

What is Mindfulness?

“The mystery of life is not a problem to be solved; it is reality to be experienced. Beware of the man who claims to have solved the problem of life, who would explain its complexities and, with deadly logic, build a system in which all the facts of our existence may be pigeon-holed and neatly stored away. He stands condemned by his own claim. The child which sees wonder in all the world around it, to whom the shells with which it plays on the beach are objects breathless excitement and thrilled amazement, is nearer to divine truth than the intellectualist who would strip a world of its mystery and takes pride in showing us its anatomy in ruthless dissection. For a while it may satisfy evolving man to know that the splendors of a sunset are but the breaking of light-rays in a moist atmosphere; he will come to realize that he may have explained the method, but has not touched the mystery at all. Recovering from the sureness of youth, never doubting itself, awakened man returns to the wonder of childhood and once again sees a world, which, as the years pass by, deepens in mystery and beauty, but is never exhausted or explained.”

– Jacobus Johannes Leeuw

What is Mindfulness?

Jon Kabat- Zinn (PhD) 2003; “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.”

Jon Kabat-Zinn explains what mindfulness is. Here he explains that mindfulness is not a technique. Please see video here.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmEo6RI4Wvs&feature=youtu.be>

Jon Kabat-Zinn created Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and brought mindfulness into mainstream medicine and detached mindfulness from religious aspects.

Mindfulness is not:

- . A religion (roots in Buddhism but not a religion).
- . To relax (mindfulness can at times be uncomfortable but we can learn more about ourselves during this process. Relaxation from mindfulness is a by-product).
- . A way to change thoughts (mindfulness has nothing to do with not thinking or changing thoughts).
- . Difficult (many studies have shown children utilising and adapting to mindfulness practices well).
- . Easy (mindfulness requires consistent efforts whereas many of us have many thoughts of the past and the future in our heads).
- . A way to not be concerned with the future anymore (mindfulness is a way to create more of a balance between the past, present and the future. We will need to plan for the future and being present moment permanently may not always be practical).
- . Just an idea (many studies into the field of psychological study have found scientific benefits of mindfulness. Dr Hugo Alberts says there are about 30-40 publications on average of mindfulness in the field of science now).

Mindfulness is:

. Science based;

Lahey, Kernis, Heppner & Lance in 2008 said that mindfulness practice has been associated with varying outcomes for your psychology from lower levels of depression and anxiety, and higher levels of self-esteem, authenticity and vitality.

. Integrated into many fields of psychological practices;

- Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)
- Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
- Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)
- Mindfulness-Based Eating Awareness Training (MB-EAT)

Mindfulness Key Elements

- Attention
- Open Awareness
- Acceptance
- No identification
- Choice

Attention

Paying attention to your thoughts, feelings and sensations in the body and in what parts of the body for example a tightening of the chest; your breathing, do you feel a sensation of rising with pride?

Open Awareness

Here we wish to grow a mindset of being aware of our judgments. For example we often judge our internal feelings and judge those around us. For open awareness we simply want to be aware and notice our judgments as they fall into place.

Having opinions and judging is not wrong but it is important we can be aware of our judgments and see things with fresh pair of eyes and be able to experience non judgmental aspects in our way of thinking.

We often confuse reality with the judgment that we have on reality.

Acceptance

Rather than pushing against feelings and experiences; acceptance is all about accepting the feeling as it is. Instead of trying to change our feeling or supressing or avoiding that feeling we accept the feeling as is.

Acceptance does not mean that we should accept anything that happens to us for example if someone insulted you; mindfulness acceptance would mean accepting the feeling that arises within you and then consciously making a choice on what you do next as opposed to automatically reacting to the event or supressing those emotions.

No Identification

You are not the emotion or thought that emerges within you.

I feel sad versus I am sad.

I feel anxious versus I am anxious.

You are not the emotion or the thought; those feelings come and go and do not define you as an individual.

Allow the thought or emotion to pass like a cloud or wave and do not identify yourself as that actual emotion or thought.

Your thoughts are not an objective truth.

This means that the thought or emotion does not have as much power over you and your state of mind can change.

Choice

Here there is room between impulse and action and we have a choice.

This is a big difference between conscious behaviour and automatic behaviour. Through mindfulness practice we can become aware of our thoughts and emotions and not allow our emotional state to take charge. This is guided by awareness in mindful practice.

What is Mindlessness?

Examples of mindlessness;

- Driving from A to B and not remembering the journey or the conversation.
- Answering a partner but not listening to what they have asked you.
- Not noticing subtle build-up of emotional changes in the body.
- Thinking too much in the past or future and not appreciating the now.
- Eating without awareness; did you savour the food or were you watching television and before you realise it the bag of food or the plate is empty? This is a crucial part of dieting as well because if we can pause to make a conscious mindful choice we are not automatically eating.

These are just a few examples of mindlessness.

If we do not pay attention to what our body is telling us and emotional changes it can lead to repressed emotions or thoughts appearing later and causing us complex distraction.

Practicing Mindfulness

Attention

Open Awareness

Acceptance

No identification

Choice

Are needed when practicing mindfulness and automatic patterns in our behaviour can prevent these five elements working in unison.

Practice and ideally daily practice through breathing meditations, body scan, mindfulness tasks, knowledge application can help with this.

Activity

Please think of a time in the last 12 months when you would say you were at your happiest moment.

How did you feel?

Would you say you were present minded?

Would you say that you felt physically positive as well as mentally positive?

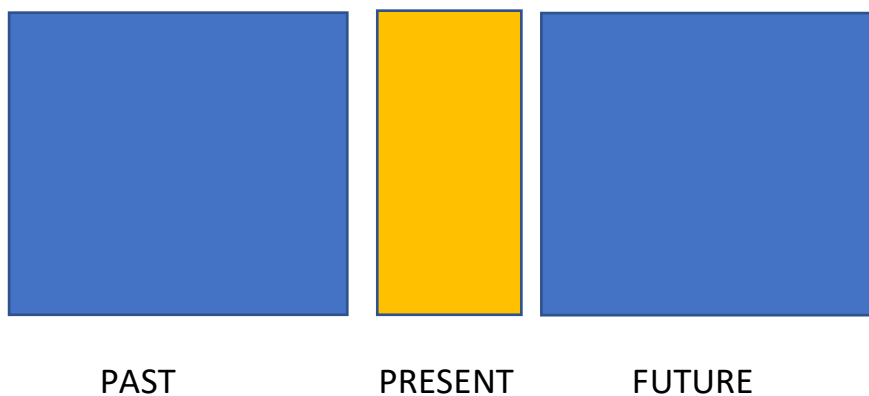
Many people assume that to be happy you need to have 'no problems' in life. However, when you felt super positive at that moment above you likely had some problems at that time in your life! Would that be fair to say?

Happiness can present itself upon us through being present minded and connections to others and our environment around us in spite of other

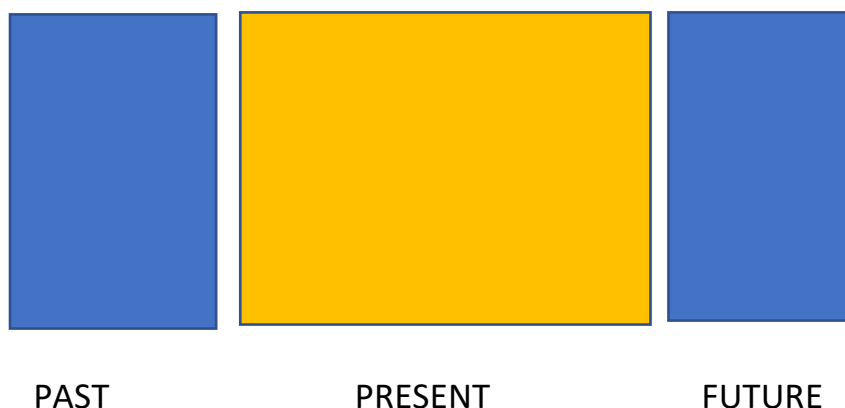
difficulties our life has at that time. As we focussed on the now in that moment we temporarily forgot about any negativity in our lives which may have present past or future tense thought processes.

What does the present moment look like?

The below diagram is quite common amongst people whereby our thought processes are predominately in the past or the future and the present moment is squeezed.



The below diagram shows what a mindful mindset would look like; mindfulness is not to always be present but to find a balance between the past, present and future of our thoughts. We want to create more balanced division of attention. We have a key focus on the present moment but still have thoughts on the past and present moments but in a healthier way.



Thoughts

Thoughts can disconnect us from the present moment. You can experience the present moment but you cannot think the present moment. We can think of our anchor point (explained later) but if we think of the past or future or “I should be thinking in the present moment” we will be disconnected to the actual now. Some mindfulness exercises require thought but this is a training process for the mind.

Interpretations of thoughts are not facts. So when we think of something that makes us feel negatively; in the same way emotions pass like clouds or waves; neither the thought or emotion is a fact and neither one defines us. People can interpret thoughts as facts but it does not always make them so.

For example if someone were to ignore a message that you sent; you may think negatively about this and this could produce negative emotion; whereas in reality there could be 101 different reasons why you did not get a response.

Mindfulness helps us to observe what is really going on versus a train of thought taking over.

Attention and Forces

Which attentional force takes our focus the most?

INTERNAL:

EMOTION

THOUGHT

EXTERNAL:

NOISE

VISUAL

Mindfulness is about regulating that attention.

Trying not to think of something is challenging if not impossible.

Mindfulness is not a way to clear the mind and not think anymore or to stop thoughts from happening.

Mindfulness is instead a way for us to deal with thoughts. Thoughts can be positive such as creative thinking and planning a holiday but they can also be negative such as worry or negative self-talk.

Suppression and **distraction** are two ways people can 'handle' negative thoughts and this can cause those thoughts to re-emerge at a later date in addition to being temporary 'solutions'.

Constructive ways to 'handle' thoughts are;

- Observing thoughts
- Letting them pass
- Taking the thought(s) less seriously

Ways to deal with thoughts with mindfulness;

- To focus our attention to one point
- Use an anchor point
- Return to this anchor point

Examples of anchor points could be sensations in our body, our breathing, a physical object or a real world sound.

We observe our thoughts > we observe our anchor point > equals mindful practice of thoughts.



David is the founder of www.meaningfulpaths.com a platform to help people reach their best selves. David is also the founder of www.skipitcommunity.com where people 'skip' unhealthy foods and habits and instead use that money saved to donate for the health and well-being of children internationally.

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