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What is Mindfulness?

Being able to think about the past and the future is a highly useful human skill. We need to learn from our past experience and also to plan effectively to move forward in our life. But sometimes – perhaps often – we spend more time than we need to away from where we actually are: the present.

Being able to make judgements is necessary. We need to assess situations and people. But sometimes we find the mind proliferating unhelpful thoughts, ideas, and emotions. As we try to think our way forward, our thoughts go round and round. We have too many thoughts about too many things – how things ‘should’ be or have been, what we ‘should’ do or not do. We find it hard to make decisions. Or we decide to do one thing and find ourselves doing another.

Sometimes the mind can feel like an unquiet sea, the surface whipped into waves by the distractions and pressures of life. We can feel thrown around by the turbulence.

Mindfulness is a way of calming our anxieties and getting to know ourselves better. We do this by first of all listening to what we are actually experiencing, and engaging with it, rather than being caught up in what we want our experience to be – or not to be. If we can be receptive to what is actually happening, then even very simple experiences – breathing or eating, for example – become richer and more rewarding.

Mindfulness can give us a new perspective – perhaps a more creative one, from where we can better judge what's really meaningful and important to us.

MBSR and MBCT: Background Information

Jon Kabat-Zinn, now an Emeritus Professor of Medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, began his researches into mind/body medicine in the late 1970s by exploring the use of simple meditation and yoga techniques alongside orthodox medicine in the management of chronic pain and incurable conditions. He and those working with him found they were able to bring about a considerable improvement in quality of life through helping their patients change how they related to the painful elements of their experience. By looking at the momentary nature of pain – and pleasure – they learnt to avoid making a bad experience worse by changing the way they dealt with it cognitively and affectively.

Over the 1980s and 1990s, the Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme became well-established, and many research projects now show clear evidence to validate this approach. The course currently runs in many locations worldwide, and other teachers and trainers in the realms of medicine and psychology have devised similar programmes to help those suffering with conditions such as chronic fatigue, obesity, addictions, anger problems, anxiety, and depression.

- Mindfulness Training
- better work/life balance
 - more resilience to stress
 - ease chronic pain
 - enjoy life more

Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) has become a well-known variant of MBSR through the work of psychologists Zindel Segal, Mark Williams, and John Teasdale. It has been recognized since 2004 in the NICE (National Institute for Clinical Excellence) Guidelines as an effective way to helping prevent relapse in depression, and is also widely adapted for addressing issues such as stress and anxiety.

Interest in mindfulness-based approaches to health in the UK has been fostered by the Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice at the University of Wales, Bangor, established in 2001 by Professor Mark Williams, now at the University of Oxford. Research and training has since been taken up by many academic and professional institutions. Breathworks, for example, is an organization promoting mindfulness as an aid to managing pain or chronic illness; this and similar programmes are now often offered at NHS Pain Clinics.

You can find out more about mindfulness-based approaches to health on:

www.bemindful.co.uk – Mental Health Foundation

www.breathworks-mindfulness.co.uk – Breathworks

www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness – Bangor University Centre for Mindfulness

www.oxfordmindfulness.org – Oxford Mindfulness Centre

Who is this course for?

This course will help you find out what mindfulness as a formal and informal practice has to offer you. Although meditation is sometimes associated with religious practice, this course is non-religious and secular in content and style.

For those with a clinical or professional interest in bringing mindfulness into their work, the course will provide essential subjective first-hand experience. This will not qualify you to teach mindfulness, but will certainly enhance your ability to be more present with those you work with.

The course is also suitable for those with a more personal interest, including those who may already have (or have had) a meditation practice and would like the support of a structured programme to re-establish their practice or explore it further. However, no previous meditation experience is necessary.

Although you will be invited to discuss your experience of mindfulness practices, this is not a form of psychotherapy; in-depth personal disclosure is not necessary. Nor is it – specifically – a training in relaxation, although most people do report that their ability to relax is definitely enhanced. The training is in self-awareness. Sometimes people do the course at the same time as attending counselling or psychotherapy, and the two go together to help the process of healing.

Mindfulness programmes may not be suitable for those currently under medical care for acute mental health issues. Although the course improves capability to cope with particularly stressful life events – as well as general everyday stress – it should be undertaken when you have the capacity to cope with the demands it will make on your routines and habits.

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How is the course structured?

If you join a group course in Mindfulness, you'll find it runs as eight weekly sessions, usually lasting between two and two-and-a-half hours, and sometimes including a morning-long or day-long session of practice at a weekend partway through the course.

This Mindfulness course can also be undertaken through distance learning, one-to-one in-person tuition, or a blending of both. We will cover the themes and practices of the usual eight-week group course, but each session is conducted one-to-one. This can be over the phone, online (using Skype, Facetime, etc, where available), or in person. Each session lasts between 60 and 75 minutes; during this time we will practise one or two mindfulness exercises and discuss your experience of them; we will talk about your practice at home over the preceding week; and we will talk through the theme for the week and your response to it.

When you apply to do the course, we arrange a preliminary orientation session. This usually lasts up to half-an-hour, and we can discuss what you are expecting from the course and how it will fit into your life. You can then make the decision whether and when to start the course, and we can arrange the best time to talk each week.

One of the advantages of learning mindfulness this way is the flexibility. Rather than waiting for a course to start, or finding that it's at a time or place that's not convenient, you can choose when to start and when the sessions will be. It's best if we make contact at the same time each week, but we can vary this according to circumstances. You could also have a 'gap week' – for instance, if you have a holiday planned.

Homepractice is also part of the course and you need to be able and willing to find time to practise between sessions – about 45 minutes a day, six days a week. We provide you with CDs with tutor-led instruction to help with this. You are also asked to reflect on your experience during the week in simple recorded form. Handouts are issued for each week – so there is no need to take notes during the sessions.

Sometimes people like to do additional reading on the background to mindfulness-based approaches to health. If you want to do this, we can include discussion on your reading in our sessions together. However, I want to emphasize that this sort of reading or study is entirely optional – and in fact we often advise students to avoid reading anything other than the basic material we send you, at least until they have completed the course.

Extra support outside the session time can generally be arranged if required, for example if something about your daily practice seems not clear or you want to ask something about the practice. When the course finishes, we arrange to be in touch again after about a month. This gives you an opportunity to check-in with us about how things are going.

Methods and Content

This course includes elements common to both MBSR and MBCT, and aims to develop the core mindfulness skills of attending more fully to your experience in the present moment without passing judgement. You will learn through the following methods:

- Body awareness or 'Body scan'

In this first exercise which we practice in class and at home, you are asked to lie (or sit if you prefer) with your eyes closed while following spoken directions to attend to different areas of the body, simply noticing any sensations or feelings that arise there.

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- Sitting mindfulness meditation

Practice develops progressively over the course, starting with 10 minutes focussing attention on the breath and later broadening awareness to the body as a whole, sounds and thoughts as phenomena. You will also learn the three-minute breathing space, a (very) short form of meditation that can be used informally in daily life when stressful moments occur. (We meditate sitting in chairs; you are not expected to sit on the floor.)

- Mindful movement

Here, simple and gentle stretching exercises drawn mainly from the yoga tradition are practised with the aim of observing physical sensations and our emotional reactions to them. We may also practise mindful walking – again, just being aware of the physical sensations that this simple activity involves.

- Discussion / Enquiry

Discussion – or enquiry into experience – can help by reassuring us that we all share, more or less, the same kinds of mental habits and patterns. All human beings have similar mental processes, helpful and less helpful. You choose how much of your experience you wish to share.

- Home practice

Formal practice at home is an important part of the course, as already mentioned. You will also be encouraged to practise mindfulness informally in everyday activities.

If you have read through this information and are still wondering whether the course is appropriate for you at this time in your life, contact me and we can talk it over.

Who I am



Mark Bowden (BA, PGCE) began teaching yoga and meditation in the early 1980s and is a former Director of Bristol Buddhist Centre.

Mark has been teaching mindfulness courses since 2007. He has trained with Bangor University's Centre for Mindfulness, with the Breathworks organization, and with Exeter University. Mark also supervises other teachers through Mindfulness Network and has contributed to research programmes on mindfulness at Bristol and Southampton Universities.

Cost

The cost of the course is £240. This includes a preliminary orientation session before the course starts, the eight sessions, support between sessions as required, CDs/mp3s to guide your practice at home between sessions, a course handbook, and a follow-up session one month after the course finishes. Concessions may be possible, according to circumstances.

To apply for the course, or to talk more about mindfulness, contact me on 01392 439715 or 07951 820803 or at info@mindbase.co.uk.

The present is the only time that we have to be alive, to perceive, to learn, to change, to act, to heal. Life only unfolds in moments. The healing power of mindfulness lies in living each one as fully as we can. (Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn)

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