

GOING TO THE MENTAL GYM

Why it's worth caring about mindfulness and compassion

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Welcome

What is Mindfulness?

A mental training technique that enables anyone who practices it to lead a more attentive, appreciative and vibrant life.

It is all too easy to get caught up in ruminations of the past or overwhelmed by fears for the future. At worst, we live life on autopilot, time-travelling backwards or forwards, losing our anchors to the present moment.

Being mindful is being aware of your own experience, moment to moment, without judgement.

Mindfulness practice teaches us to be aware of our thoughts, feelings, moods and bodily sensations as they are in the present moment so that we can see things as they are and not as we might wish them to be.

Why is that useful?

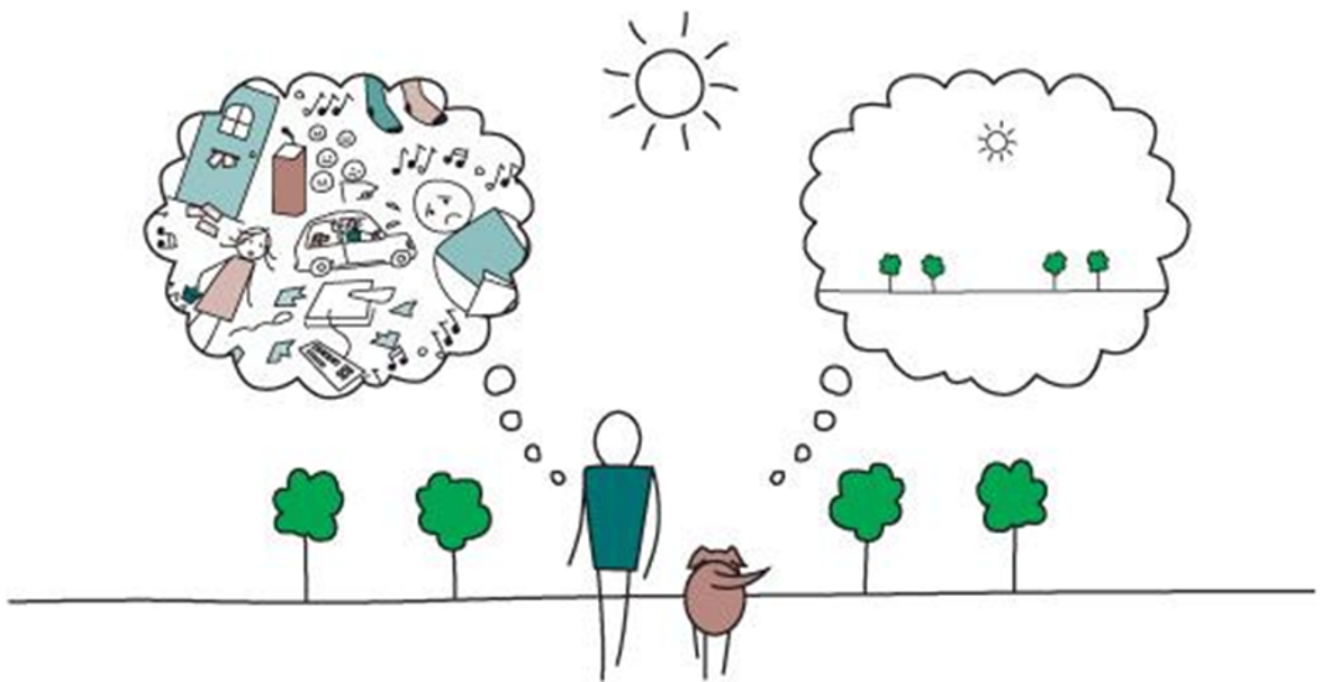
Because paying attention cultivates **awareness** of what is happening in our bodies and minds in the present moment.



And awareness fosters **understanding** of our feelings, experiences and behaviours.



Understanding allows us to **acknowledge** and **accept** our thoughts and feelings - without judgement but with compassion - leaving us the space and time to choose how to respond.



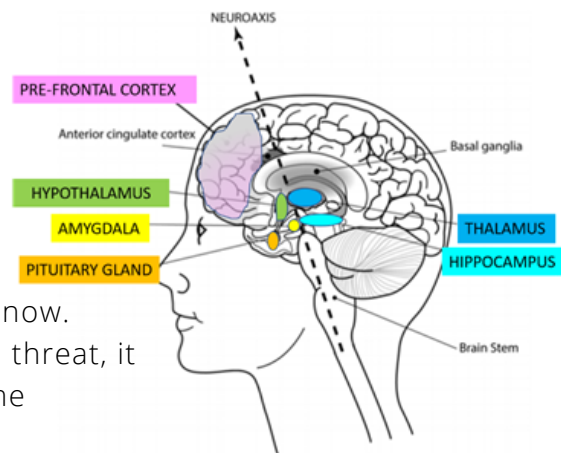
Mind Full, or Mindful?

So how might I benefit?

To answer that, let's first look at what happens in the body and brain when we experience stressful situations, and the implications when such situations are constant and chronic.

Something happens:

This is a threat of some kind. It might be a car heading towards you in the street, a worrisome thought, dealing with someone difficult, things not going your way. It might be something big or small, long-standing or short-lived. It might be happening right now or anticipation of something in the future. Or it could be something from the past that still evokes a physical or emotional reaction when it comes up now. Whatever the nature of the threat, it draws largely upon the same reactions in the body and brain.



The Amygdala reacts:

The Amygdala is the part of the brain involved with experiencing emotions – particularly fear and aggression (but it can experience positive emotions too) – and seeking out threats.

This, in turn, triggers a cascade of other processes:

The Thalamus:

- sends a wake-up signal to the brain stem, which stimulates release of the stress hormone **Adrenaline** through the brain.

The Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS)

- sends signals to the major organs and muscle groups in the body to ready them for 'fight or flight'.

The Hypothalamus:

- prompts the Pituitary Gland (brain) to tell the adrenal glands (on top of the kidneys) to release the stress hormones **Adrenaline** and **Cortisol**.

Adrenaline and Cortisol are the heavy hitters of the hormone world:

Adrenaline

- increases the heart rate, which pumps more blood around the body, helping muscles work faster and more efficiently.
- dilates the pupils - letting more light into the eyes.
- directs blood to the large muscle groups so they can work harder and longer.
- increases sugar release (glucose) to feed the muscles.
- increases oxygen intake to the brain promoting faster and clearer thinking.

Cortisol

- suppresses the immune system to reduce inflammation.
- stimulates the Amygdala even more, so the stress response is continually strengthening.
- suppresses the Hippocampus (the part of the brain that reins in the Amygdala), so that the stress cycle can continue.

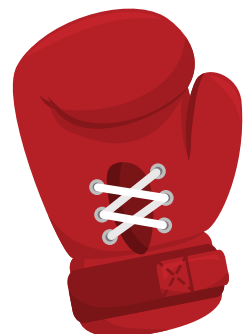
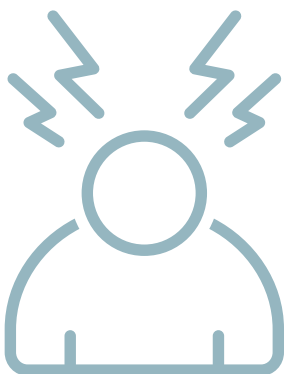
Alongside these processes, low priority bodily functions are shut down - such as reproduction, digestion (so you become constipated), salivation (so you get a dry mouth).

Whilst the Amygdala is so strongly stimulated, emotions (especially fear and negative emotions) intensify in order to organise and mobilise all the body's resources for action.

The Pre-frontal Cortex (the part of the brain involved in regulating actions, words and thoughts to create *benefit* rather than *harm*) declines.

In a nutshell:

You feel stressed, scared, angry and primed for a fight



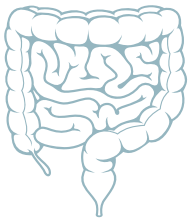
So at the right time, a response like this is normal, healthy and appropriate.

Once the threat goes away, the brain processes and sympathetic nervous system reactions should return back to their “unstimulated” state. But what happens when we are battling the constant onslaught of threats of all shapes and sizes, some big, some small, some long-standing, some short-lived? The nervous system will be constantly alerted to some degree.

Our bodies are equipped to deal with momentary stress or threats but not to cope with these responses being stimulated all the time, and over a much longer life expectancy than our early ancestors.

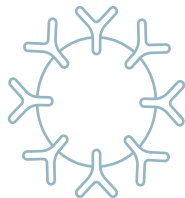
The result? Accumulated damage to an over-stimulated nervous system. Your body's resources are constantly being shunted away to what they perceive to be “emergency” situations, rather than building and supporting you for long-term, consistent health and happiness.

Just some of the known effects are:



Gastrointestinal

Ulcers, digestive and bowel conditions.



Immune

Increased susceptibility to infection.



Cardiovascular

hardening of arteries, heart attacks



Endocrine

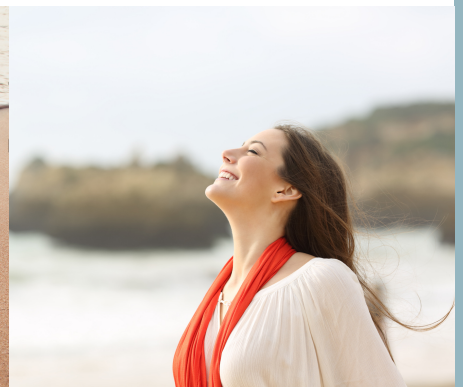
Type II Diabetes, reproductive problems



Anxiety and Depression

When the body and mind are **calm** however, whether through mindfulness meditation practice or some other technique, the parasympathetic nervous system is stimulated, causing the body to **stop** releasing stress hormones.

Many people who meditate regularly have learned to condition their body to relax on demand and according to research, can manage stress more effectively.



So are you saying that through mindfulness I could change the way my brain works, and even change the way I think?

Yes. Most of us have grown up with the belief that the way you think – what makes you “tick” – is fixed. It’s just “how you are”.

Scientists used to think the same. It was believed that most brain formation took place in childhood, and that by adulthood, your brain pathways were fixed and no longer changeable. However, since the advent of brain scans which can show “live” brains working in real time, they realised this was wrong. We now know that brains can, and do, change throughout our lives. They are adaptable and malleable. In neuroscience, this is called “Neuroplasticity”.

Think of your brain as a big road network – with billions of paths, tracks, roads, motorways, race tracks – all working at the same time to process the different kinds of traffic. Every time you think, feel or do something, part of that network will be activated by neurons in the brain. Some of the roads are very well-travelled – these represent our habits, established and practiced ways of thinking and doing. Every time we think in a particular way, or practice a particular task or feel a certain emotion, we are strengthening that road, making it easier and quicker for our brains to travel that way. But if we choose to think about things differently, learn something different, or choose a different emotional response, then a new path will be created. With more use, that new path will strengthen, and the old one, being used less and less, will weaken.

So if you have ever changed a habit, or thought about something in a different way, then you will already have experienced brain changes – neuroplasticity in action.

The good news is we can all do this, throughout our lives. It may feel difficult and clumsy at first, but by repeatedly directing attention towards the changes you desire, you can re-wire your brain.

Through mindfulness practice we can become attentive to how we think and behave. From that place of balanced awareness, we can choose to create new choices in how to live by seeing things as they really are and recognising early warning signs of stress or illness. The aim of attention training is to create the ability to pause and slow down in order to *respond* to what needs our attention rather than *react* to it. The more we can do this, the greater emotional balance we will experience.

So mindfulness actually changes the structure of your brain

Other studies have found that people with increased activity in brain areas linked to positive emotions (cultivated through mindfulness practice) reported greater psychological well-being, and that mindfulness leads to greater emotional resilience and recovery from negative experiences. Loving-kindness based mindfulness practices, in particular, help us foster feelings of genuine happiness and compassion towards ourselves and others.

So far, neuroscience does not measure the benefits of different amounts of mindfulness meditation, but the changes seen in the brain suggest that lasting results come from ongoing, regular practice – use it or lose it.

So aside from reducing stress levels, what are some of the other benefits?



Sounds great! How do I get started?

The good news is that you already have some mindfulness skills. But like anything worthwhile, these are skills that you develop through practice. Everyone already has some degree or another of mindfulness. It's something we acquire naturally through normal childhood development and growing up. But without deliberate training, few people progress very far past the basics. To truly thrive, we have to go to the mental gym. Informal mindfulness practices are a great starting point - this is when you practise mindfulness without carving out a special time for it. Here are some examples:

Mindful Communication

When you are speaking or listening to someone, really focus on the sound of their voice. Each time your mind wanders off, bring it gently back to focus on the sounds, without criticising yourself.

Mindful Queuing

Next time you're waiting in a queue in the supermarket, instead of getting impatient, you could spend a moment focussing on your senses. What can you see, hear, smell, touch, taste?

Gratitude Journal

Make a note every day of three things you are grateful for today. It could be something as simple as someone offering you a cup of tea.

A formal mindfulness routine lies at the heart of a mindful way of living. This is meditation practice that you set aside time for in your day – anything from 1 to 45 minutes or more, nearly every day. These practices invite us to practice focussing our attention on one thing. They are often guided - so you listen to a person's voice guiding you through the practice - this might be in person or from a recording. Here are some examples:

Mindful Breathing

This helps to stabilise and focus the mind by using the breath as a reliable anchor to the present moment.

Mindful Movement

We often find ourselves 'stuck in our heads' so in Mindful Movement we really sense into our bodies in a way that heightens our awareness of movement and reinvigorates the connection between mind and body. Tuning into the message our body is trying to send us helps broaden our senses and identify what our body needs.

Body Scan

In the body scan meditation we focus our minds on different parts of our body in turn and observe how each part feels. We work around the whole body, moving the spotlight from place to place pausing on each area to consider how that area feels. We do this exercise to build greater awareness of the physical body.

The real mental muscle gets made through regular practice including formal and informal aspects.

A taught course is often a great way to get started so you can ask questions and really understand how to be mindful.

What about compassion?

Self-compassion is an incredibly powerful tool for dealing with difficult emotions. Research shows that self-compassionate people tend to experience fewer negative emotions – such as fear, irritability, hostility or distress – than those who lack self-compassion.

The emotions still come up, but they are less frequent, less intense and less persistent.

Self-compassion practice helps you to soothe distress, soften self-criticism or judgement, connect with others rather than isolating, and have a balanced awareness of reality.



How do I learn compassion?

Be kind to yourself - treat yourself as you would your best friend.

Embrace your common humanity - we are all imperfect humans.

Be mindful - notice difficulties in a kind, loving way, rather than ignoring them.

And finally....a note about self-soothing

We all get stressed sometimes and whilst we may want others to soothe our pain and suffering, ultimately we need to be able to do this for ourselves. By soothing our own pain, we trigger production of the hormone Oxytocin - one of the "happy" hormones which increases feelings of trust, calm and safety and reduces fear and stress.

Here are some self-soothing exercises you might try at work or home:



Self-hugs - Find a quiet and private spot and give yourself a hug - it's just as effective as a hug from someone else in releasing Oxytocin. Focus on what it feels like and let the feelings sink in.



Favourite things - Make a mental list of your favourite food, film, sport/activity, season, music, animal.



Practice "soothe talking" - The voice of our inner critic is usually the loudest. A kinder, more compassionate voice will help you feel safe and connected and give you the confidence to keep going. You might say things like, *"I'm sorry you're having a bad day. I know this is a difficult time, it's OK to feel this way. This will pass."*

Thanks for reading.

I hope you've found this article interesting and are now curious to learn more about how mindfulness and compassion might help you or perhaps you're ready to get started.

In my work as a Fertility, Pregnancy and Gynaecology Acupuncturist, I integrate formal and informal mindfulness and compassion techniques into my one-to-one work with clients. From time to time I run group courses to teach mindfulness and compassion. If you'd like to work with me, just get in touch.

With warmest wishes,

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