

# Mindfulness



Do you ever feel like your thoughts are racing 100 miles a minute? Or that there's just too much going on and you can't find time to breathe? Or that your emotions become so overwhelming that you feel out of control? Perhaps mindfulness could help.

## What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a very simple but powerful technique that can enhance everyday living. But let's start with what it isn't as there are common misconceptions. Mindfulness isn't emptying your mind or having no thoughts. Nor is it necessarily about doing meditation type exercises, though that is often the best place to start.

So what is it? Mindfulness is simply *awareness, of the present moment, without judgment*. Let's pull that apart.

1. **Awareness.** You can become *aware* of anything. For example, you can be aware of internal things like: your breathing, your thoughts, feelings, emotions, sounds, vision, bodily sensations, behaviour, etc. And external things like other people, situations, trees, wind, birdsong etc. So, being mindful of your thoughts would mean paying attention to and becoming aware of your thoughts. Being mindful on a walk would mean noticing the things around you from your various senses.
2. **The present moment.** How often are we not in the present moment, but thinking about the past or the future? Or lost in rumination and not noticing the world around us? We lose ourselves to the present when we worry about "what if's" or "should have's" for instance. You cannot change anything in the past, and the future is not here yet. The only place we have any power is in the present moment. That is what being fully present means.

3. **Non-judgment.** This is often the more difficult part. To be aware WITHOUT judgment, ... and without resistance as, “What you resist, persists.” The more you try to NOT do or think something, the more you seem to do it or think it. So in mindfulness we are not trying to resist thinking about something. We are allowing the thoughts to come and go, but without judging them. Or looking at it another way we are **accepting** them. Often we have an ongoing commentary in our mind that is constantly judging. *“I am really annoyed with that person”* may be a thought which might be quickly followed by *“That is not nice. I shouldn’t think that way.”* Or, *“I feel really sad,”* followed by *“That is not okay. I shouldn’t feel sad. Other people have bigger problems”* Or *“It is weak and pathetic to feel sad. Snap out of it.”* You get the idea.

Mindfulness is not about stopping the thoughts but about allowing an awareness that is non-judgmental. More like a David Attenborough approach, where we just witness as a detached observer. “I feel sad,” with just an acknowledgment of it, not a judgment. An acceptance and perhaps even a compassionate acceptance. “I feel sad. It is just an emotion I am feeling at this moment.” Or even, *“I am feeling sad. That’s understandable and maybe I need to nurture myself in some way.”* Or *“I am noticing that I am judging myself for feeling sad. How interesting.”* Or, *“I am having a thought about what my friend thinks of my not being able to go to the dinner with them. I am assuming they will be really upset with me. It is just a thought. It is not reality. It is a thought I am having about a situation.”* So, to reiterate, is not about stopping the thoughts, feelings etc. It is about accepting them and letting them come and go without resistance and without judgment. Over time this changes our brain!

### How do we learn to do this?

You can practice in mindful meditations. There are classes and apps you can use to get started. However, it is also about being more mindful day to day, not just while you are doing a meditation. Doing one thing at a time with relaxed focussed attention is mindful.

Why would we do this? Well because when you can learn over time to pay attention, in the present moment, without judgment life starts to become more pleasant in many ways as a bi-product of the quality of attention we bring to it. And we become gentler with ourselves and with others. When we stop either being overwhelmed by our thoughts/feelings/sensations/emotions, or trying to avoid or get rid of them, we can learn another way of being that is more effective. But like most things worthwhile – it takes time and practice to get good at it.

Give it a go. What have you got to lose?