

Seven

Live in the moment

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Introduction

Alice is a very busy first-year student. Having started just a few months ago, she is excited to discover her independence, relishing her first time living away from home. She is meeting new people, making new friends, acquainting herself with the university campus and with the many written and unwritten rules of student life, creating new schedules and routines, and getting to grips with her demanding programme.

Alice is throwing herself into student life with excitement. She studies hard, parties hard and even holds down a part-time job. Time passes quickly because she is busy, and Alice finds that she barely has time to reflect on her new experiences and learning. At times, she is so exhausted that she falls asleep at her desk or finds it impossible to concentrate in lectures. Sometimes, she finds herself not really engaging with her friends or work colleagues as she is worried about the next exam or paper that is due.

At times, she has a sense of being on a rollercoaster ride, not really in control of what is happening to her. She worries that spreading herself too thinly may undermine her learning and achievements. She wishes that she could disembark from this fast ride, just to take stock and evaluate everything that is happening. She would prefer to enjoy what she is doing rather than worrying about the next task.

Her university offers a mindfulness course for students and a friend invites Alice to participate. Alice is reluctant to take on yet another obligation, especially one that requires daily practice. She has little idea what mindfulness is and

would like answers to her questions: What is mindfulness? What does it take to practise it? How would it benefit her?

These are the questions that this chapter will address.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness seems to be everywhere today – in schools, universities, hospitals, workplaces and even government institutions. For some, it is considered therapy; for others, technology. Many people see it as a lifestyle choice. Mindfulness is practised by millions of people in the West, and by even more people in Eastern cultures. In public discussions, it is sometimes presented as a mystical panacea – a cure for all the ills of modern societies. Regrettably, with its growing popularity, many myths and misconceptions have emerged.

In what follows I aim to offer an overview of mindfulness: what it is, how to practise it, what it is useful for, and its potential benefits based on research evidence. Along the way, I shall de-mystify some common myths and misconceptions.

After engaging with this chapter and its activities, you will have:

- an overview of mindfulness: what it is and what it means to be mindful or mindless
- an awareness of the common myths and misconceptions of mindfulness
- an understanding of how to practise mindfulness: What is formal and informal practice? What is meditation and how is it practised? What constitutes the optimal practice of mindfulness?
- a glimpse into the vast research into mindfulness and an understanding of its therapeutic power: When is mindfulness the right solution? What are its potential benefits? What are the challenges of mindfulness?
- some exercises that you can easily apply to gain its benefits.

The Eastern approach to mindfulness

The mindfulness approach discussed here was developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn and his associates in the 1970s. It draws on Buddhist meditative practices and is therefore considered an Eastern approach to mindfulness. Within Buddhism, the practice of mindfulness signifies a higher level of conscious awareness. As it was adopted in advanced, industrialised nations, the practice became ‘Westernised’, downplaying its religious and spiritual content, thereby creating a non-religious therapeutic-contemplative practice. This is how mindfulness is practised and offered to this day. It is considered therapeutic in its orientation since it is used to alleviate a range of physical and psychological conditions.

Exploring mindfulness

Drawing on Buddhist philosophy, Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as ‘paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally’ (1994, p. 8). Mindfulness entails observing *external* events as well as *internal* experiences as they occur (Baer, 2003). When we pay attention to internal events, we may observe our thoughts, our emotions or body sensations as they occur. Focusing our attention on external events means attending to anything that is going on around us that is captured by our senses: any sights, noises and events.

Kabat-Zinn’s definition suggests that mindfulness entails:

- self-regulation of attention
- directing our attention to internal or external experiences
- metacognitive consciousness
- adopting an accepting, non-judgemental attitude.

One of the biggest misconceptions around mindfulness is that it is a state that occurs when meditating. Mindfulness is in fact a state that we employ many times in our everyday lives. Every time we pay attention to something, it can be said that we are being mindful. So, you already know how to be mindful! Kabat-Zinn (2003) clarifies that mindfulness meditation is a training method that aims to enable people to extend periods of mindfulness into their everyday lives.

Mindfulness and ‘mindlessness’

Mindfulness is often contrasted with ‘mindlessness’. Mindlessness can be described as a state of superficial awareness, where we rely on automatic thoughts, habits or behaviours to perform tasks. In short: it is when we are on autopilot. Mindless repetition can be used to develop expertise and peak performance.

ACTIVITY

Exploring the differences

Do you have a driving license? If you have, can you recall how you felt when you drove for the first time after passing your test? Were you vigilant, stressed, cautious, excited?

Now try recalling how you felt a few months later. Maybe relaxed, enjoying the drive, able to eat, speak, or make a to-do list in your mind while driving?

In our first week of driving once we have passed our test, it is likely that we will be in a mindful state. Every bit of our attention would be focused on our driving techniques

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and skills. Compare that with a few months later. Through practice, our driving skills have become habituated and automated. We can therefore drive 'mindlessly'. It is like we are on autopilot, and we are able to multi-task because driving no longer requires all of our attention. This is what we refer to as a mindless mode. It occurs when we reach a fairly high level of competence. This shift between mindfulness and mindlessness occurs every time we learn a new skill.

The difference between the mindful and mindless mode of attention is linked to another misconception around mindfulness. There is no expectation that we should be mindful all the time. This is neither possible nor desirable. Both mindful and mindless modes are required in life. We constantly shift between them. Indeed, being on autopilot from time to time is important for conserving energy and when doing something that requires expertise. However, research suggests that many of us spend *most* of our time in autopilot mode (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). This very high level of mindlessness is harmful to our wellbeing because we tend to make more errors and have more clashes and accidents when we are in autopilot. Kabat-Zinn (1994) argued that the result of this habitual state of shallow attention is an undisciplined mind that becomes an unreliable instrument for examining internal or external processes.

The key message of mindfulness research and practice is that we need *more balance* between the two modes to maintain optimal wellbeing in our lives. For most of us, this would mean being more mindful and spending less time in autopilot mode.

The goal of mindfulness practice, therefore, is to develop a disciplined mind (Kabat-Zinn, 2005), through increased capacity to self-regulate our thinking. In a sense, mindfulness offers us a tool to control our minds. This is gained through a variety of mindfulness practices, including meditation, which are explored below.

The qualities of mindfulness

Mindfulness practice entails three essential qualities (Shapiro et al., 2006):

- practitioners' *intention* in mindfulness practice
- directing *attention* to internal or external experiences as they transpire
- the *attitudes* that meditators bring to mindfulness practice.

The *intention* in mindfulness practice addresses the questions 'why do we practise?' and 'what are we aiming to achieve through practising mindfulness?' Research suggests that the intentions of practitioners tend to vary across several categories (Shapiro et al., 2006):

- relaxation or self-soothing of the mind or body
- self-regulation – control over the self

- self-exploration – knowledge of the self
- self-liberation – transcendence of the self: being able to connect to higher goals, to reach enlightenment or to become more spiritual.

Many people start their mindfulness practice with an intention to relax and reduce stress. For some, this may move on to different intentions. Interestingly, research outcomes correlate with these intentions.

There are six elements that make up *attention* (Brown et al., 2007):

- being present-focused
- having clarity as to what one observes
- being non-discriminatory
- having flexibility of awareness and attention
- taking a value-free stance towards our experience
- gaining stability of attention.

Research suggests that practitioners gradually develop these qualities through practising mindfulness.

The *attitude* feature may contain some or all of the following qualities (Shapiro et al., 2005):

- not judging: neutrally observing the present moment
- acceptance: recognising and embracing things as they are
- letting go of thoughts, feelings or experiences
- patience: letting things progress in their own time and at their own pace
- gentleness: having a soft, considerate and tender outlook
- being open-minded: considering things anew or creating new possibilities
- empathy: understanding another person's state of mind
- not striving: not forcing things and not aiming to achieve an end
- trust: having confidence in oneself and in the processes unfolding in life
- generosity: giving without expecting anything in return
- gratitude: being thankful
- loving kindness: caring for others, forgiving and loving unconditionally.

These attitudes are very powerful and are at the heart of mindfulness practice. Mindfulness training is designed to help people bring these attitudes into their mindfulness practice and into their everyday lives.

Mindfulness interventions

In 1979, Kabat-Zinn and his colleagues developed and launched the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme at the University of Massachusetts

Medical School. MBSR is a group-based intervention that trains participants to practise mindfulness regularly so that they can become more mindful in everyday life. Many of the programmes offered today in healthcare, education and workplaces are based on the original MBSR structure, contents and principles.

MBSR includes:

- 8–10 weekly group meetings, in which participants are offered mindfulness instruction and practice, yoga exercises, group discussions and individual support
- participants being expected to practise mindfulness at home (40–60 minutes per day) – this daily practice is crucial for attaining the benefits of this training; about 40 minutes per day is considered optimal practice time, though recent studies have found that just 10–15 minutes practised consistently can deliver significant benefits (Creswell, 2017)
- often, an intensive silent mindfulness meditation retreat (for a day or two) (Didonna, 2009).

MBSR is widely available today. It is usually offered in group settings facilitated by a trained mindfulness instructor, either face to face or online through video-conferencing technology. It is also offered in a self-help (non-facilitated) mode through books, video or audio programmes or through mobile phone apps. The facilitated face-to-face and live video-conferencing delivery is showing much better results than video or audio lectures, books or apps, mainly because dropout rates from the non-facilitated programmes are substantial (Gál et al., 2021).

MBSR was initially developed as an add-on treatment for patients experiencing chronic pain (Kabat-Zinn, 1982). Over the years, MBSR has been successfully tested on many other physical and mental conditions (Ivtzan & Hart, 2015). Today it is offered by several national health services (e.g. the National Health Service (NHS) of the UK) to patients diagnosed with cancer, heart disease, and varied chronic illnesses (such as fibromyalgia, high blood pressure, asthma or skin disorders). It is also offered to patients experiencing a variety of psychological symptoms, such as stress, depression, anxiety, panic, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), sleep disturbance or fatigue. The goal of MBSR is to reduce physical and psychological ailments through the enhancement of patients' self-regulatory capacities, which are developed through the daily practice of mindfulness exercises (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

POINTS FOR REFLECTION

Minding pain

MBSR was inspired by Buddhist meditation retreats, which often require meditators to practise for hours while sitting motionlessly. Although practitioners naturally adopt a comfortable position, the prolonged stillness often results in pain in muscles and joints.

Meditators are encouraged not to change position to ease the pain, but instead to consciously focus on and attend to the ache sensations, and the thoughts, emotions or urges that arise, while adopting a non-judgemental attitude towards them. The ability to observe painful sensations with acceptance is believed to ease the distress provoked by it since it promotes the awareness that pain and the feelings that accompany it are 'just thoughts' and are not reflections of truth or reality, and thus do not necessitate escaping or avoiding them (Baer, 2003). Kabat-Zinn (1982) claimed that the prolonged exposure to pain, without catastrophising it, can lead to a reduction in the emotional reactivity triggered by the pain, thus leading to desensitisation, which in turn eases the pain.

Kabat-Zinn et al. (1992) described a similar mechanism for relieving psychological disorders, such as anxiety and depression. They claim that repeated attentiveness with an accepting attitude to troubling thoughts or emotions, without escaping them, can reduce the emotional reactivity, and thereby relieve symptoms. The assertion of MBSR is therefore that, with repeated practice, practitioners can become skilled at being less reactive towards their symptoms, whether the symptoms are physical or psychological, and thereby better able to restrain adverse patterns of thinking and behaviour (Shapiro et al., 2006).

MBSR includes two types of mindfulness practice:

- *formal practice*: different types and lengths of meditation practice
- *informal practice*: everyday mindfulness; this is when we bring mindful attention to an everyday event – mindful walking, mindful eating, mindful cooking, etc.

It is important to practise both regularly to get the desired results. Therefore, the 40-minute daily programme mentioned earlier is made up of both formal and informal practice.

ACTIVITY

Trying a breathing meditation

Sit comfortably in your chair with your back supported well by the chair. Try to sit up, but only to the point that it is still comfortable and not an effort. Place your feet on the floor and your hands on your legs. When you are comfortable, close your eyes.

Listen to the following recording: [LINK HERE](#)

'As you are sitting comfortably and closing your eyes, I'd like to invite you to become aware of your breathing. Simply focus on your breathing and become aware of it. Breathing in ... Breathing out ... Breathing in ... Breathing out ... Take note of the pace and depth of your breathing. Take note of the air as it flows in and out, through

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your nose to your lungs, and note your belly expanding and contracting ... Simply be with your breathing ... Not trying to change anything, not trying to control your breath ... just let it be, as it is. Breathing in ... Breathing out ... Breathing in ... Breathing out ... Breathing in ... Breathing out ...

If your mind wanders, and your attention goes away from the breath, when you notice it, gently go back to focus your attention on your breath. Do this gently, kindly and non-judgementally ... Accept with grace and compassion that your mind has wandered and escort it back to the breath when you notice. Breathing in ... Breathing out ... Breathing in ... Breathing out ...

When ready, slowly come back to the here and now.'

Mindful movement

This is when we bring mindful awareness to any activity that we do in everyday life. Therefore, when cooking, washing dishes or taking a shower, instead of having a vivid conversation with our boss, friend or mother-in-law in our head while doing the activity, the invitation is to pay attention to the activity itself and fully be with that experience.

ACTIVITY

Developing mindful attention

In the mindful movement practice (adapted from Stahl & Goldstein, 2019), you are invited to bring your full attention to the movement of the body. Stand up and follow the instructions as best you can. If you have a physical difficulty, consult your physician or physiotherapist before embarking on this exercise. Go to the following link to start the practice: [LINK HERE](#).

'Stand in bare feet or socks, with your feet a bit apart and more or less parallel to each other. The back is straight, but not stiff, shoulders relaxed, and hands are down by your sides.

It is important to be gentle with yourself as you do these stretches, applying self-care during the movement. Let the wisdom of your body decide how far to go with any stretch and how far to hold it. You are invited to see this practice as a chance to cultivate awareness of the body as you carry out these gentle movements.

As you are standing here, notice the contact points between your feet and the floor. Try to distribute your weight evenly between both feet, unlocking the knees so that the legs can bend slightly. See how this feels. Breathe naturally. Then on an in-breath, slowly and mindfully raise both your arms to the sides, so they come to be parallel to the floor. And just breathing here for a moment ... And then inhale and continue to raise your arms slowly and mindfully until your hands are raised above your head, with the palms facing each other, stretching upwards.

Ground yourself on the floor, as you breathe in, and stretch up like this for a few breaths ...

And then when you are ready, slowly, on the exhale, begin the journey back. Allow the arms to come down, breath by breath ... Tune into the changing sensation as the arms move ... Until the arms come back to rest.

And now, breathing naturally, stretch your right arm up over your head, as if you are picking a fruit from a tree. Bring your attention to the sensations that are felt through the body, and be aware of what the breath does as you stretch.

And now, allow the left heel to come off the floor as you stretch, keeping the toes on the ground. Feel the stretch right through your body. Breathe naturally ... And now, allow the heel to come back to the floor. Begin to lower your hand, following the fingers with your eyes if you choose. Notice what colours and shapes your eyes capture as they follow your hand. And now when you face the centre, tune into the after-effects of this stretch, along with the sensations of the breath ...

Now, breathing naturally, stretch up to pick fruit with your left hand ... Then, allow the right heel to come off the floor to help the stretch. Once again, notice what parts of the body are involved in this stretch. Just become aware and let go of even the smallest tendency to push beyond your limits ... And now slowly and gently, allow the heel to come back to the floor ... The arm returns slowly to your side, following it with your eyes all the way if you choose. Let the arms come back to rest. Allow the face to come back to the centre, and tune into the after-effects of this stretch, along with the sensations of the breath ...

Now place your hands on your hips and very slowly and mindfully on an out-breath, allow your head and shoulder to bend over to the left, with the hips moving a little to the right, so the body forms a curve that extends from the feet to the hips and torso, bending sideways.

Breathe in ... It's not important how much you bend, it is the quality of attention that you bring to the movement that matters. And on the in-breath come back to stand straight and remain here for a moment.

And then repeat the same movement to the right side. On the out-breath, put the hands on your hips and gently and mindfully allow your head and shoulder to bend over to the right. And breathe in with this ... And now, on the in-breath come back to standing straight, and remaining here for a moment, breathing in.

And finally do some shoulder rolls. First, raise your shoulders towards the ears, then move the shoulders backwards, and then let the shoulders drop down, squeezing the shoulders together in front of the body. And then put these movements together in a smooth, rolling motion - up, back, down and forward. Let your breathing pace determine the speed of the rotations so that you are breathing in for half a movement and breathing out for the other half.

And now change it, so that the shoulders move in the other direction.

And now coming to stillness, standing here, aware of sensations in the body, the after-effects of doing these stretches, and the sensations of the breath moving in and out of the body.

As we come to the end of this practice, congratulate yourself for taking the time to be present.'

Meditation

Meditation is one of the key training practices included in MBSR. But what is meditation and how does it help us become more mindful in everyday life, and develop a disciplined mind?

Meditation is defined as ‘a family of techniques which have in common a conscious attempt to focus attention in a non-analytical way’ (Shapiro, 1980, p. 14). The goal of meditation practice is ‘the development of deep insight into the nature of mental processes, consciousness, identity, and reality, and the development of optimal states of psychological well-being and consciousness’ (Walsh, 1983, p. 19). The aim of meditation is to alleviate suffering by developing metacognitive awareness and self-regulation of attention and thought (Wallace, 2005). The deeper level of perception that is exercised during meditation is a mode of being that meditators aim to bring into their daily lives (Olendzki, 2009).

The common meditative techniques can be divided into three main types (Shapiro et al., 2005):

- *concentrative meditations*: in concentrative practices, practitioners attempt to control their attention by focusing on a single object or idea, while ignoring other internal or external stimuli. Awareness is thus focused on the object of meditation – which could be one’s breathing, a mantra, a word, a phrase or a sound. Mantra meditation, loving-kindness meditation and transcendental meditation (TM) are considered concentrative techniques (Siegel et al., 2009)
- *mindfulness meditations* are considered mental practices for opening up attention. The objective is not to select a particular object to focus on, but to notice the shifting experiences (Siegel et al., 2009). In mindfulness practice, practitioners attempt to notice whatever predominates their awareness in the moment – internally or externally. They are taught to bring an attitude of openness, acceptance and kindness to observed experiences, and to avoid evaluating, criticising, altering or attempting to stop these experiences, even when they are taxing (Baer, 2003). Zen meditation is an example of a mindfulness practice
- *contemplative meditations*: these types of meditations involve appealing to a larger spirit (a higher power, such as a deity) while accepting a state of not knowing. From this position, practitioners may ask questions and bring up unresolved issues. Contemplation is more commonly practised as a spiritual practice than in a therapeutic context.

It is worth noting that within MBSR and similar training programmes, the meditation practices include a combination of mindfulness and concentrative techniques.

For example, the breathing meditation offered earlier is concentrative because it entails concentrating on our breath. More advanced meditation practices included in MBSR often start with a concentrative technique (such as focusing on the breath) and then move on to mindfulness techniques where meditators are asked to observe whatever is happening in the moment (e.g. bodily sensations, thoughts or emotions). This is because researchers have found that concentrative techniques can facilitate mindfulness practice (Shapiro et al., 2003).

How does meditation lead to the development of a disciplined mind?

Most meditations involve a dynamic process of monitoring our awareness and regulating our attention. When we engage our minds with meditation, it is common for us to find our mind wandering. There is only one instruction in meditation: when your mind wanders, bring it back. Therefore, when noticing your mind wandering, gently come off your new train of thought and bring your attention back to your meditation with acceptance and tolerance. It is important not to scold ourselves or think that we are doing it wrong. That is what minds do – they wander. This cycle of mind-wandering and bringing back the attention to the instructions of the meditative practice repeats itself numerous times in the space of one practice (Olendzki, 2009). Thus, the essence of the process is not the contents of consciousness, but the process of managing it (Didonna, 2009). According to research, this process is one of the key mechanisms of mindfulness, as it provides a powerful exercise for the brain. By doing this repeatedly, we learn to control our attention. Research suggests that our ability to control our attention promotes and develops our capacity to self-regulate our thoughts, emotions, behaviours and even bodily sensations (Didonna, 2009).

An additional key mechanism that makes mindfulness effective in reducing physical and psychological disorders is that it changes our relationship with our thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations (Shapiro et al., 2006). This mechanism involves a paradox: on the one hand, it entails becoming aware that we are continuously flooded by a river of thoughts. By practising mindfulness, we develop a very close relationship with ourselves, gaining a better understanding of our thoughts. Similar awareness is developed around our emotions and bodily sensations. On the other hand, we learn not to get caught up in these thoughts, emotions or sensations. This is known as *dis-identification* – being able to disidentify from your own thoughts, emotions or sensations as if you are a person watching from the outside looking in (Shapiro et al., 2006).

ACTIVITY

Learning to STOP

There are several meditations as well as informal practices that enable us to develop the capacity to disidentify from our own thoughts, emotions or sensations. The following brief informal practice invites us to bring our awareness to internal events such as thoughts, emotions or bodily sensations, allowing us to re-balance our mind and body after a challenging or stressful event.

The following practice is called STOP (adapted from Stahl & Goldstein, 2019). It consists of four steps:

- S = Stop
- T = Take a breath
- O = Observe
- P = Proceed.

There may be times during our busy day when we are unaware of what is happening inside us. By taking just a brief moment to stop, take a breath and discern what is happening, including our own thoughts, emotions and sensations, we can reconnect with our experiences, balance our emotional state, and then proceed and respond more effectively. This practice can be very illuminating. You may discover that you are experiencing a pain in your shoulder, that your jaw is clenched, or that you are sitting uncomfortably. You may also notice that you are hungry, tired, stressed, frustrated or anxious. You can practise this STOP activity any time you feel stressed or upset. Once you notice where you are, you can acknowledge, accept, release tension and rebalance. You might choose to do this practice before or after certain activities, or you may even schedule in various times during the day to STOP and check in with yourself. With this activity, you can become an active participant in the management of your own psychological wellbeing and develop the capacity to experience the present moment, no matter how difficult or intense, with more balance and peace.

Research on mindfulness interventions

In the past 50 years, extensive research has been conducted to examine the psychological and physiological effects of mindfulness training and therapies. The research suggests that mindfulness programmes can improve a variety of physical and psychological conditions. Many of these studies focused on MBSR. Several interventions combine mindfulness with cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). A leading example is mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) (Segal et al., 2002). This was originally designed to prevent relapse in patients with a

history of depression, but has also been trialled successfully with other disorders such as anxiety (Chiesa & Serretti, 2011).

There is a substantial body of research on mindfulness programmes amounting to thousands of papers. The summary below offers a glimpse into this vast literature. Several studies found that the electrical activity of the brain is responsive to mindfulness training, prompting a rise in beta activity (associated with wakefulness) alongside increased alpha and theta waves (both of which are generated in a state of relaxation) (Chiesa & Serretti, 2010). A number of studies found that after a few weeks (4–8) of mindfulness training, certain areas in the brain are not only activated more often but also show changes in the constitution and performance of the brain. The areas shown to be affected are associated with pain, emotion, consciousness, attention, cognition, self-awareness, introspection, memory, sensory and visual processing, and the regulation of emotional or behavioural responses (Chiesa & Serretti, 2010; Marchand, 2012). Further research has shown that mindfulness training induces a state of physical rest, as measured by respiratory and metabolic performance, blood pressure and cortisol secretion (Marchand, 2012). Mindfulness training offered to participants with cancer found that it strengthened their immune function (Witek-Janusek et al., 2008). Several studies examined the effects of mindfulness when delivered in educational settings (mainly schools and universities). These studies revealed that mindfulness training can improve learning skills: short- and long-term memory functions, attentiveness, perception, curiosity, concentration, metacognitive awareness, cognitive flexibility, imagination, creativity and inventiveness (Marchand, 2012). Several clinical trials have demonstrated a significant decline in subjective pain experience following mindfulness training (Chiesa & Serretti, 2010; Grossman et al., 2004; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992). MBSR was also shown to improve skin condition in patients with psoriasis (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1998); and resulted in improved sleep and reduced fatigue in cancer patients (Shapiro et al., 2003).

In psychology, mindfulness training can significantly lower symptoms of psychological distress, including anxiety, panic, worry, stress, depression, suicidal ideation, self-harm behaviours, rumination, neuroticism, anger, cognitive disorganisation, thought suppression, post-traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse (Keng et al., 2011). Mindfulness training has shown to be effective in reducing symptoms of bipolar disorder, social phobia, psychosis, dissociation, borderline personality disorder and eating disorders (Chadwick, 2014; Kristeller & Wolever, 2010; Williams et al., 2008; Zerubavel & Messman-Moore, 2013).

Improvements in wellbeing following mindfulness training include: increases in happiness, life-satisfaction, psychological wellbeing, quality of life, positive emotions, hope, sense of coherence, sense of control, autonomy and independence, coping skills, resilience, moral maturity, spirituality, self-actualisation, self-compassion, stress-hardiness, emotional regulation, self-esteem, self-acceptance,

benevolence, trust, empathy, forgiveness, the ability to express emotions, improved social relationships and social adjustment, and even a better sense of humour (Friese et al., 2012; Keng et al., 2011; Robins et al., 2012). As can be seen from this brief overview of the research, mindfulness practice is showing impressive outcomes and I therefore encourage you to try and engage with these exercises daily.

ACTIVITY

Practising a loving-kindness meditation 1

To end this chapter, I invite you to try out this loving-kindness meditation (adapted from Stahl & Goldstein, 2019). You can follow the recording provided here: [LINK](#).

'Begin your practice by congratulating yourself that you're dedicating some precious time to meditation. As you begin to become present, become aware of the body and mind and whatever is carried within you. Simply allow and acknowledge whatever is within you and let it be ... without evaluation or judgement. Gradually, shift your awareness to the breath, breathing normally and naturally. Breathing in, breathing out ... Just being aware of your breathing ... Just living life, one inhalation and one exhalation at a time. Breathing in, breathing out, watching each breath appear and disappear. Just breathing.

Now gently bring awareness to your beating heart, feeling any sensations within and reflecting on how fragile and precious life is. The heart is the gateway into deeper compassion and love for yourself, and for all beings. Now feel into your own precious life with compassion, mercy and love. Feel into the powerful qualities of loving kindness itself, a boundless, altruistic love that can be compared to the sun, the moon or the stars, shining on all living beings without distinction, separation or prejudice. Bring this love into your own heart, skin, flesh, organs, bones, cells and being. May you open to deep kindness and compassion for yourself, recognising and accepting the imperfectly perfect being that you are. It may be a struggle to feel love towards yourself. Work with this by acknowledging your challenges, and then continue to open to discover what it feels like to have an experience of loving kindness towards yourself. Take a moment to be open to each of the following phrases for a few minutes, letting them sink into your being:

- May I be safe
- May I be healthy
- May I have ease of being
- May I be at peace.

Now expand the field of loving kindness to one or many benefactors, teachers, mentors and others who have inspired you, repeating the same phrases:

- May they be safe
- May they be healthy

- May they have ease of being
- May they be at peace.

Now gradually expand the field of loving kindness to one or many near and dear ones among your family, friends and community:

- May they be safe
- May they be healthy
- May they have ease of being
- May they be at peace.

Now further extend the field of loving kindness to one or many neutral people, acquaintances and strangers:

- May they be safe
- May they be healthy
- May they have ease of being
- May they be at peace.

Now consider extending loving kindness even to one or many of those difficult people in your life. It may seem challenging or even impossible to send loving kindness to this group. With the understanding that resentments have a toxic effect on your own health and wellbeing, begin to neutralise them by sending loving kindness and compassion to yourself. Then reflect on forgiveness and realise that conflict and unkindness often have their roots in fear and lack of awareness. Open your heart and extend loving kindness to your rivals, and then further extend the wish that they will find the gateway into their own hearts, gaining greater awareness and transforming their fear into love. Gently and slowly send loving kindness to these enemies or difficult people in your life:

- May they be safe
- May they be healthy
- May they have ease of being
- May they be at peace.

Now take some time to remember those less fortunate, bringing into your heart anyone you know who is experiencing physical or emotional pain. Picture these people who face difficulty or challenges experiencing more healing and peace. Further expand this circle of healing to all beings. May all living beings experiencing sickness in the body or anguish in the mind be at peace. Now send loving kindness to all who are victims of natural disasters or war, and to those who are hungry or without a home. May they too be at peace. Extend loving kindness to anyone who is feeling anxiety, stress, isolation, alienation or hopelessness, and to those who are addicted or lost or who have given up. May they too be at peace. Letting none be forsaken, may those who are suffering in any way be at peace. Build this loving-kindness energy to become as boundless as the

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sky and begin to radiate it to all human beings and all living beings. Send loving kindness to all living beings, omitting none, whether great or small, weak or strong, seen or unseen, near or far. Send this vast love to all beings of the earth, the water and the air, spreading loving kindness in all directions:

- May all beings be safe
- May all beings be healthy
- May all beings have ease of being
- May all beings be at peace.

As you begin to withdraw from the loving-kindness meditation, come back to the breath, and sensing and feeling into the whole body as you breathe in and out. Feel the entire body rising upward on an inhalation and falling downward on an exhalation. As you come to the end of this meditation, may you share any merits you've gained with all beings. May all beings be at peace.'

Final thoughts

Mindfulness is:

- an opportunity to turn off our autopilot system, connect with our lives and be more present
- a mode of attention and awareness that we already have
- a way to develop self-awareness, acceptance and self-compassion – it can help us become more aware of our own thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations, learn to accept them as they are, and respond non-judgementally and compassionately
- a method that enables us to alleviate a variety of mental and physical health disorders, including stress, anxiety, depression and pain
- a way to develop resilience and avoid creating additional distress for ourselves during difficult times
- a means to develop the capacity to self-regulate our thoughts, emotions and behaviours, and to learn to relate to events in our lives with less reactivity and a gentler and more non-judgemental attitude
- a way of being with yourself and others that conveys loving kindness, and is empathetic, altruistic, trusting and caring
- a way of being that can bring increased wellbeing and wisdom
- evidence based: there is significant research around its benefits.

Mindfulness is *not*:

- a quick fix that can take away all your troubles or stressors; mindfulness requires consistent practice and effort to see its benefits
- a practice that requires you to empty your mind, or be mindful all the time, and does not occur only when meditating
- a one-size-fits-all approach: people tend to develop their own unique way of practising mindfulness; also, it does not suit everyone, and it does not work for all. It should therefore not be forced on others
- a panacea: although mindfulness can alleviate mental and physical disorders, it should not be used as a substitute for medical treatment or psychological therapy – oftentimes, it may be used by medical and psychological professionals as an add-on to treatments
- an all-or-nothing type of experience – you can indeed join a training programme, try it out and engage with it as little or as much as you wish, and slowly build up a habit of practising
- a practice that distances you from life, helping you to escape from difficult experiences, or from your memories or emotions – in effect, it allows you to engage with your experiences more intensely, and work through them with acceptance and self-compassion.

Ultimately, you are the only person who can decide if mindfulness is suitable for you, how it fits into your life, or whether it is helpful. If you have an opportunity to try it out, I'd recommend taking it. My hope is that you will find enough in this chapter to intrigue you and encourage you to have a go and try it out. The practice of mindfulness offers a path of discovery that can help us create new ways of being, doing and interacting with others. We may discover new possibilities, as well as befriend ourselves in the process.

