

AN INTRODUCTION TO MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

Mindfulness is a type of Meditation that is proving to be very useful for some people in helping them to find a way of living with and managing pain, stress and other medical conditions. The practice of Mindfulness meditation goes back thousands of years and has its roots in East Asia and Buddhism. However, nowadays, people from all different beliefs and walks of life are finding it helpful.

What is Mindfulness Meditation?

There are many different definitions of Mindfulness meditation. At its most simple level:

‘Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally.’ *Jon Kabat-Zinn*

This might include paying attention to thoughts, feelings, sensations, surroundings or any aspect of our experience in the present moment.

How is this Different to How We Usually Are?

If you think about it you’ll probably agree that a lot of the time our thoughts seem to have a life of their own. There can be an ongoing chatter of thoughts that happen automatically. We can spend a lot of time and effort trying to avoid, or escape from certain thoughts, feelings and sensations, while trying to capture and maintain positive ones. Some thoughts can be quite judgemental. This means we tend to weigh up our experiences, thoughts, feelings and sensations and we judge them as being right or wrong, good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, desirable or undesirable, or as neutral. Many of us also spend lots of time on ‘automatic pilot’ where we tend to just **react** automatically to our thoughts, sensations or experiences – not always in the most helpful ways. We can get caught up in unhelpful patterns of thinking – maybe brooding on the past, having runaway anxious thoughts about the future, perhaps making assumptions on the basis of little real evidence.

The problem is that getting 'caught up' by our thoughts in this way can often bring strong emotions. This then leads to us experiencing **more** distress and suffering.

Mindfulness offers a very different way of relating to what happens with our thoughts. Instead of judging thoughts and experiences, we learn to simply notice them with a kindly curiosity. It is almost like you can become an 'internal observer' of what goes through your mind without reacting to it. Mindfulness offers a way of putting some space between our thoughts and experiences and our usual automatic responses. We can then choose to 'respond' rather than automatically just 'react'. By being more aware we are in a good position to make wise choices regarding the best way to respond in the present moment.

To summarise:-

What Mindfulness is Not.....

- It's not just a new way to get rid of bad thoughts or distracting thoughts
- It's not about getting rid of old habits or patterns (though it might help you make choices about these)
- It's not a way of reducing bad feelings and physical sensations
- It's not a way of 'beating' or 'confronting' unpleasant thoughts, urges or physical feelings.
- It's not aimed at making you feel relaxed or good (although it might do this)
- It's not a way of thinking of nice images or pleasant memories.
- It's not 'positive thinking'
- It's not a way of 'getting control'
- It's not about having loads of will power or trying really hard to concentrate
- It's not about 'forcing' yourself to be in a certain way
- It's not a religious thing – it doesn't conflict with religious beliefs or traditions and it isn't about trying to sell you a new belief or ideology
- It's not about being self-absorbed, 'spaced out' or passive.
- It's not a cure all or solution to life's problems
- It's not about trying to improve yourself or make yourself a better person
- It's not about having a special experience.

OK...So What Is Mindfulness Then?

- It's about developing self awareness
- It's about noticing what's happening in the present moment
- It's about paying attention in a particular way
- It can be about noticing your judgements
- Or about watching what your mind is doing or saying right now!
- It's knowing that you feel the way you feel and you think the way you think
- It's a way of being.

How do I start using Mindfulness Meditation?

The two most widely used types of meditation practices are focusing on the breath (Mindfulness of breath) and body scan (bringing awareness to different locations in the body). Ultimately though, Mindfulness is a practice that you can start to use at any time and with any activity.

If you are interested in learning more about Mindfulness Meditation, please see our information on 'managing pain through mindfulness meditation' located on this website.