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## Q&A on Mindfulness

### What is mindfulness?

#### Mindfulness:

- is the practice of paying attention to the present moment, non-judgementally, with openness and curiosity.
- involves bringing awareness to present thoughts, emotions and sensations in your body, as well as what is going on in the external environment– sights, sounds, touch and smell.
- is a skill that anybody can learn; you don't need any special tools or equipment.
- is cultivated both through meditation practices and with everyday activities.

### Why practice mindfulness?

We all have different ways of managing our own health, well-being and focus, and mindfulness offers one such route.

Although the description of mindfulness makes it sound relatively simple, it can sometimes be difficult to bring our awareness to the present moment, particularly when we are stressed, busy or distracted by what is going on around us.

Our minds can often be:

- fast-forwarding to the future (such as thinking about a client deadline, about how much work we have on, or rehearsing a difficult conversation we are anticipating, for example), or
- ruminating on the past (such as worrying about an email we have sent to a client/colleague earlier in the day, or even churning over conversations and experiences we have had a very long time ago).

Learning how to focus our attention back to what is happening ‘right now’ rather than fast-forwarding to the future or ruminating on the past can positively impact our outlook, feelings, and stress levels in a powerful way.

The good news is, we all have the capacity to be mindful – it just takes some patience and practice.

### How might mindfulness help me as a professional?

Mindfulness can be helpful to a wide range of people and professions.

There are some commonly found features of any profession which can, if left unmanaged, exacerbate stress levels both on an individual and a corporate level.

These might include:

- Time management, and, in the case of private and some in-house practice; having ‘billable’ hours targets;
- High workload;
- Dealing with difficult intellectual issues against a tight and driven deadline;
- Demanding clients;
- Long hours;
- Poor support networks or supervision;
- The tendency to be perfectionists;
- Poor management of bad habits

### What are the potential benefits? What is the evidence that it works?

There is a growing evidence base around the use of mindfulness and the impact this can have on reducing stress and improving well-being.

There are now over 4500 peer-reviewed research papers on the mental, physical and emotional benefits of mindfulness. We have highlighted a small sample below that are of relevance to potential benefits of mindfulness.

- Mindfulness improves the ability to pay attention: The average mindfulness practitioner had stronger attention skills than 72% of non-meditators.<sup>1</sup>
- Mindfulness training has been shown to improve working memory.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> P. Vergaegen, Presence: How Mindfulness and Meditation shape your brain, mind, and life (Oxford University Press, 2017)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 111

- Neuroscientific studies into mindfulness have indicated that mindfulness it is associated with brain changes that seem to reflect improvements in attention and emotional regulation.<sup>3</sup>
- A meta-analysis of six randomised controlled trials for people who were currently well and who had a history of three or more episodes of depression found that Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) reduced the risk of relapse by almost half (43%) in comparison to control groups.<sup>4</sup>
- A year-long study led by Ashridge Business School found that mindfulness training significantly affects a number of areas relating to resilience, collaboration and the capacity to lead in complex conditions. Notably, the effects were far greater if participants practiced for more than 10 minutes per day. Those who took part reported that the effects of the course were sustained after three months.<sup>5</sup>

### How do we practise mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a completely secular practice which involves both formal (meditation) and portable (i.e. moment to moment) training of our attention. Practising meditation can help cultivate an ability to be more mindful, and more present with your current experience. Having a regular formal practice can also be very useful in training the attitudes and ability to be present throughout normal daily life.

However, we can practise mindfulness with virtually everything we do, by simply bringing a conscious awareness to whatever it is we are doing.

This involves noticing the physical and emotional sensations that accompany the activity or experience, noticing when our minds wander off to being somewhere else, and gently guiding our minds back to the experience right now, without recrimination or judgment and with an attitude of kindness to oneself.

A real benefit of mindfulness lies in the capacity to bring that sustained non-judgmental present awareness to whatever it is we are doing right now.

So you can have a mindful shower, eat something mindfully, go for a mindful walk, or practise some mindful listening next time you engaged in conversation with someone.

### How quickly will it work, and how long do I need to practise to get the benefit?

Mindfulness is not a 'quick fix'. It takes patience, persistence, and regularity. If you compare it to physical exercise, think about the effect of doing one sit-up, or even one hour of intense physical exercise. This is unlikely to have a long-lasting effect on your life. But if you did a regular amount of exercise each day, you would start to feel and see the results. The same applies to mindfulness.

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<sup>3</sup> Chiesa A, Calati R, Serretti A. Does mindfulness training improve cognitive abilities? A systematic review of neuropsychological findings. *Clinical Psychology Review*. 2011;31:449–464. Ostafin BD, Kassman KT. Stepping out of history: Mindfulness improves insight problem-solving. *Consciousness and Cognition*. 2012;21(2):1031-6

<sup>4</sup> 1 Piet J, Hougaard E. The effect of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for prevention of relapse in recurrent major depressive

<sup>5</sup> <https://hbr.org/2016/11/mindfulness-works-but-only-if-you-work-at-it>

## Will it make me relax?

Whilst relaxation can be, and often is a by-product of practising mindfulness, it is not the “aim” of it. Practising mindfulness is about noticing our present moment experience, whatever that is for us right now and bringing a skilful open and non-judgmental awareness to that experience. Indeed, we may notice that we’re not relaxed!

## Where can I begin?

You can practice mindfulness meditation anywhere, in any position – sitting, lying down or walking. Your posture should be comfortable and alert. You might want to listen to a guided meditation using an App. There are many useful resources to get you started at [www.mindful.org](http://www.mindful.org), including guided meditations.

You can begin to practice mindfulness right now if you want to! Here is [one](#) guided meditation, and here is [another](#), especially for working with difficult emotions. Here’s a physical [body scan](#). Here’s a nice [how-to](#), also. We highly recommend this site ([mindful.org](http://mindful.org)) and you may wish to see what it contains that is of interest to you.

## Is mindfulness practice for everyone?

If you are clinically depressed, suffer from mental illness, or have substance abuse issues, please speak to a certified mindfulness teacher about whether you should start a mindfulness practice.

## Will mindfulness help me at work?

Whilst mindfulness is not a magic “fix” for work issues the practice will help you to alter your approach and response to that environment. In brief, mindfulness helps us to recognise the way we react in ways which may not be helpful to us and others (for example, acting out or repressing anger), and give us the space in our mind to recognise the situation as it is and make conscious choices as to how best to respond.

## Further Information and Resources on Mindfulness

Our Q&A page contains lots of helpful information on what mindfulness is and how it can help individuals in the workplace.

The organisations and resources listed below are also recommended if you want to find out more about mindfulness:

- **Mindfulness Initiative:** <https://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk/>
- **Mental Health Foundation/Be Mindful Online:** <https://bemindful.co.uk/>
- **UK Listing of Mindfulness Teachers:** <https://www.ukmindfulnessnetwork.co.uk/uk-listing/>
- **Mindful.org:** <https://www.mindful.org/>
- **Practical Meditation:** <https://www.practicalmeditation.co.uk/>
- **Building the Case for Mindfulness in the Workplace (published by the Mindfulness Initiative):**  
[https://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk/images/reports/MI\\_Building-the-Case\\_v1.1\\_Oct16.pdf](https://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org.uk/images/reports/MI_Building-the-Case_v1.1_Oct16.pdf)

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