

MINDFULNESS: WHAT IS IT, AND HOW CAN IT HELP ME?

Mindfulness is both a formal meditation process and an approach to day-to-day living, based originally on Buddhist philosophy but adapted for secular practice. It teaches moment by moment relaxed awareness of breathing patterns, bodily sensations, thoughts and emotions and external stimuli, helping the practitioner to remain fully conscious in the “here and now” instead of living life on “autopilot”.

What do I mean by “autopilot”? Well, have you ever arrived at a destination, having been so preoccupied that you remembered nothing about the journey? Or have you eaten a meal without really *tasting* the food, because your thoughts were elsewhere? Then you’ve been on autopilot! In fact, we can often find ourselves living most of our lives in this way, constantly focusing on the next item on our “to do” list, or dwelling on the past, and never fully *being* in the present.

Most of the programmes run in the West are based on the work of pioneering work of Jon KabatZinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre and the Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy developed by Segal, Williams & Teasdale in the UK and Canada. There is a 20+ year history of the effective use of Mindfulness in treating stress, depression, anxiety and the psychological effects of chronic pain; this includes a number of clinical trials that produced the following results:

- Anxiety disorders: significant reduction of symptoms in 20 out of 22 patients
- Depression: relapse reduced from 78-36% in patients with 3 or more incidents of depression (maintained over the course of a year)
- Significant improvements in ability to cope with chronic pain and related negative body image, low mood and inactivity. Decrease in use of pain-relieving drugs
- Improvements in self esteem; these were ongoing 15 months after the termination of the programme.

Some forms of meditation aim to quieten the mind and distract it from negative thoughts and feelings by focusing the attention on a specific object, such as a lighted candle, or a mantra. Mindfulness is not a distraction technique; participants are taught to recognise & accept whatever is present for them in a calm, non-judgemental manner, and to recognise the link between thoughts, feelings and behaviour so that they are in a better position to choose an effective response, particularly at times of excessive pressure.

Mindfulness can therefore:

- Improve resilience to stress or depression or chronic pain, by helping people manage their reactions better
- Increase general satisfaction and enjoyment of life, improving mood and self esteem
- Encourage focused awareness, improving effectiveness in work and personal life and facilitating effective decision-making
- Increase relaxation (though it is not specifically a relaxation technique)

Programmes generally consist of 8 weekly sessions (1.5 to 2 hours long) plus a one-day intensive. Sessions include instruction in a range of Mindfulness meditation practices and gentle movement. Participants need to practice daily between sessions, and CDs and a workbook are provided.

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For Mindfulness programmes in Bristol, contact Chris Bowles on 0117 3732168 or visit the Breathing Space website, www.breathing-space.biz