in to the count of four as it fills from the bottom (diaphragm). As you breathe out, to the count of six, it empties from the bottom. Continue this for one to three minutes.

Study your experience

Use daily routines to enhance awareness. For example hold your cup of coffee in both hands. Focus all your attention on your experience; the warmth you feel in your hands, on your face as you bring the cup to your lips, the liquid as it flows into your mouth. Notice all the sensations, how the drink affects your nose, mouth, the position of your hands. Notice what it is like to really experience this daily habit. Continue drinking in a mindful way. It will help you to focus your attention on the moment so that distracting thoughts move away. You can use this with any routine task, housework for example.

Benefits of Mindfulness include increased self-awareness and self-acceptance, more confidence, and composure in the face of difficulties. It helps with stress reduction, depression, anxiety and life's challenges, and helps improve concentration and performance. It brings an enhanced appreciation of life.