

Mindfulness-based approaches to psychological wellbeing

Tasim Martin, psychologist at the First Psychology Centre, Edinburgh takes a look at mindfulness-based approaches and how they can help.

WHAT IS 'MINDFULNESS'?

Mindfulness originated from Eastern meditation practices and it is now being increasingly used in Western approaches to improving physical and mental health. It was introduced to modern health care by Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn. It can be defined as paying attention to our experience in the present moment, to what is going on in our mind, body and day-to-day life, in a nonjudgemental or accepting way (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

HOW CAN IT HELP?

We can often find ourselves wishing things were different, particularly when caught up in our everyday thoughts and feelings, responsibilities and illnesses. These experiences can be so powerful we get 'swept away' and find ourselves feeling very bad, very quickly and without realising how we got there. If our attempts to make things better don't work, we feel stuck, which can then make things even worse. Mindfulness can help us to work directly with our difficulties by helping us:

- notice when we become preoccupied with worries, plans or memories;
- become less likely to behave automatically without awareness of our actions;
- drop the rope in the tug of war with our emotions, freeing us up to do other things;
- tap into our insight or 'wise mind'.

WHAT ARE MINDFULNESS-BASED APPROACHES?

The four main approaches are Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). These approaches have been used with children, adolescents and adults to successfully treat a wide range of physical and psychological difficulties.

Mindfulness is taught as sets of practical skills and can be learned over a few minutes, several sessions, as a structured eight session programme or as part of a year of intensive therapy depending on the approach and nature of the difficulty being treated.

HOW CAN I PRACTISE MINDFULNESS?

When reading this article, your mind has probably been focused some of the time and distracted at other times by noises, thoughts or memories. Try reading it again. When it gets distracted, as it will, gently and non-judgementally notice this and return it to focus on reading again. This mindful awareness can be brought to any routine activity such as walking, eating and most commonly, breathing. A more formal mindfulness breathing exercise is detailed below.

EXERCISE: BREATHING TO CONNECT

Sit or lie comfortably with your eyes closed. For the next six minutes connect with your breathing. Notice the gentle rise and fall of your rib cage and follow the air in and out of your lungs. Let any thoughts and feelings come and go, and each time you notice that your attention has wandered, gently refocus (you'll need to do this again and again... and again). For the next three minutes expand your awareness so that you're aware of your body and feelings as well as your breath. For the final minute open your eyes and connect with the room around you, as well as with your body, your feelings, and your breathing (Harris, 2007).

OUTCOMES

As well as improving quality of life over the long term, many people find cultivating mindfulness reveals inner strengths and resources that help them make wise decisions about things they are thinking, feeling or doing right now.

FURTHER RESOURCES

CDs: There are a range of self-help and guided mindfulness meditation CDs and MP3s available widely. A good one to start with is Jon Kabat-Zinn's, *Mindfulness for Beginners*

Books:

Baer, R.A. (2006), *Mindfulness-Based Treatment Approaches: Clinician's Guide to Evidence Base and Applications*, London: Elsevier.

Harris, R. (2007), *The Happiness Trap*, London: Robinson.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990), *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*, New York: Delacorte.

Websites: www.mbsr.co.uk, www.mbct.co.uk, www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness

Psychological therapy: Our First Psychology centres offer one-to-one (and group-based) psychological therapy using mindfulness-based approaches to manage common difficulties. To find out more or to book an initial session, please contact your local centre:

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