

Adult Mental Health Services
Stabilisation Workbook 3

Mindfulness: Learning to be in the present moment





Introduction

Mindfulness is defined as **“paying attention in a particular way – on purpose, in the present moment and without judgement.”**

When someone is being mindful, they are noticing what is happening in the present moment by paying attention to and becoming fully aware of their thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and environment. Paying attention in this way is different from how the mind normally behaves. Most often the mind is on ‘auto pilot’ and caught up with thoughts about the past and the future rather than focused on the present moment.

Mindfulness involves training the mind to focus attention and stay as much as possible in the present moment, rather than be caught up in thinking about worries for the future or distressing memories from the past. As the mind is not used to staying present it will naturally wander. The act of mindfulness is about noticing this and then gently returning your attention to the present moment.

Mindfulness takes practice. If you have tried mindfulness and found staying present challenging, then you are not alone! The human mind is complex and will naturally wander. Training the mind to pay attention requires practice, so do not feel disheartened if it feels difficult.

This session overlaps with the session on ‘grounding’, so you may find it useful to read this one too.

Why is mindfulness helpful?



Self awareness

Staying in the present helps you to become more aware of your thoughts, feelings and physical sensations. Having a greater awareness of these things can support us to make mindful decisions about when to act rather than reacting without awareness. Focusing on the present can help to identify the areas of life that you may wish to change.



Controlling attention

Mindfulness can help you to gain control over the mind rather than the mind having control over you. Paying attention in the present moment can help prevent the mind being taken over by thoughts of the past and worries about the future.



Emotions

When people experience a feeling such as sadness or anxiety, they often want to get rid of it as quickly as possible. This is not easy and can be unhelpful. Sometimes fighting difficult feelings makes them last longer. Trying to accept and tolerate the emotion is encouraged in mindfulness practice.



Thoughts

Mindfulness encourages you to recognise thoughts as merely thoughts and not facts. It is important to remember that thoughts are not facts and that you do not need to act on them. This can help reduce the power of thoughts and help achieve some distance from them. Visualising your thoughts on clouds that float by, or leaves that drift past on a river may help to get some distance. When thoughts are too strong or loud, then attention can be refocussed on the breath, the body, or what is happening in the environment.

Close your eyes and think exercise

The following exercise has been designed to help us understand the rationale for mindfulness a little better.

I want you to close your eyes, whilst the person with you asks a series of questions (as below). Answer the questions out loud, but don't open your eyes until after all the questions have been asked.

If you are alone, try and keep your attention focussed just on this page as you read and answer the questions. Try your best to answer the questions from memory rather than looking up and around you for the information you need.

- 1.** How many times have you been in this room / physical space before?
How much time (in minutes or hours) do you think you have spent here in total?
- 2.** What colour are the walls / are the surroundings around you?
- 3.** What colour is the floor / the ground underneath you?
- 4.** If you are inside, describe the ceiling. What colour is it? Where are the light fittings?
What do they look like?
- 5.** How about the furniture or other items / landmarks around you? Describe them to me. What do they look like? Where is everything positioned?
- 6.** Is there anything else in this physical space around you that you haven't mentioned?
What does it look like and where is it?

Now, slowly open your eyes and take a moment to look around you. Take a moment to notice everything you misremembered or hadn't taken in before the exercise.

Our minds are so often caught up in thinking about worries for the future or difficult memories from the past that we are very rarely focussed on the present. This exercise is one way of demonstrating this, and the benefits of being mindful.

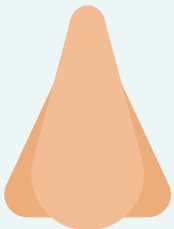
Five senses exercise

1. Sit in a comfortable upright position with your feet planted flat on the ground. Rest your hands on your thighs or on your desk.
2. Notice your breath. No need to breathe in any particular way. Just bring attention to each part of the breath – the inhale, exhale, and space in between.
3. Bring awareness to each of your 5 senses. One at a time, for about one minute each. The point here is to focus on the present moment and how each sense is being activated in that moment. The order in which you pay attention to each sense does not matter.



Hear

Begin to notice all of the sounds around you. Try not to judge the sounds – just notice them. They are not good or bad, they just are. Sounds might be internal, like breathing or digestion. Sounds might be close by or more distant like the sound of traffic. Are you now hearing more than you were before you started? You may begin to notice subtle sounds you did not hear before. Can you hear them now?



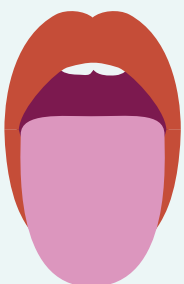
Smell

Now shift your attention to notice the smells of your environment. Maybe you smell food. You might become aware of the smell of trees or plants if you are outside. You might notice the smell of books or paper. Sometimes closing your eyes can help sharpen your attention.



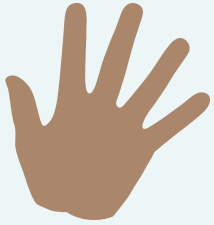
See

Observe your surrounding and notice the colours, shapes and textures. If you really look, you may notice things that have gone unnoticed.



Taste

You can do this one even if you don't have food in your mouth. You may notice an aftertaste of a previous drink or meal. You can just notice your tongue in your mouth, your saliva, and your breath as you exhale. We have tastes in our mouth that often go unnoticed. You can run your tongue over your teeth and cheeks to help you become more aware.



Touch

Bring your attention to the sensations of skin contact with your chair, clothing, and feet on the floor. You can notice the pressure between your feet and the floor or your body and the chair. You can observe temperature like the warmth or coolness of your hands or feet. You might take time to feel the textures that you noticed by sight a moment ago.

When finished, pause to notice how your body feels in this moment. Compare how you feel now with how you felt 5 minutes ago – what has changed? Try this exercise next time you're feeling overwhelmed.



Mindful body scan

With thanks to Shilan Keskin, who developed this script.

Begin by bringing your attention to your body, and settling into a comfortable position. Place your feet flat on the ground... roll your shoulders back to open up your chest, and place your hands palms facing down on your thighs. Or, if you want, you can do this lying down.

If you feel comfortable to do so, close your eyes for this exercise. Otherwise, find something that you can focus your attention on and try to soften your gaze there for the duration of the exercise.

Now, feeling your body, begin to relax into your chair, the bed, or whatever surface you're on. Starting with a couple of breaths – breathing deeply in through the nose and feeling your lungs expand, and then breathing out through the mouth to feel the body relax. Do this two more times, as slow and deep as you can.

Now, bring your attention to your face, your scalp, your jaw – notice any sensations or feelings in this part of your body. Is your forehead scrunched up? Is your jaw clenched? Maybe you notice a mild headache, or nothing at all. Just taking notice of anything you feel, without judging it or trying to change it or get rid of it.

Bringing your attention to your neck and your throat, take notice of what you feel there. Are there any sensations there, or none at all? Stay here for a moment. If you notice yourself getting distracted, you can come back to the exercise by coming back to your breath.

Now focus on your shoulders, is there any pain or tension there? Any other feelings? Have you scrunched them up, do they begin to relax as you focus on this area?

And slowly your attention further down... tracing the tops of your arms, your elbows, forearms, wrists, palms and then your fingers with your focus. Can you feel anything here? Maybe all you can feel is your palms against your thighs – that's great. Remember to just take notice – whether pleasurable or painful, the sensation will pass.

Now, focussing on the front of your torso, see if there's anything there. Any tightness, or pains, maybe you feel hungry or can feel your chest rising and falling as you breathe.

And then bring your attention to your back – the upper back, lower back... what can you feel? Take a moment to just take notice.

Moving down to your legs, can you notice any sensations along the top and bottom of your upper thighs, your knees, calves... is there any feeling there, whether pleasant or uncomfortable? Your ankles, and your feet... the arch, the heel, your toes... what do you notice?

Remember you can always come back to the breath if you get frustrated or bored.

Feel your feet sinking heavy into the ground, and take notice of your entire body here in this space.

Take two more deep breaths in through the nose, and out through the mouth. And then bring your attention, without opening your eyes, to the space around you.

Can you remember where you are, who you're sat next to, and what is in front of you? Take notice of any sounds around you. You can wiggle your fingers and your toes.

And when you're ready, you can begin to flutter your eyelids open gently.



Mindful colouring exercise

Practice colouring the image below mindfully. Take notice of the different shapes and colours and what you can see on the page. Notice when your mind wanders and gently bring it back to colouring the image. If you find this exercise helpful, why not look for more mindful colouring exercises online or buy a mindful colouring book.



Leaves on a stream exercise

This exercise is about learning to be mindful of our thoughts. Before starting the exercise, take a moment to remember that **thoughts are not facts and that you don't need to act on them.**

1. Sit in a comfortable position and either close your eyes or rest them gently on a fixed spot in the room.
2. Visualize yourself sitting beside a gently flowing stream with leaves floating along the surface of the water. Pause 10 seconds.
3. For the next few minutes, take each thought that enters your mind and place it on a leaf... let it float by. Do this with each thought – pleasurable, painful, or neutral. Even if you have joyous or enthusiastic thoughts, place them on a leaf and let them float by.
4. If your thoughts momentarily stop, continue to watch the stream. Sooner or later, your thoughts will start up again. Pause 20 seconds.
5. Allow the stream to flow at its own pace. Don't try to speed it up and rush your thoughts along. You're not trying to rush the leaves along or 'get rid' of your thoughts. You are allowing them to come and go at their own pace.
6. If your mind says "This is silly," "I'm bored," or "I'm not doing this right," place those thoughts on leaves, too, and let them pass. Pause 20 seconds.
7. If a leaf gets stuck, allow it to hang around until it's ready to float by. If the thought comes up again, watch it float by another time. Pause 20 seconds.
8. If a difficult or painful feeling arises, simply acknowledge it. Say to yourself, "I notice myself having a feeling of boredom / impatience / frustration." Place those thoughts on leaves and allow them float along.
9. From time to time, your thoughts may hook you and distract you from being fully present in this exercise. This is normal. As soon as you realise that you have become side-tracked, gently bring your attention back to the visualisation exercise.



Take ten breaths exercise

1. Take ten slow, deep breaths. Focus on breathing out as slowly as possible until the lungs are completely empty – and then allow them to refill by themselves.
2. Notice the sensations of your lungs emptying. Notice them refilling. Notice your rib cage rising and falling. Notice the gentle rise and fall of your shoulders.
3. See if you can let your thoughts come and go as if they're just passing cars, driving past outside your home. Expand your awareness – simultaneously notice your breathing and your body. Then look around the room and notice what you can see, hear, smell, touch, and feel.

Useful links and resources

Videos on mindfulness

You can find guided meditations as well as experts such as Jon Kabat-Zinn giving talks about mindfulness on YouTube.

www.youtube.com

Websites and apps

www.freemindfulness.org/home

www.headspace.com

www.mindful.org

Courses

The CNWL Recovery College run a 6 week mindfulness course you can find more information here:

www.cnwl.nhs.uk/patients-and-carers/recovery-and-wellbeing-college



This manual has been developed by the Harrow TIA Team (Faye Nikopaschos, Gail Burrell, Sheelagh Holmes, Nick Rhodes and Cleo Boado) from the Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board – Psychological Therapies Department
Stabilisation Pack