

Mindfulness

**A short guide to mindfulness for
people living with a long-term health
condition.**

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What is mindfulness?

Put simply, mindfulness is a way of slowing down, and noticing what's going on around us. Mindfulness has traditionally been associated with meditation, but actually we can be mindful anywhere, any time.

Imagine the scene, you arrive home from work and find you can't remember a single moment of the journey. This lack of awareness, which happens to all of us at times, is called automatic pilot (autopilot). When we are in automatic pilot mode we get pulled along from one task to another without really stopping to notice what's going on for us, and in the world around us. Existing in automatic pilot robs us of the present moment, a blue sky, a moment of connection with a loved one, a tasty meal. More importantly, we don't know when our mood is becoming low.

When we practise mindfulness, we get better at picking up unhelpful patterns earlier, and nipping them in the bud. We learn to stand back from our thoughts and notice them without judgement. This means we can interrupt unhelpful behaviours that don't fit with how we want to be. Perhaps we are irritable, snappy, or we agree to things that we don't want to do.

Slowing down and becoming mindful lets us choose to respond rather than react, allowing us to become more effective in our lives.

What mindfulness isn't

Mindfulness as it is practiced by therapists is not a religion. It's an approach to living that evidence suggests can help people to manage day-to-day stress, and look after their physical and mental health.

You do not have to sit cross legged in a dark room. You can practice mindfulness almost anywhere at any time. Research has shown that even 20 minutes a day can have health benefits.

Mindfulness is not about clearing your mind, 'zoning out', or getting rid of your thoughts. It's about getting to know the habits of your mind and learning to observe them without judgment.

Mindfulness is not supposed to relax you. If you happen to feel relaxed when you practice it, that's fine, but if you don't, that's fine too.

How will mindfulness help me?

This is hard to say as it will vary from person to person and can only be discovered by you practicing and seeing for yourself.

Research is in the early stages but some studies suggest that, over time, mindfulness can contribute to improved mental and physical wellbeing. Scientific studies have shown that mindfulness can reduce the risk of relapse into depression, and that it can positively affect the brain patterns responsible for how we respond to everyday anxiety, stress, depression and irritability.

Some studies have shown that mindfulness can improve mood and quality of life for people with a variety of long-term conditions including fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis, and cancer.

It is important to note that mindfulness is not a cure-all, it won't magically get rid of your worries, pain or fatigue. Living with a long-term condition can bring with it worries about the future, and rumination on how hard things can be.

Mindfulness can help people to live well with their condition by giving them a tool focused on managing the difficult thoughts and emotions that come with a health condition.

How can I become more mindful?

There are many ways to become more mindful. The most common one is to practice mindfulness meditation exercises. This will involve practicing focusing your awareness on a particular thing, such as the breath, and when your mind wanders (which it will, it's what minds do), gently returning to the breath. During your practice you will repeat this process many times. There are many resources that give free access to mindfulness audio tracks which are a great way to practice mindfulness (details later on in this leaflet).

As well as meditating, you can also develop your mindfulness skills by becoming more aware when you carry out everyday tasks. Read the example below, 'A mindful cup of tea'. Bringing your awareness to everyday tasks like this can help to break out of chronic cycles of worry and rumination, and notice what's here in the present moment.

A mindful cup of tea - an exercise in everyday mindfulness

Have you ever noticed that you are so lost in thought that you don't pay attention to what you are actually doing? This autopilot can mean we spend a lot of time in our heads, planning or worrying about the future, or ruminating on the past. One way to become more present is to bring mindfulness to everyday things. For example, a cup of tea.

Notice the sound of the kettle boiling. Watch the tea steep, the colours change. Notice the aromas. Take your time. Add milk (if you like it) and observe. Bring the cup slowly to your mouth, notice the warmth of the cup against your skin.

Really take the time to taste the tea, savour the flavour as if you were tasting it for the first time. If your mind wanders, that's ok, just bring it gently back to the tea when you notice this.

Reflection: What did you notice about this exercise? How was it to really be in your experience rather than thinking about something else? This exercise shows us how we can bring mindful awareness to any moment in our lives. In this way we can fully appreciate the everyday things, and be truly present in this moment.

How can I learn more about mindfulness?

Access audio recordings online

There are many free/cheap resources to learn mindfulness. You can access audio recordings on one of these sites:

Bangor University,

w: www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness/audio/index.php.en

Frantic World,

w: www.franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/

Go on a course

Attend an eight-week course with a professional teacher, in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) or mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). You can look up local courses here,

w: www.bemindful.co.uk/learn-mindfulness/ or simply type 'MBCT' or 'MBSR' and your local area into Google.

w: www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness/learn-mindfulness.php.en

Breathworks, an organisation that has courses and resources for people living with long-term conditions,

w: www.breathworks-mindfulness.org.uk/

Through self-help books

Mindfulness: Finding peace in a frantic world, by Dr Danny Penman and Mark Williams

Mindfulness for health, by Vidyamala Burch and Dr Danny Penman

Living well with pain and illness, by Vidyamala Burch.

Mindfulness apps

Velindre mindfulness app, has a variety of audio exercises available for free, for Android and iPhone.

Headspace app, requires subscription but has many mindfulness exercises on topics such as managing anxiety, stress relief, breathing, and sleep meditations.

Further sources of information

NHS website, **w:** www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mindfulness/

Contact us

For more information on leaflets on conditions, procedures and services offered at our hospitals, please visit **w:** www.guysandstthomas.nhs.uk/leaflets

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS). To make a complaint, contact the complaints department.

t: 020 7188 8801 (PALS) **e:** pals@gstt.nhs.uk

t: 020 7188 3514 (complaints) **e:** complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Pharmacy Medicines Helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your medicines, please speak to the staff caring for you or call our helpline. **t:** 020 7188 8748, Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm

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