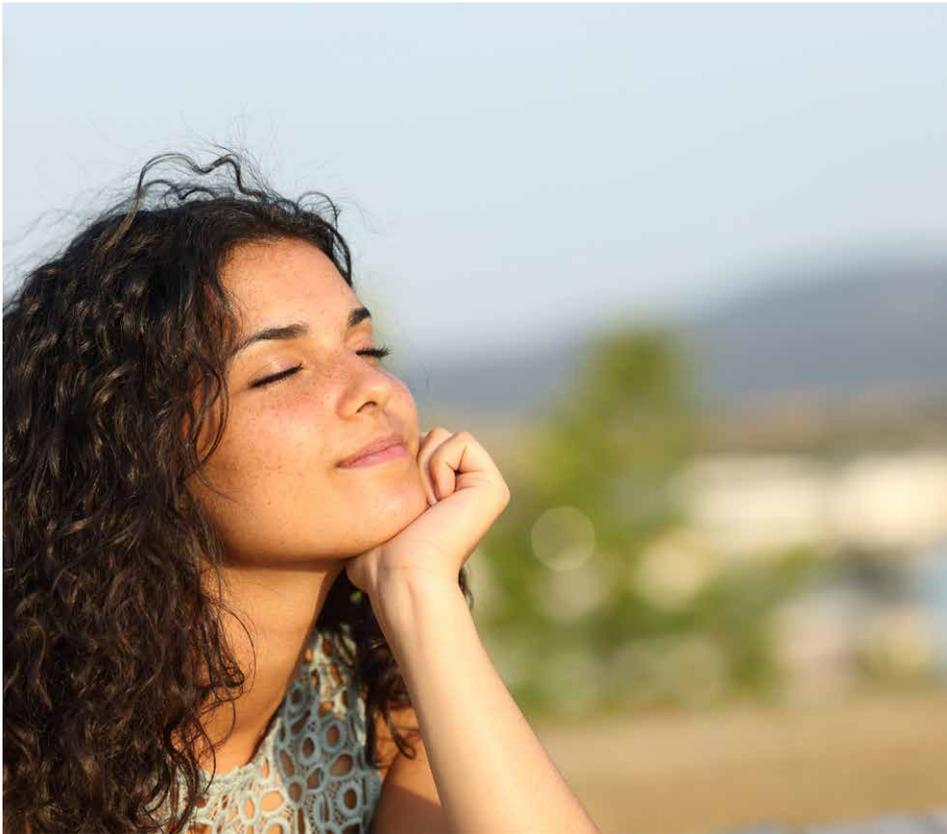




THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY

Mindfulness practice



Mindfulness is a process of non-judgmentally observing your thoughts, emotions and sensations as they come and go, with an attitude of curiosity and acceptance.

What is mindfulness

Mindfulness means remembering to pay attention. Why remembering to pay attention rather than just paying attention? Because, after we decide to place our attention on something, our mind will inevitably wander off to something else. Mindfulness is about paying attention, on purpose, which means that when we are practicing mindfulness we intentionally place our attention on something, and as soon as we notice that our attention has wandered, we redirect it back to the thing we set out to pay attention to. We pay attention with an attitude of curiosity, non-judgement and kindness. This means that we are patient with ourselves when we notice that our mind has wandered yet again.

Being in the moment

We spend much of our lives in 'doing mode', also known as autopilot. We go about our daily tasks in a habit driven way without full awareness of what is going on in the present ('being mode'). For example, driving is such an automatic task that we might arrive at our destination and notice that because we have been so absorbed in our own thoughts, we do not remember the route we took to get there.

Often, we are in doing mode, doing several things at once, for example snacking while we are reading, or flicking through our social media account while we are talking with a friend. While there are benefits to operating in doing mode, for example when we are super busy, habitually operating on autopilot causes us to miss out on possibilities in the present.

What is it good for?

Mindfulness develops our ability to observe our own experience as it is, in this moment, without trying to change anything. It is not grasping at pleasant thoughts and emotions, or trying to push away difficult thoughts and emotions. By strengthening our capacity to observe things as they are, we increase our ability to participate fully in our lives no matter whether what we are experiencing is pleasant or unpleasant.

Mindfulness practice helps to train us to tolerate difficult emotions such as anger, fear, or embarrassment. When we aren't afraid to face difficult emotions, we won't feel so overwhelmed by the inevitable challenges that life presents us with. This will help us to commit more fully to engaging with life rather than avoiding situations where uncomfortable emotions may arise.

Mindfulness practice also helps us to learn to observe our thoughts rather than being pushed around by them. For example, when writing an essay, our minds may tell us "you're not smart enough to write a good essay, who do you think you're kidding". A thought like this may make us feel so uncomfortable that we give up on writing the essay; or we can notice that this is a thought and recognize that thoughts are events in our minds and not necessarily facts, and then we can get back on with the difficult task of writing. In short, by learning how to observe our inner experiences (thoughts and emotions), we can learn how to make wise choices about our actions, rather than acting automatically and on impulse.

What are the benefits?

Mindfulness can have a range of benefits including:

- Improved sleep
- Decreased stress and anxiety
- Improved mood
- Increased attention

Being mindful takes practice

Deciding to be fully present in each moment as it unfolds in a non-judgemental way sounds fairly simple. Once we make up our minds, surely anyone can pay attention! In a sense, it is a simple idea and almost anyone can pay attention, but that doesn't mean that it's easy. Most people find that almost as soon as they place their attention on something, the movement of their breathing for example, their attention will wander off to something else. This is not actually a problem. The task of mindfulness is to remember to pay attention. As soon as we realise that we are not paying attention to the thing that we intend to notice, we can remember to pay attention and then redirect our attention back again. Each time we do this we are practicing Mindfulness. Mindfulness does take practice.

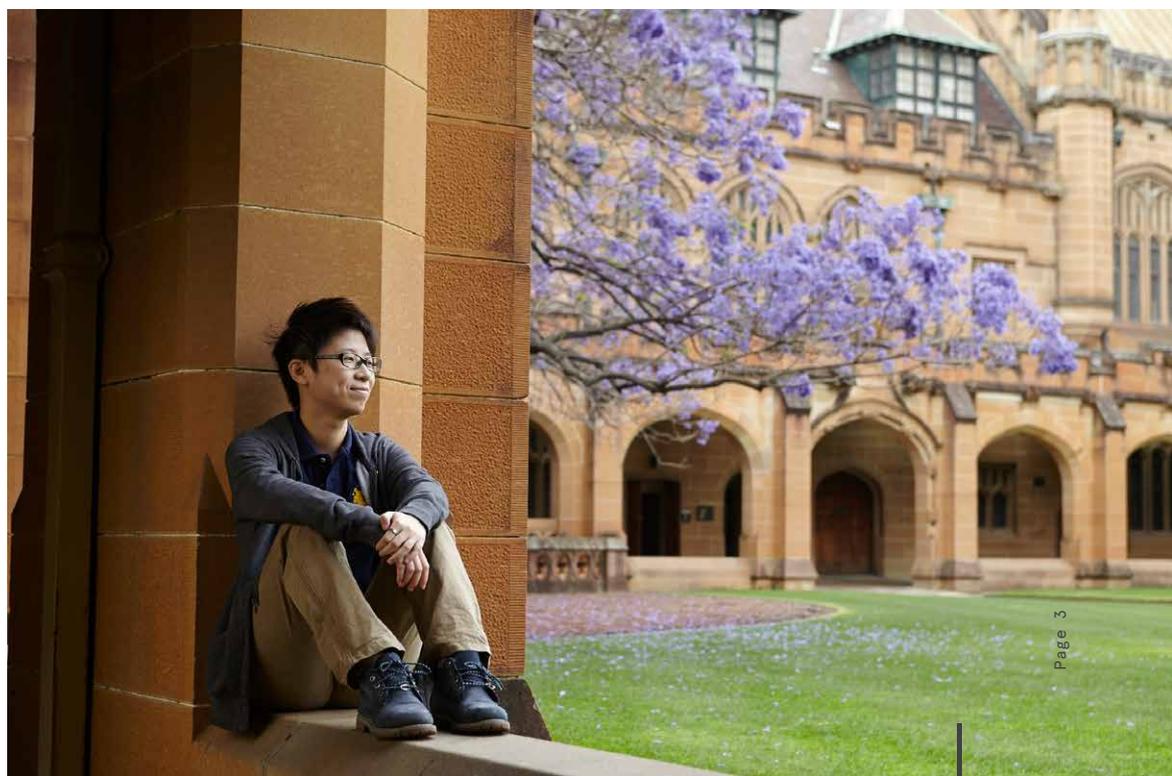
So how do I do it?

Mindfulness meditation is a way of setting aside some time to practice remembering to pay attention. To practice mindfulness meditation, we need to choose an object to place our attention on. Our breath is often a good choice as a meditation object because it is always with us wherever we are. THIS WAY UP offer a free Introduction to Mindfulness online course which is self paced, but is designed to be completed within 2 months. More information is available here:

- thiswayup.org.au/how-we-can-help/courses/intro-to-mindfulness/

Learn from an expert

If you would like to learn more from an expert, call the Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS) on 02 8627 8433 and book an appointment to meet with a CAPS Psychologist. We'll be happy to have a chat with you about how things are going and what you might like to work on or change.



Mindfulness activities to try yourself

Mindfulness skills can help us to refocus our attention, especially when we are overwhelmed with strong emotions. This skill can help us to stay calm and rational in times of distress, allowing us to choose a response instead of reacting automatically or impulsively.

Below are some short mindfulness activities that you might like to try. In Part two of this guide, we have provided an example of 4 activities which can help to build mindfulness in a variety of different ways.

Activity one: balloon

1. Start by sitting upright in your chair, putting your hands comfortably on your lap. If you want to, close your eyes. Your task is to simply observe any thoughts, feelings, sensations or urges that you may experience in your body. Imagine that you are standing in the middle of a large open field holding a bunch of balloons. Take a few moments to observe what is going on around you and what is happening within you. Remember observing is just looking around, it is not attempting to label, describe or respond in any way.
 - Stay quiet for 20 seconds
2. Now start to describe what you see around you. Describe something, then place that description on one of the balloons and allow that balloon to float away. Describe another thing you see, and put that description on another balloon, and let it float away. Keep doing this for a moment while you remain standing in the field.
 - Stay quiet for 20 seconds
3. Now, slowly bring your attention to yourself, and start describing things that are happening within you - thoughts, feelings, urges and physical sensations. Each time you notice one of these, describe it with one of these four labels (a thought, a feeling, an urge, a physical sensation), put the description on a balloon and let the balloon float away from you up into the sky.
 - Stay quiet for 20 seconds
4. If you notice your mind wandering off, gently notice where your mind went, what you were thinking about, describe this distraction, put it on a balloon and let the balloon float away.
 - Stay quiet for 2 minutes
5. Now slowly bring your focus back into the room. Feel yourself sitting on the chair, listen to any sounds in the room... and in your own time begin to open your eyes.

Practice this activity often. Allowing your distracting thoughts, feelings, urges and physical sensations to float away, helps you calm the mind. Our mind can be so full of past regrets and future worries that we never enjoy the current moment. Allow those worries and regrets to float away on a balloon. A calm mind allows you to focus on what is important for you right now, today.





Activity two: leaves on a stream

1. Start by sitting upright in your chair, putting your hands comfortably on your lap. If you want to, close your eyes. Remember that your task is to simply observe any thoughts, feelings, sensations or urges that you may experience in your body. I want you to imagine that you are standing on a bridge above a stream. Floating on the stream are leaves from the surrounding trees. This may be a stream that you have actually been to before, or one that you have near your house, or it may be one that you just imagine. Take a few moments to observe what is going on around you and what is happening within you. Remember observing is just looking around, it is not attempting to label, describe or respond in any way.
 - Stay quiet for 20 seconds
2. Now I want you to label what you observe without letting judgments get in your way. For each observation that you make, I want you to label it as a thought, feeling, urge or physical sensation, put it on one of the leaves and let it float off down the stream. So, you may have a thought about something, label it as a thought, put it on a leaf and watch it float away downstream.
 - Stay quiet for 20 seconds
3. Other things you might observe are body sensations, feelings you are experiencing, or distractions going on around you in the room. Label each one, put it on a leaf and let it drift down the stream.
 - Stay quiet for 20 seconds
4. The important thing to remember is not to go down the stream with the leaf, but rather to stand back and let the leaf drift off.
 - Stay quiet for 20 seconds
5. If you notice your mind wandering off, gently notice where your mind was, what you were thinking about, describe this distraction, put it on a leaf and watch it float away downstream.
 - Stay quiet for 2 minutes
6. Now slowly bring your focus back to the room. Feel yourself sitting on the chair, listen to any sounds in the room... and slowly in your own time begin to open your eyes.

Practice this activity often. Allowing your distracting thoughts, feelings, urges and physical sensations to float away, helps you calm the mind. Allow those worries and regrets to float away on a leaf on a stream. A calm mind allows you to focus on what is important for you right now, today.

Activity three: rhythms and sounds (group activities)

Keeping the rhythm

Begin with a rhythm (for example two claps). The next person then repeats the rhythm (two claps) and adds an additional rhythm (for example a foot stomp). The next person repeats this rhythm (two claps and a foot stomp) and adds an additional rhythm (for instance taps chair). The rhythm is passed on from person to person, adding rhythms as you go. The activity starts from the beginning if someone forgets a rhythm.

Throwing and catching sounds

Start the activity by throwing a sound to another person (for instance, throw the sound by using hand movements as if throwing a ball while saying the sound 'buzz'). The person catches this sound (using hand movements as if catching a ball while saying 'buzz'). Now, this person throws a new sound to the next person (for instance, throws the sound 'boing'). This person will catch this sound and throw a new sound to the next person. Speed up the pace as you become more practiced.

Take some time to reflect on your experience.

Some people first notice some anxiety. Often this goes away quickly as they focus on the activity. Other people do not notice any thoughts, feelings or urges because the activity distracts them. The more you do this activity, the less anxious, more capable and more focused you become. The more you practice mindfulness, the more skilled you become! The skill of mindfulness can help you in other areas of your life. When you are ready, try the activity again. Did you notice any difference in your experience?





Activity four: sushi train

The analogy below can be a useful activity to try to understand unhelpful, negative thinking patterns or ruminations that you may be experiencing.

Have you ever been to a sushi train or know what it is? So, the food goes around and round and you pick which food you want. Is there anything that you wouldn't eat on a sushi train – perhaps raw eel?

Some thoughts are also a bit like this. Just because they are in our head, doesn't make them true and doesn't mean that we have to buy into them, just like you wouldn't buy the raw eel. You can simply observe the thoughts and allow them to continue on the sushi train.

What would happen at the end of the day if nobody bought the raw eel sushi? They may not make as much the next day. And what if nobody bought it the next day? They may make less again, because they know that people *used* to buy the raw eel, so they wouldn't take it straight off the menu.

What if nobody bought the raw eel by the end of the week? They'd probably take it off the menu. What would be the point of serving something up each day if nobody buys it? Well unhelpful thoughts are a bit like that too. The less you buy into them, the less of them that float around in your head, and then eventually, if you gradually stop believing in them, stop buying them, they fade.

But every once in a while, the owner of the sushi train may decide to try out the raw eel again. Perhaps he wonders whether it was seasonal, as he remembers that people used to buy it. So, just like that every once in a while, these unhelpful thoughts might pop up again. This doesn't mean that you're back to square one, it's just your brain checking in to see if you will buy into the thoughts.

What to do

Set aside some time to observe your thoughts. When a thought comes up you don't want to buy – put it on the sushi train and watch it go by. You might try this activity regularly. Our mind can be so full of past regrets and future worries that we never enjoy the current moment. Allow those worries and regrets to pass by on the sushi train. A calm mind allows you to focus on what is important for you right now, today.

* Mindfulness activities sourced from the Project Air Synergy Strategy factsheets

