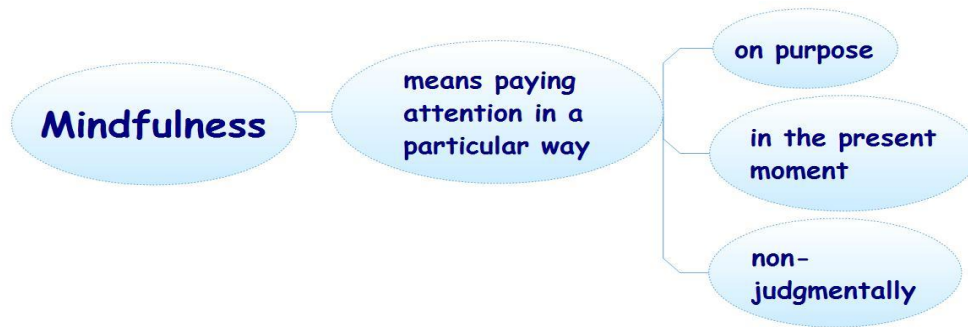


# Mindfulness



## What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is an ancient Buddhist practice which is very relevant for life today. Mindfulness is a very simple concept. Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally. This increases awareness, clarity and acceptance of our present-moment reality.



Mindfulness does not conflict with any beliefs or tradition, religious, cultural or scientific. It is simply a practical way to notice thoughts, physical sensations, sights, sounds, smells - anything we might not normally notice. The actual skills might be simple, but because it is so different to how our minds normally behave, it takes a lot of practice.

I might go out into the garden and as I look around, I think "that grass really needs cutting, and that vegetable patch looks very untidy". My young daughter on the other hand, will call over excitedly, "Mummy - come and look at this ant!" Mindfulness can simply be noticing what we don't normally notice, because our heads are too busy in the future or in the past - thinking about what we need to do, or going over what we have done.

Mindfulness might simply be described as choosing and learning to control our focus of attention.

## Automatic Pilot

In a car, we can sometimes drive for miles on “automatic pilot”, without really being aware of what we are doing. In the same way, we may not be really “present”, moment-by-moment, for much of our lives: We can often be “miles away” without knowing it.



On automatic pilot, we are more likely to have our “buttons pressed”: Events around us and thoughts, feelings and sensations in the mind (of which we may be only dimly aware) can trigger old habits of thinking that are often unhelpful and may lead to worsening mood.

By becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, from moment to moment, we give ourselves the possibility of greater freedom and choice; we do not have to go into the same old “mental ruts” that may have caused problems in the past.

## Mindful Activity



When I wash the dishes each evening, I tend to be “in my head” as I’m doing it, thinking about what I have to do, what I’ve done earlier in the day, worrying about future events, or regretful thoughts about the past. Again, my young daughter comes along. “Listen to those bubbles Mummy. They’re fun!” She reminds me often to be more mindful. Washing up is becoming a routine (practice of) mindful activity for me. I notice the temperature of the water and how it feels on my skin, the texture of the bubbles on my skin, and yes, I can hear the bubbles as they softly pop continually. The sounds of the water as I take out and put dishes into the water. The smoothness of the plates, and the texture of the sponge. Just noticing what I might not normally notice.

A mindful walk brings new pleasures. Walking is something most of us do at some time during the day. We can practice, even if only for a couple of minutes at a time, mindful walking. Rather than be “in our heads”, we can look around and notice what we see, hear, sense. We might notice the sensations in our own body just through the act of walking. Noticing the sensations and movement of our feet, legs, arms, head and body as we take each step. Noticing our breathing. Thoughts will continuously intrude, but we can just notice them, and then bring our attention back to our walking.

The more we practice, perhaps the more, initially at least, we will notice those thoughts intruding, and that’s ok. The only aim of mindful activity is to continually bring our attention back to the activity, noticing those sensations, from outside and within us.

## Mindful Breathing

The primary focus in Mindfulness Meditation is the breathing. However, the primary goal is a calm, non-judging awareness, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. This creates calmness and acceptance.



1. Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed and your spine reasonably straight.
2. Direct your attention to your breathing.
3. When thoughts, emotions, physical feelings or external sounds occur, simply accept them, giving them the space to come and go without judging or getting involved with them.
4. When you notice that your attention has drifted off and becoming caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note that the attention has drifted, and then gently bring the attention back to your breathing.
5. It’s ok and natural for thoughts to arise, and for your attention to follow them. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing.

## **Breathing Meditation 1**

Assume a comfortable posture lying on your back or sitting. If you are sitting, keep the spine straight and let your shoulders drop.

Close your eyes if it feels comfortable.

Bring your attention to your belly, feeling it rise or expand gently on the in-breath and fall or recede on the outbreath.

Keep your focus on the breathing, “being with” each in-breath for its full duration and with each outbreath for its full duration, as if you were riding the waves of your own breathing.

Every time you notice that your mind has wandered off the breath, notice what it was that took you away and then gently bring your attention back to your belly and the feeling of the breath coming in and out.

If your mind wanders away from the breath a thousand times, then your “job” is simply to bring it back to the breath every time, no matter what it becomes preoccupied with.

Practice this exercise for fifteen minutes at a convenient time every day, whether you feel like it or not, for one week and see how it feels to incorporate a disciplined meditation practice into your life. Be aware of how it feels to spend some time each day just being with your breath without having to *do* anything.

## **Breathing Meditation 2**

Tune into your breathing at different times during the day, feeling the belly go through one or two risings and fallings.

Become aware of your thoughts and feelings at these moments, just observing them without judging them or yourself.

At the same time, be aware of any changes in the way you are seeing things and feeling about yourself.



## **Using mindfulness to cope with negative experiences** (thoughts, feelings, events)

As we become more practised at using mindfulness for breathing, body sensations and routine daily activities, so we can then learn to be mindful of our thoughts and feelings, to become observers, and subsequently more accepting. This results in less distressing feelings, and increases our level of functioning and ability to enjoy our lives.



With mindfulness, even the most disturbing sensations, feelings, thoughts, and experiences, can be viewed from a wider perspective as passing events in the mind, rather than as "us", or as necessarily true. By simply being present in this way, you support your own deep healing (Brantley 2003).

When we are more practiced in using mindfulness, we can use it even in times of intense distress, by becoming mindful of the actual experience as an objective observer, using mindful breathing and concentrating attention on breathing with the body's experience, listening to the distressing thoughts mindfully, recognising them as merely thoughts, breathing with them, allowing them to happen without believing them or arguing with them. If thoughts are too strong or loud, then we can move attention to our breath, the body, or to sounds in the environment. We can use kindness and compassion for ourselves and for the elements of the body and mind's experience. "May I be filled with peace and ease. May I be safe" (Brantley 2003).

Jon Kabat-Zinn uses the example of waves to help explain mindfulness. Think of your mind as the surface of a lake or an ocean. There are always waves on the water, sometimes big, sometimes small, sometimes almost imperceptible. The water's waves are churned up by winds, which come and go and vary in direction and intensity, just as do the winds of stress and change in our lives, which stir up waves in our mind. It's possible to find shelter from much of the wind that agitates the mind. Whatever we might do to prevent them, the winds of life and of the mind will blow, do what we may.



"You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf" (Kabat-Zinn 2004).

## **Mindfulness of Thoughts**

### ***Leaves in the Stream***

When learning **mindfulness** skills, it is usually recommended that we start practising mindfulness of the breath, then mindfulness of the body, before moving on to mindfulness of thoughts.

The Leaves in the Stream metaphor is often used as an exercise to help us distance ourselves from our almost constant stream of thoughts. To stand back and observe our thoughts rather than get caught up in them. We can notice that thoughts are simply thoughts, passing streams of words that we don't need to react to, we can just notice them.

Whilst sitting quietly, bring your focus to your breath, then start to notice the thoughts that come into your mind. As you notice each thought, imagine putting those words onto a leaf as it floats by on a stream. Put each thought that you notice onto a leaf, and watch it drift on by. There's no need to look for the thoughts, or to remain alert waiting for them to come. Just let them come, and as they do, place them onto a leaf.

Your attention will wander, particularly so at first, and that's okay - it's what our mind does. As soon as you notice your mind wandering, just gently bring your focus back to the thoughts, and placing them onto the leaves.

After a few minutes, bring your attention back to your breath for a moment, then (open your eyes and) become more aware of your environment.

# Introduction to Mindfulness

## Websites

### Freemindfulness.org

This website provides free access to audio downloads of mindfulness- based exercises.

Enter the Free Resources link on the website to access the free exercises. There are a variety of short breathing exercises and a muscle relaxation exercises. The body scan is a combination of breathing and muscle relaxation exercises

## Irish Websites

The following are Irish websites which have links to several online courses and workshops in mindfulness.

[www.mindfulnessireland.org](http://www.mindfulnessireland.org)

[www.mindfulness.ie](http://www.mindfulness.ie)

## Introductory videos

'Mind the moment' is a collection of online video tutorials which help teach people about mindfulness.

Go to **Youtube.com** enter '**mind the moment e-learning videos**' to access 13 free online tutorials.

## Phone Apps

### The Mindfulness App

This app has audio guided breathing and muscle relaxation exercises which are useful to use at any time. They can be used when relaxing at home or while exercising.

### Smiling Mind

This app offers a series of free mindfulness-based meditations through online and mobile apps. When you sign up, you can specify your age (7-11, 12-15, 16-22 or adult) to get tailored meditations.