What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a hot topic in Western psychology, increasingly recognised as an effective way to increase fulfillment, reduce stress, raise self-awareness, enhance emotional intelligence, and undermine destructive emotive, cognitive, and behavioural processes. While many people think mindfulness means meditation, this is not the case. Mindfulness is a mental state of openness, awareness and focus, and meditation is just one way among hundreds of learning to cultivate this state.

Although mindfulness has only recently been embraced by Western psychology, it is an ancient practice found in a wide range of Eastern philosophies, including Buddhism, Taoism and Yoga. Mindfulness involves consciously bringing awareness to your here-and-now experience with openness, curiosity and flexibility. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a world authority on the use of mindfulness training in the management of clinical problems, defines it as: "Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."

Mindfulness is about waking up, connecting with ourselves, and appreciating the fullness of each moment of life. Kabat-Zinn calls it, "The art of conscious living." It is a profound way to enhance psychological and emotional resilience and
increase life satisfaction.

**The Benefits of Mindfulness.** Practicing mindfulness helps you:

- to be fully present, here and now to experience unpleasant thoughts and feelings safely
- to become aware of what you’re avoiding
- to become more connected to yourself, to others and to the world around you
- to become less judgmental
- to increase self-awareness
- to become less disturbed by and less reactive to unpleasant experiences
- to learn the distinction between you and your thoughts
- to have more direct contact with the world, rather than living through your thoughts
- to learn that everything changes; that thoughts and feelings come and go like the weather
- to have more balance and less emotional volatility
- to experience more calm and peacefulness
- to develop self-acceptance and self-compassion

**Mindfulness and Psychotherapy**

Mindfulness training has emerged as a powerful, evidence-based tool for enhancing psychological health. It is empirically supported as an effective intervention in a wide range of clinical disorders, including chronic pain, anxiety disorders, depression, PTSD, OCD, substance abuse, and borderline personality disorder.

**Practicing Mindfulness**

Mindfulness allows you to notice when you are caught up in negative or unhelpful thoughts (e.g., “I don’t want to study now - it’s boring”) which can derail you from your studies and lead you to procrastinate. Once you are aware of buying into your negative thoughts, you can learn to refocus on the present moment to take action in a valued direction (e.g., sit down to study).

A simple mindfulness exercise focuses on the experience of eating a sultana. If you don’t have a sultana at hand a piece of fruit or chocolate will do. Now eat the food in slow motion with a total focus on the taste and texture of the fruit, and the sounds, sensations and movements inside your mouth. While you’re doing this, all sorts of distracting thoughts and feelings may arise. The aim is simply to let your thoughts come and go, and allow your feelings to be there, and keep your attention focused on eating the sultana.

What you may notice is that there is so much flavor in one single sultana or piece of fruit. You probably noticed things you had never noticed before about eating this food. The same thing happens when you are sitting in a lecture or at a social engagement when you are caught up in your thoughts. Too much attention is being taken by your inner experience rather than what is going on around you. As a result, you miss out on important events or information. If your thoughts are negative or unhelpful and you are consumed by them, they are more likely to leave you feeling depressed, stressed or anxious and to become less productive. The key is to learn how to let them come and go, that is, practice mindfulness.

**Daily Mindfulness**

Now it’s your turn to ‘get out of your head and into your life’ by practicing full engagement with all the five senses in a number of daily routines (e.g., having a shower, brushing your teeth and washing the dishes). Remember, when you notice yourself being distracted by thoughts and feelings unrelated to the present moment, acknowledge them, thank your mind and return to the here and now. Mindfulness is a skill like any other, the more you practice it, the more familiar it becomes.

**Mindfulness Apps**

You can download some mindfulness apps to your smart phone and practice with the convenience of headphones. You may like to try, Smiling Mind, Calm or Headspace. Don’t worry if you don’t like all of the exercises – practice with the ones that suit you.


UNSW Resources - [https://student.unsw.edu.au/meditation](https://student.unsw.edu.au/meditation)