

How to practice mindfulness

Twenty-first century living is often hectic and – for many of us – stressful. But one thing that has become hugely popular lately for managing stress, as well as many other aspects of mental wellbeing, is a practice called mindfulness.

Despite the fact that it became all the rage relatively recently, mindfulness isn't anything new. In fact, it has its origins in Buddhism, which may explain why mindfulness is often associated with meditation. However, mindfulness is about much more than that. Indeed, there are lots of quick and easy ways to practise mindfulness throughout your day that may help you become more of your thoughts and feelings, which may in turn help you to manage them better.

You can practice mindfulness anywhere and at any time, and best of all you only have to spend a few minutes a day doing it to reap benefits. It can be helpful for anyone of any age, including children, and you don't have to be religious or spiritual to practise it. But most importantly, it's probably not the complicated thing you may think it is at all.

Did you know? Mindfulness is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) as a way to prevent depression in people who've had three or more bouts of depression in the past. (*Source: NHS Choices*)

What is mindfulness exactly?

The idea behind mindfulness is really simple. It's about being present in the moment – or in other words, being aware of the here and now, including being aware of your thoughts, feelings, body sensations and your surroundings. To put it another way, it's the exact opposite of mindlessness.

For instance, have you ever walked into a room and forgotten why you went there in the first place? Most of us have done just that at some time or another. But while we may blame our memory, the problem usually has more to do with the fact that our mind simply became distracted from what we were doing.

So if, like most people, you're constantly multi-tasking and juggling any number of different tasks and thoughts, not just at work but also at home, it should be no surprise that you lack awareness of the present moment. According to the NHS, however, paying more attention to the present moment can help you enjoy life more and understand yourself better.

How can it help me?

The Mental Health Foundation claims mindfulness can be used as a tool to manage your wellbeing and mental health. Here's a list of some of the things the charity says it may be good for:

- It can help you feel less overwhelmed
- It can help improve your sleep quality
- It can change the way you think and feeling about your experiences – especially stressful experiences – so that you think about them more positively

- It can boost your ability to manage difficult situations
- it can help you make wiser choices
- It can help reduce levels of anxiety, depression and stress
- It can reduce the amount of time you spend chewing things over in your mind
- It can help you have greater compassion for yourself

Researchers have also looked at whether or not mindfulness is useful for treating physical health issues, with studies suggesting it may have a positive effect on conditions such as high blood pressure, insomnia, chronic fatigue syndrome and chronic pain. There is also some evidence that, where depression is concerned, mindfulness may work just as well as antidepressant drugs. Some experts believe it may be an effective tool in the treatment of addiction too.

How can I learn mindfulness?

You can learn mindfulness techniques from books, face-to-face courses or online courses – the Mental Health Foundation, for instance, runs an online course called [Be Mindful](#). But you don't have to do a course or read a book. Here are some different ways you can practice mindfulness during your day:

Mindful meditation If you have a few minutes to spare and a quiet place to sit, try this simple meditation (it's suitable for anyone, even complete beginners). All you have to do is focus on your breathing, which helps you to become more aware of the present moment:

- Find a warm, quiet place where you won't be disturbed or distracted. Get into a comfortable position – but don't lie down, as you may fall asleep.
- With your eyes either open or closed, start focusing on your breathing. Count your breaths, if you like, or repeat a soothing word every time you exhale. Try repeating the word 'calm', 'still', 'peace' or 'quiet', for instance.
- Focus your attention on your body. Start with your feet and work your way right up to the top of your head, concentrating on each part and how it feels in that exact moment.
- If other thoughts come into your head, bring your attention back to your breathing and let the thoughts gently flow back out again.

Mindful brushing It's easy to let your mind wander while doing everyday things such as brushing your teeth. Instead, try to pay attention to how the toothpaste tastes and feels in your mouth, the sound of your toothbrush moving against your teeth, how the bristles feel when they come into contact with your gums and how fresh your mouth feels when you've finished.

Mindful eating When you sit down to eat, try switching off any distractions such as the TV, radio or your mobile phone, and avoid talking or reading the newspaper. Give your full attention to your food. How does it smell? What colour is it? What are the textures like? Is it hot or cold, and how does the temperature feel in your mouth? Chew slowly and really savour your meal. Finish eating when you feel satisfied – you don't have to clear your plate.

Mindful drinking An ordinary activity such as making and having a cup of tea can also be practised mindfully. Start by noticing how the kettle gets heavier as you fill it with water. Listen to the sound of the water as it runs from the tap and how the stream catches the light. Pay attention to the sound the water makes as it bubbles and comes to the boil. Then watch the

boiling water pouring into your cup, noticing how the water changes colour when it comes into contact with the teabag and how steam escapes into the air.

Sit quietly to drink your tea and pay attention to the warmth of your cup in your hands. Take a sip and savour the taste – what flavours can you taste? How does the warmth of the liquid feel in your mouth? Take your time and try not to rush back to what you were doing earlier.

Mindful walking The next time you go out for a walk, try to really notice what's going on around you. Think about the way the ground feels under your feet and how the wind feels on your face. Consider how you breathe as you walk – are you breathing more deeply and quickly than usual? Notice the buildings, your fellow pedestrians and the rest of your surroundings. What sounds can you hear? What does the sky look like?

Mindful commuting Practising mindfulness can help if you use public transport to get to work and home again too. Try to be conscious of the physical sensations in your body – are your muscles tense? If so, try to relax them. Look out of the window and pay attention to the scenery. Notice the rhythm of the movement of your transport. If you feel uncomfortable in overcrowded environments, try focusing on your breathing.

Mindfulness apps

A convenient way to practise mindful meditation is to use a mobile phone app. Many of these apps are free to start with, but if you want to progress you may have to pay for in-app purchases or a premium subscription. The following are currently among the most popular mindfulness apps – why not give one a try?

Calm Available for both the [iPhone](#) and [Android](#) devices, Calm offers a range of guided mindful meditations that range from three to 25 minutes in length – so you can try one even if you're really short on time. Other features include breathing exercises as well as soothing sounds and sleep stories to help you drift off. Ideal for beginners, it also has a lot to offer those who are more advanced in their mindfulness practice.

The Mindfulness App As well as guided and non-guided mindful meditation sessions, this app offers a five-day introduction to mindfulness – which you may find useful if you're a beginner. It also displays regular messages on your phone to help you stay grounded throughout the day, called Mindful Notices. The ability to save your favourite session to use when you're offline is also very convenient, especially if you don't always have internet access. Available for [iPhone](#) and [Android](#) phones.

Headspace Ideal if you're new to mindful meditation, Headspace includes a variety of guided mindful meditations, including mini meditations lasting just two to three minutes. You can also track your progress and keep a check on how much time you spend meditating, and if you need help with falling asleep at night the app offers a variety of sleep sounds. There's lots more to explore – visit the [Apple App Store](#) or the [Google Play store](#) for more details.

Buddhify The idea behind the Buddhify app is that you don't have to sit quietly to do its meditations. In fact it offers a range of mindfulness exercises you can do while you're going about your day-to-day activities, whether you're at the office, in the gym or at home. There are sessions for complete beginners as well as those with more experience, offering practices lasting from three to 40 minutes. It's available from the [Apple App Store](#) and [Google Play store](#), though it currently costs a few pounds to download.

Useful links

If you are experiencing any of the issues covered in this guide, in the first instance call our free helpline on 0808 801 0550. Our Advisors will listen without judging and will work with you as best

they can to achieve a positive outcome. If you prefer you can email support@ltcharity.org.uk; Visit our website: www.licensedtradecharity.org.uk. It's full of useful information about the kind of issues we know people who work in the licensed trade face.

Other sources of information:

Mental Health Foundation

www.mentalhealth.org.uk

This mental health charity website offers a complete section on [mindfulness](#).

Be Mindful

bemindful.co.uk/

The website for the Mental health Foundation's online mindfulness course.

Mind

www.mind.org.uk

The mental health charity Mind also provides information about [mindfulness](#), including how to practice it and how it can help with mental health problems, on its website

Mindful

www.mindful.org

A not-for-profit organisation aimed at 'anyone who wants to explore mindfulness'.

Oxford Mindfulness Centre

oxfordmindfulness.org

Research company that has built up a body of knowledge on mindfulness; the website has a page devoted to [mindfulness books](#).

Nottinghamshire Centre for Mindfulness

www.nottinghamshirehealthcare.nhs.uk/ncm

NHS centre providing mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MNCT) – see the [resources](#) page for a number of free mindful guided meditations.

UK Network for Mindfulness-Based Teacher Training Organisations

www.ukmindfulnessnetwork.co.uk

Find a mindfulness course or teacher by using the search facility on the [UK listing page](#).

NOTE: This guide is not exhaustive. It has been produced by the Licensed Trade Charity to provide you with an overview of the issue in question. If you're experiencing problems with this issue, our Advisors are available to you.