

# How to...

# Look after your mental health using mindfulness



Mental Health  
Foundation



## What is wellbeing?

The government defines wellbeing as 'a positive physical, social and mental state'. For our purposes, we are focusing on mental wellbeing.

Mental wellbeing does not have a single universal definition, but it does encompass factors such as:

- The sense of feeling good about ourselves and being able to function well individually or in relationships
- The ability to deal with the ups and downs of life, such as coping with challenges and making the most of opportunities
- The feeling of connection to our community and surroundings
- Having control and freedom over our lives
- Having a sense of purpose and feeling valued

Of course, mental wellbeing does not mean being happy all the time and it does not mean you won't experience negative or painful emotions, such as grief, loss, or failure, which are a part of normal life. However, whatever your age, mindfulness can help you lead a mentally healthier life and improve your wellbeing.

## What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to the present moment, using techniques like meditation, breathing and yoga. It helps us become more aware of our thoughts and feelings so that, instead of being overwhelmed by them, we're better able to manage them.

## How can mindfulness help?

Mindfulness can be used as a tool to manage your wellbeing and mental health. Some people call mental health 'emotional health' or 'wellbeing'. We all have times when we feel down, stressed or frightened; most of the time those feelings pass, but sometimes they develop into a more serious problem, and this could happen to any one of us.

It's important to maintain your mental health, but being mentally healthy doesn't just mean that you don't have a mental health problem. With good mental health, you can:

- Make the most of your potential
- Cope with life
- Play a full part in your family, workplace, community and among friends

While research is still growing in the area of mindfulness, evidence has suggested the benefit of mindfulness to health and wellbeing, with results showing positive effects on several aspects of whole-person health, including the mind, the brain, the body, and behaviour, as well as a person's relationships with others.

Mindfulness has also shown to help with a number of conditions, including stress, anxiety, depression, addictive behaviours such as alcohol or substance misuse and gambling, and physical problems like hypertension, heart disease and chronic pain.

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## **Is mindfulness for me?**

Mindfulness is recommended as a treatment for some people who experience common mental health problems, such as stress, anxiety and depression. It's also for those who simply want to improve their mental health and wellbeing. Depending on what you're looking for, there are different ways to learn mindfulness, which can help people in different ways. Anyone can learn and practise mindfulness: children, young people and adults can all benefit.

## **How do you learn mindfulness?**

Mindfulness can be practised in person, either through a group course or a one-to-one with a trained mindfulness coach. There are online courses, books and audio, too, where you can learn through self-directed practice at home. Even though mindfulness is understood to have Buddhist origins, you don't need to be religious or spiritual to practise mindfulness.

**Start our online course for  
free at  
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**Mindfulness has been incorporated into psychological therapies and stress reduction programmes.**

### **Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)**

MBCT is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) for the prevention of relapse in recurrent depression. It combines mindfulness techniques, like meditation, breathing exercises, and stretching, with elements from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy to help break the negative thought patterns that are characteristic of recurrent depression.

### **Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)**

MBSR aims to address prolonged periods of stress that can lead to poor mental and physical health. MBSR can be helpful as a single treatment to manage stress in individuals who do not experience mental ill health, as well as a joint intervention with other treatments for people who have symptoms of anxiety, as MBSR is at the core of psychotherapies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and Dialectical Behavioural Therapy (DBT).

## How does mindfulness work?

Evidence shows compelling support for Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which helps people to cope with stress, and for Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which is designed to help people with recurring depression. They provide a flexible set of skills to manage your mental health and to support wellbeing.

Mindfulness might change the way you relate to experiences. It is becoming widely used in a variety of ways and contexts, and is recommended by NICE as a preventative practice for people who experience recurrent depression. Many people testify that practising mindfulness can give more insight into emotions, can boost attention and concentration, and can improve relationships.

## Be Mindful online

A research study published by the University of Oxford in November 2013 provides evidence of the effectiveness of the Be Mindful online course. The study examined the effects of the course for the 273 people who had completed it and showed that, on average, after one month, they enjoyed:

- A 58% reduction in anxiety levels
- A 57% reduction in depression
- A 40% reduction in stress



## Is mindfulness a fad?

There are a lot of misconceptions around mindfulness, including that it's a fad with no evidence base. Mindfulness doesn't necessarily work for everyone; however, there is growing evidence that regular practice may produce benefits for some individuals.

"Mindfulness was first suggested to me by the mental health and wellbeing team at my university. I guess I paid lip service to mindfulness at first; it seemed very 'touchy feely', like an airy fairy, homeopathic take on treatment. I thought 'how can breathing slowly and thinking "happy thoughts" help me in the long term?' However, my opinion of mindfulness completely changed after the session.

Today, I build mindfulness into my everyday life. Breathing, imagery and meditation exercises I find most useful, and I tend to do these once or twice a day. The biggest shock for me was that I could practise anywhere, anytime, and often without other people knowing. It's actually very empowering to know that I can control my reactions and feelings in any situation without others even being aware of it."

## How can I learn mindfulness?

### In person

There are a growing number of academic institutions, organisations, and individuals teaching mindfulness across the UK. Check out [www.bemindful.co.uk](http://www.bemindful.co.uk) to find a teacher in your area. Mindfulness courses and practitioners listed are for information only.

### Online

Our Be Mindful course is a four-week online course that is designed to guide you through all the elements of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). As referenced, it has been shown to reduce anxiety by 58%, depression by 57%, and stress by 40%. In as little as four weeks, you could be enjoying the benefits, including reduced stress, depression and anxiety.

### Books and audio

There are currently a number of books, apps and audio materials on the market offering guidance in mindfulness practice.

## One-minute mindfulness

Mindfulness can be used in your everyday life and doesn't have to take a lot of effort or time. You can practise mindfulness in just one minute!

In this section, we describe various one-minute mindfulness practices so that you can try it yourself anywhere and at any time that suits you.

### **Breathing**

This is a chance for you to step out of the daily grind and to allow time to be present with yourself; that is, being present with yourself, and with whatever arises in your mind and body. Take a minute to observe your breathing. Breathe in and out as you normally would: notice the time between each inhalation and exhalation; notice your lungs expanding. When your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to your breath.

### **Body scan**

It can often feel like we're an observer of our own body caught up in our heads. Spend your one mindful minute bringing awareness to your body and your body's sensations. Close your eyes and begin scanning your body. Start with your feet, and then slowly bring your awareness upwards in your body until you reach your hands. What sensations do you feel? Heaviness in the legs? Strain in the back? Perhaps no sensations at all. Now move your focus out from the hands and become aware of your environment and the space all around you.

## **Mindful walking**

Mindful walking is something you can practise at any time as you go about your day. It's good to try it slowly at first, but once you're used to it, you can practise it at any pace – even when you're rushing.

Walk slowly: become aware of the sensations in the soles of your feet as they make contact with the floor, and any sensations in the muscles of the legs. You don't have to look down at your feet. When your mind wanders, use the contact of the feet on the floor as an anchor to bring you back into the present moment. Just take a minute to focus on the sensations generated by walking.

## **Mindful eating**

Eating mindfully can take us out of autopilot, helping us appreciate and enjoy the experience more.

The next time you eat, stop to observe your food. Give it your full attention. Notice the texture: really see it, feel it, smell it, take a bite into it – noticing the taste and texture in the mouth – continue to chew, bringing your full attention to the taste of it.

## **Mindful listening**

By taking this time out to tune in to your environment and listen to what it tells you, it will help you to bring mindfulness into the rest of your life – bringing your awareness as you move through the day. Take a minute to listen to the sounds in your environment. You don't need to try and determine the origin or type of sounds you hear, just listen and absorb the experience of their quality and how it resonates with you. If you recognise a sound then label it and move on, allowing your ears to catch new sounds.

## **We hope you found this booklet informative and useful.**

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# The Mental Health Foundation

*Good mental health for all*

Our mission is to help people understand, protect and sustain their mental health.

Prevention is at the heart of what we do, because the best way to deal with a crisis is to prevent it from happening in the first place. We inform and influence the development of evidence-based mental health policy at national and local government level. In tandem, we help people to access information about the steps they can take to reduce their mental health risks and increase their resilience. We want to empower people to take action when problems are at an early stage. This work is informed by our long history of working directly with people living with or at risk of developing mental health problems.

The Mental Health Foundation is a UK charity that relies on public donations and grant funding to deliver and campaign for good mental health for all.



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