

# First Steps in Practising Mindfulness

From *Using Mindfulness Skills in Everyday  
Life: A Practical Guide*



## First steps in practising mindfulness

In previous chapters, we have described how being mindful can enhance the quality of your life and experiences. For any of us to get to the position where we can easily remember to be mindful on a daily basis, we really need to practise regularly in a disciplined way. This is why most people join a class or group, so that they can practise with other people and get some feedback on how they are doing. A mindfulness teacher should help to shape your practice so that over time you become more skilled at being mindful when you really need to be. If you prefer to learn how to be mindful on your own, you can begin by following the suggestions in this chapter. In that case, set aside a time each day when you are going to do one or more of the exercises we suggest so that you don't forget. We would also encourage you to practise being mindful at different points of the day, in different situations and in a variety of places so that you get used to being mindful as you go about your everyday life.

### **What's the point of mindfulness exercises?**

In a mindfulness practice, you usually have a focus for your attention, and you practise bringing your mind back to it over the period of the exercise. By taking some time for reflection afterwards, this short regular discipline can help you in the following ways:

- 1 You get to practise the action of deliberately focussing your attention (exercising the 'mental muscle')

- 2 You learn to accept the current experience ('being' in the moment)
- 3 You learn to identify the components of an experience (expanding awareness)
- 4 You start to notice obstacles to mindfulness (the antics of the 'untrained puppy')
- 5 You find ways to transfer the skill from wherever you practise to other situations (the 'roll-out' message)

In this chapter, we give some example practices and also some glimpses of what might happen if you visit a mindfulness teacher or mindfulness skills trainer.

### **Keep it simple**

Mindfulness exercises can be completely spontaneous. Here is an example of something you can do quite easily in almost any situation.

Right now, in this moment, run your finger lightly along the palm of your other hand, from your wrist to your fingertip. What did you notice? Was there a sensation? Is it still there? Did your mind wander off at all when you did that? Where did it go? Into the future? For example, 'I'll stop off and get some hand-cream as my skin is a bit dry.' Or into the past? 'This reminds me of stroking the cat this morning.' Or did it stay on the sensation? Were you judging yourself? 'I don't think I'm doing this right' or were you judging the exercise? 'How can this help anyone?'

In this instance, there was very little need to prepare, as the focus of your attention was – pardon the pun – readily to hand. But it contained the most essential ingredients of a practice – there was a chosen focus for your attention, and there was some guidance to help you expand your awareness.

Mindfulness is not about the highlights – it is about the spaces in between. When we seek to add complexity, we are

rejecting the current experience, wanting it to be something other than it is. A truly advanced practitioner is able to do the same simple thing over and over again – being as alive and awake the first time as the last. The real skill is to open ourselves fully to the moment whatever it contains.

However, being mindful in the current moment can be quite a hard skill if you have a lot of distractions. You are more likely to be able to achieve mindfulness if you practise regularly and in a formal way. This means setting aside some time on a regular basis and disciplining yourself. During these formal practices, you can add some ingredients to improve the effectiveness of your learning.

### **Getting ready for the practice**

You may be wondering where you are going to do your practice. If you are half way up a mountain in Tibet with a stunning view and no distractions for a hundred miles, this is an ideal location. If you are perched on a stool in your kitchen with the neighbours playing loud music and the dog scratching the door for his breakfast this is an ideal location. Get the message? Wherever YOU are is the ideal location. Whether you are sitting cross-legged on an antique Persian rug or on the 08:32 to Euston, it is still possible to choose a focus for your attention. The more demanding the distractions, the more difficult it is likely to be to practise, but also the more useful.

This is the reason that as mindfulness teachers we have never put notices on the door saying ‘quiet please, mindfulness in progress’. Do what you can to make it easier for yourself to concentrate, but don’t make easiness the most important thing. Most of us lead busy, chaotic lives. If this skill is going to be a game-changer for us, we have to make it fit the space we occupy. So let go of any judgements that your location is not quiet enough, or spacious enough, or peaceful enough, or tasteful enough. It is what it is. Your preparations don’t have to be hugely elaborated, in fact the best exercises are very simple. So don’t feel you need to rush out and buy a special cushion, or a bell, or a mat. But do arrange a space and time where your full intention is to practise.

## **How to sit**

For this first exercise, we will assume that you have at least got a place to sit. Right from the outset, we want to be very clear about the difference between mindfulness and relaxation. It can be difficult to unhook from the notion that we should feel calm or relaxed at the end of the practice. For this reason, instead of trying to ‘sit comfortably’, we prefer the instruction favoured by Jon Kabat-Zinn to ‘sit with dignity’.

Place both feet on the floor and keep your back upright if you can. We are doing the opposite of relaxation – reminding our body that we want it to be alert and alive. Try to keep your eyes open, just find a place to direct your gaze that isn’t too distracting, perhaps a spot on the floor or on the table in front of you. Many people find it easier if they angle their eyes slightly downwards, as the posture of staring into the middle distance is often associated with daydreaming. Eventually, we will encourage you to be mindful in any position, but for regular practice, it helps to assume a posture associated with mindfulness.

These instructions might sound strange, you might be thinking that you want to lean back in your chair as that is more comfortable, or you want to close your eyes to help you concentrate. Remember the reason we are being mindful is so that we can bring this same quality of attention to our daily activities. Do you recall the girl in Chapter 2 who needed to take her coat back to the shop? She would certainly need to do that with her eyes open. Having said this, if you can’t keep them open to begin with, don’t beat yourself up about it, just work towards an eyes-open practice over time.

## **Duration of a practice**

Mindfulness practices can be anything from 1 minute long to a number of hours. Our experience is that most people find it easier to begin with shorter sessions and gradually extend them. We have noticed in our own practice that we can become complacent at the ease of short exercises and assume that a longer exercise is just ‘more of the same’. But this is not the case; there is a very different quality to longer

practices; and we would encourage you to lengthen them out as you get more experienced.

Having said this, if you are someone who doesn't like to be alone with their thoughts, or if you feel your emotions very intensely, then 2 minutes might feel like a long time. When starting out, many people say that 2 minutes can seem like much longer. It can be amazing how many things your mind can do in such a short period of time.

When you start learning mindfulness, we would advise you to focus on something fairly obvious like sounds or objects. In the remainder of this chapter, we will outline some simple exercises of this type, and then in Chapter 5, we will move onto mindfulness of internal experiences.

As we introduce the mindfulness exercises in this chapter, we include scripts that we use when teaching a group or one-to-one. If you are practising on your own you can either read these to yourself before the exercise to give you an idea of what to do, or read them into a taping device and listen to them when you are ready to practise. After a while, you won't need this type of memory aid, as being mindful will become more natural.

### **Key components of a mindfulness practice**

- 1 You have a specific focus for your attention
- 2 Remember that it is normal for your mind to wander
- 3 If your mind wanders, notice where it has gone to and bring it back to the focus you set at the start
- 4 You may have to repeat the same action again and again
- 5 Despite your mind wandering, if you *return it*, you have been mindful

### **Timing your practice**

If you are a beginner to mindfulness then it is probably best to use a device such as a kitchen timer, a stop watch, a timer on your computer or on your phone. There are apps that can be downloaded to time the practice for you. For the next exercise, set your timer for 2 or 3 minutes.

### **Mindfulness of sounds**

In this practice, we are going to be mindful of sounds. If you are able, then try and keep your eyes open, just find a place for them to rest. The task is simply to notice sounds that we hear. We are not attempting to label the sounds, although this might automatically happen. Our minds have been used to labelling sounds, so it is likely that as we hear 'tick tock', our mind may say, 'that's the clock.' Or if we hear 'dringg dringg', our mind may say, 'that's a phone.' If this happens, then there is no need to judge your mind for doing what it has always done; instead, just gently guide it back to the next sound. Whatever your mind starts to do, even if it goes into stories or memories associated with the sounds, the skill is just to bring it back to the next sound. Do this as many times as you need to until the end of the exercise.

The skill that you have just practised is that of 'observing', that is, noticing without having to put words on the experience. Try repeating this exercise whenever you remember it during the day. Repetition of the same exercise allows us to notice our own progress and to detect the factors that make our practice easier or harder. Listening mindfully is a good one to start with as it is a skill that can be practised in any location.

A mindfulness student recounted keeping a bedside vigil when her sister was seriously ill in hospital. She found that her mind constantly wandered into the future (fears that her sister would not recover) and into the past (the accident that had caused her sister to be admitted). During those long hours, she found she could not concentrate enough to read a book or magazine, and there were a number of other ill patients in the ward so talking or watching TV was discouraged. She turned her attention to being mindful of sound.

At first, she became alarmed, adding a label to each sound she heard, trying to work out whether it was good news or bad news (the sound of footsteps approaching: good or bad? A click from the monitor: good or bad?). But over time, she became more effective at just receiving the sensation of each hum, swish, click or whoosh that she heard, attaching to none and pushing away none. She found that her own sounds; her breathing, the creak of her chair as she moved position, became part of the experience of sound. Did mindfulness turn this experience into one that was pleasant? No. Did it make the time pass more quickly? No, but she stopped adding to her own distress by recalling the past or predicting the future. She found that she was able to tolerate the present moment more easily.

### **Guided mindfulness of an object**

This is a different type of exercise, one in which a teacher usually gives instructions throughout the practice. It is still possible to conduct the practice on your own, and we will give some pointers on how to do so at the end of the script.

For this example, we have chosen to be mindful of a leaf. (This is one of our favourite exercises as we work in the NHS, and leaves are cheap.) When we used to lead this exercise in a group, we would have a selection of leaves and pass them round the participants for each person to choose one. As they did so, we would say:

As each of you selects a leaf for this practice, I am going to hazard a guess that some of you are having the thought ‘I want a good leaf.’ The interesting thing is that for each of you, what would constitute a ‘good leaf’ is different. For some, a ‘good leaf’ would be one that is completely free from blemishes. For others, a ‘good leaf’ is one that is different from the others in form or colour. How interesting that even if you have never

done this exercise before, your mind already has a protocol for it. Somewhere you have a mental file labelled, 'a list of qualities for a "good leaf" if you are asked to observe one during a mindfulness practice'. It is not just this current situation in which your mind has an agenda. It has millions of these protocols, producing them at the drop of a hat. Your mind won't wait for you to request the protocol, but it will just hand it to you as though these are the rules. In mindfulness, we learn to notice when this happens and then to exercise choice. We can choose to follow the protocol, or we can choose to ignore it.

### **Mindfulness of a leaf**

The following instructions will guide you through a series of observations. If your mind wanders off, then gently bring it back to the leaf and follow the next instruction.

First of all, hold the leaf in the palm of your hand. . . . Notice the weight of it. . . . How does it feel against the skin on your palm? . . . Are there places where it touches and places where it doesn't?

Pick it up between your fingers and thumb. . . . Notice the temperature of the leaf. . . . does it feel warm or cool? . . . Is it the same temperature all over? . . . Does the temperature change as you hold it between your fingers?

Notice the texture of the leaf. . . . Does it feel rough or smooth? . . . Do the edges of the leaf feel the same as the centre? . . . Is it hard or soft, firm or limp to the touch, damp or dry? . . . Does the stalk feel the same?

Allow your eye to follow the contour of the leaf. . . . Notice the shape and size. . . . View it from a variety of angles and see the shape change in your eye-line. . . . How thin is it, how wide at its widest point?

Notice the colour on the upper side of the leaf. . . . See any variations in shade and texture. . . . Look at the detailing; any veins, ridges, patterns? . . . Explore every part of the leaf, the edges, the middle, the stalk.

Now taking the leaf in your fingers turn it over and notice how the underside differs in colour and texture. . . . Notice how the light catches the leaf differently as you move it.

Is there a smell to the leaf? . . . Is it more evident towards the stalk or in the body of the leaf, does it change if you run your nail over the leaf?

Continue to use your senses to observe the leaf until the end of the exercise.

If you are being mindful of a leaf by yourself, you can read over the list of prompts to orient yourself on how the exercise is done, and then set your timer for 3 minutes and explore the leaf using your five senses. Alternatively, you can read the steps onto a recording device leaving 15 seconds or so between each step and play it back when you want to begin. You might even do the practice with friends who are interested in practising, with one of you reading the instructions while the others do the exercise.

Any object can be used for this type of mindfulness practice. You might choose to be mindful of something you see every day around your home, or things that are found in nature. Here are a few suggestions.

Stones, shells, crystals, acorns, pine-cones, conkers, twigs, feathers, wheat stalks, flowers, fruit, vegetables, water, raisins, biscuits, dried pasta (spaghetti is a particular favourite for its projectile snapping qualities), cinnamon sticks, sweets (those in a wrapper offer additional opportunities to be mindful), teabags, pieces of fabric, cotton wool, sponge, pictures from magazines or birthday cards, keys, buttons, stamps, coins, beads, toothbrushes, string, ornaments, marbles, CDs, coloured pencils.

## **Mindfulness of the breath**

Mindfulness of the breath is a universally recognised practice, and for most people, it is a gentle introduction to mindfulness. However, it can be harder if you have suffered from anxiety. You may find that when you turn your mind to your breath, you start feeling anxious. In that case this probably isn't the exercise that you should begin with, perhaps start with those exercises that focus on an object or listening to sounds. However, sooner or later mindfulness of the breath is a must for everyone, because the breath is something you have with you at all times. If you are someone who finds it difficult at first, then it is likely to be the one practice that has the most benefits for you, so please persevere.

Below is the script for a mindfulness exercise that we have used regularly with clients in the NHS, and it has two features that make it user-friendly even if people are naturally anxious. One is that it begins by directing the focus outside of the body and moves the attention slowly inwards towards the breath. The other is that it adds an instruction to label the 'in' and 'out' breaths. If you are anxious, this act of labelling can make the practice easier, but for all of us, the act of labelling helps us to focus.

### **Mindfulness of the breath**

Just take a moment to arrive here in this room. Allow the walls of the room to act as a barrier, keeping out whatever happened before you came into this room, keeping out whatever might happen after you leave.

Let's bring our attention to the way we are connected to this room, moving the spotlight of our mind to the very soles of our feet – can you sense the hardness of the floor beneath your shoes? And now pay all of your attention to the sensation of being seated on the chair. Notice how it feels to allow your weight to rest on the chair, feel the sensation on your legs and your bottom and your back as the chair holds you up.

And now bring your attention in further to notice that you are breathing. We're not attempting to alter the rate of our breathing in any way, but if it does alter, that's fine, just notice without judging. Bring the spotlight of your mind to the point in your body where you are most aware of your breath. This may be in your nostrils, or in the rise and fall of your chest, or in the expansion and contraction of your abdomen. Wherever that place is for you, see if you can tell the difference between the in-breath and the out-breath.

Notice that every in-breath is followed by an out-breath, and every out-breath is followed by an in-breath. Notice the point at which your breath changes from going in to coming out. If your mind wanders, then gently guide it back to the in-breath or the out-breath.

Now as my voice falls away continue to focus on the breath. It may help you if as you are breathing in to say quietly in your mind, 'IN', and as you are breathing out to say quietly in your mind, 'OUT'. Continue to do this until I signal the end of the exercise.

Learning to accept the breath however it comes is more beneficial than trying to avoid being aware of it, as the breath is with us at all times whether we like it or not.

### **Mindful body scan**

Another universally recognised practice is the body scan, and there are numerous examples in books and CDs. The idea is to move the focus of your attention around your body. This has proved very effective for people who are suffering from physical pain. Recurrent pain in one part of the body, back or shoulder for example, will often draw our attention to the exclusion of everything else. This increased awareness can heighten the sensation of pain. One of our clients with post-operative pain told us that he used the body scan practice on a daily basis, describing the effect as 'diluting the sensations of pain'.

A further reason for practising the body scan is because our experience of the world comes through our body. Some people who have suffered from trauma have very little awareness of their physical self; they often describe themselves as feeling ‘stuck in their head’, cut off from their bodily sensations. The body scan can be a gentle re-introduction to genuine experiencing. This is a concept to which we will return in later chapters.

The body scan can be contracted or expanded but we would advise you to start with 15 minutes and build up gradually to longer practices. Some mindfulness teachers ask their clients to bring a mat and lie on the floor, but as you will have gathered by now, we think that sitting in a chair is fine too, as this is the posture you are more likely to adopt when you are using the skill outside of the mindfulness room.

### **Mindful body scan**

Doing a mindfulness body scan can be like being in a scanning machine, except that instead of radio waves, we are using our own attention to scan our body. While we are doing this practice, if you notice that your mind gets preoccupied by one part of your body, perhaps because there is pain or discomfort, then just try to treat that part as you do all the others, don't avoid it and don't linger there as the practice moves on. Just listen for the next instruction.

Let's start by bringing that attention to our scalp, right at the crown of our head.

Can you feel the skin across your forehead?

Perhaps you have the sensation of hair touching your ears or the back of your neck.

Can you feel any sensation in your eyes? And now in your cheeks?

Notice the feeling in your lower jaw – perhaps it is tightly closed, or a little open. Bring your attention slowly downwards, over your chin and onto your neck.

Notice the front of your neck, with the breath going up and down your throat, and the hollow of your collarbone, scan round and up the back of your neck, feeling your head resting at the top of your spine.

Now move your attention to scan the top of your shoulders, noticing if they are high, up under your ears or if they are hunched forward or sloping down towards your arms.

Move your attention to your arms, down to the elbows, then down your forearm to the wrist. Can you move your attention all the way round the bracelet of each wrist – how does it feel?

Now push your attention all the way through your hand to the very tips of your fingers and your thumbs. Can you feel any pulse in those thumbs?

Now notice your upper body, your ribcage and chest. Do you have any sensation there? In your mind, follow the sensation down your breast bone to the softness of the abdomen beneath. Notice the sensation down each of the little bones in your back, from your neck down to your waist. Can you scan around the girdle of your waist?

Notice the feeling of your hips and upper thighs. Feel your weight being supported by your bottom on the chair.

Follow the line of your thighs down to your knees, can you feel the chair beneath you? Is the temperature different on the back of your thighs to the front?

Bring your attention over the curve of your knees. Can you feel the hardness of your kneecap? Can you feel the skin over the top? Now notice the angle of your shins and calves as you bring your attention down towards your ankles.

Are you aware of any sensations in your heels, perhaps you can feel the cradle of your shoe around them? Notice the soles of your feet, and slowly drive your awareness to the very end of your toes, noticing the little toes on each foot and then your big toes. Notice if you have any feeling in the very tips of those big toes.

Notice that as you go through this practice, we are not asking you to change anything that you notice in your body. For example, we don't suggest that if you encounter tension in your back and shoulders you should relax your muscles or alter your position. This is the key difference between mindfulness and relaxation. In mindfulness, we accept what's there without trying to change it. We have produced a CD with a 5-minute breathing practice and 15-minute body scan – see the 'Other resources' section at the end of this book for details of how to order.

In each of the practices above – mindfulness of sounds, of an object, of your breath and of your body – we have shown you how to do the exercise in a formal way. But as you go through each day, you will have other chances to practise:

Listening to the variety of sounds as you prepare a meal – chopping, sloshing, sizzling and clinking.

Observing the sensations as you brush your teeth; holding your toothbrush, the feel of the handle, the sound of the bristles against your teeth, the smell and taste of the toothpaste.

Mindfulness of your breath as you wait in a queue to be served.

Mindfulness of your body as you rise from a chair, noting the pressure on your feet, the contracting of the muscles in your thighs, the forward motion of your torso, the changing position of your head as you make the transition from being seated to standing.

If you do any of these things with your full awareness and attention, they become mindfulness practices. Get into the habit of doing them as you go through each day.

You might like to keep a record or log of the practices that you do, as this is another way of encouraging yourself to practice. It is also helpful to see how you build up the time you devote to mindfulness on a daily basis – jot down any formal practices that you do and also when you have participated in your everyday activities in a mindful way.

In this chapter, we have described how to set up an exercise and given examples of some common practices. In the next chapter, we will look at some reflection that you can do after each exercise.

### **Key tasks**

- Keep it simple
- Clearly define the focus for your attention
- Only pay attention to ‘one thing at a time’
- If the mind wanders off the task, just gently guide it back
- Start with short practices and build up over time
- Keep a mindfulness log

### **Remember**

- Mindfulness does not require a special location or specific equipment
- Mindfulness is not relaxation
- Be prepared to repeat practices, and also to add new ones
- Don’t confine your mindfulness to one place and time
- Start to incorporate short practices into your everyday life



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