

What mindfulness really is

Mindfulness is everywhere these days! But what is it really? Expert Dr Richard Chambers brings mindfulness back to its pure intention, and offers helpful tips on how to practise effectively.

by Dr Richard Chambers

Mindfulness, mindfulness, mindfulness. Everyone seems to be talking about mindfulness these days. It's being practised in boardrooms and classrooms all across the world. It has even made its way onto the footy field, with Richmond captain Dustin Martin giving it a plug in his MVP acceptance speech.

But with its popularity has come a watering down of its key messages, as well as some misconceptions. Let's straighten these up.

MINDFULNESS – FOR EVERYONE

Mindfulness basically means being aware and fully engaged in each moment of life. It starts with paying full attention to what we are doing, staying in direct contact with what is actually happening, rather than getting caught up in judgments and evaluations. Once we learn how to do this, we can stay fully present and aware in each

moment, bringing our full attention to what we are doing. Research shows that this boosts productivity and performance and also reduces stress and mental health problems.

Mindfulness is something that we all experience spontaneously throughout the day. It is also something that we can enhance through practice. We can practise it informally, by paying nonjudgmental attention to everyday activities such as eating, communicating, and moving. To really take it to the next level, we can also practise it through meditation.

MEDITATION – MORE THAN JUST CONCENTRATION

Meditation just means 'attention training'. There are lots of types of meditation, actually, where we focus our attention on different things. Examples include mantra meditation (focusing the attention on a word or sound that is repeated over and

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over) and visualisation (e.g. focusing on an image of a peaceful scene). With mindfulness meditation, we focus our attention on the senses. This anchors our attention in the present and gives us something to return to when the mind invariably wanders off (which research shows happens at least half the time we are awake).



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When we practise mindfulness meditation over a period of time, two very important things start to happen. Our *concentration* gets stronger, so we can focus for longer periods on what we want to focus on (which might be the breath, but could also be the activity we are engaged in). We also develop an awareness of where our attention is, as well as what we are thinking and feeling. This is often called 'metacognition' and is a profoundly important ability as it means we no longer get caught up in thoughts and emotions in the same way. We can allow them to come and go without reacting to them, which brings a profound sense of freedom.

A lot of meditation teachers just focus on the concentration aspect, which is unfortunate as it misses the point. Obviously, it is very useful to be able to focus and let go of distracting thoughts and reactivity. But it is when we are able to simply let everything come and go without getting caught up in it that we become truly free. Mindfulness actually has much more to do with this type of awareness, often called 'open monitoring' or 'choiceless awareness', than it does with concentration.

As well as improving productivity and well-being, research shows mindfulness strengthens the prefrontal cortex, making it easier to pay attention,

remember, manage emotions, and think clearly. Mindfulness also boosts empathy and compassion and can help us relate better to others and ourselves.

It doesn't take a lot of practice, either. Research shows that as little as five to ten minutes a day of meditation produces significant benefits in a short period of time (think weeks rather than years). And we can practise mindfulness in every moment too, just by paying nonjudgmental attention to what we are doing.

FIVE TIPS FOR PRACTISING MINDFULNESS PROPERLY:

1 Unitask. Multitasking is an illusion since we can't focus on more than one complex thing at a time. Flight mode your phone and start focusing on one task at a time – and notice the improvements in your productivity and wellbeing.

2 Mind wandering is normal. Don't try to stop your mind from wandering or get rid of thoughts. That's a trap a lot of people fall into at the start. It is the nature of the mind to wander and trying to stop thoughts means we end up focusing on them even more. Mindfulness lets us observe thoughts as they come and go, without reacting to them or resisting them. They just become things that come and go in the mind.

3 Train the puppy. The untrained mind is like a naughty puppy that won't stay on its mat. We try to focus on the breath but within seconds our attention wanders off. Getting mad at ourselves or roughly dragging our attention back to the breath just agitates the mind more. Instead, practice gently and patiently bringing the attention back, over and over, and notice how this helps the mind settle and focus for longer periods.

4 Rest as awareness. There are the things that come and go in awareness (e.g. thoughts, feelings, sounds etc.) and then there is the awareness that is noticing them. We

can get so caught up in the *objects* of awareness that we fail to notice awareness itself. But mindfulness is ultimately about getting in touch with this pure awareness – the part of us that is not in resistance to anything, and which doesn't change. As we recognise it more and more clearly, we start to identify with it and rest with it, rather than spending our time caught up in distraction and reactivity. This creates a profound sense of freedom and is the ultimate goal of mindfulness. If you want to know what I mean, take some time right now to notice what is looking through your eyes, listening through your ears and feeling through your body. To quote meditation teacher Adyashanti, "Let what comes come, let what goes go, and find out what remains".

5 Remember the point. Practising mindfulness by itself results in improved wellbeing and performance. But the original point of mindfulness was to become more self-aware and ethical. So if you want to *really* understand mindfulness, start paying attention to your own thoughts, words and actions and their effect on others. Get unstuck from all the distraction and busyness and notice the part of you that is infinitely compassionate and wise. Recognise that it is timeless and alive in everybody else as well as you. And then live your life from this place. ●

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Author of three books on mindfulness, he is leading a university-wide mindfulness initiative at Monash University and helped create the free Smiling Mind app. He runs regular mindfulness courses in his private practice and offers presentations and workshops in a growing number of businesses and educational institutions.