

An Introduction To Mindfulness

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What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is

- paying attention
- on purpose
- now
- without judgement

It is gently and compassionately bringing attention to our thoughts, feelings and sensations and experiencing what is happening right now *just as it is*. Mindfulness is purely getting a sense of what is occurring in this moment and being OK with that without needing to achieve anything or change anything.

For many of us this can be quite difficult. It is the natural state of the mind to want things to be the way I want them to be. That means that I cling to things I like and want, and push away things that I dislike or don't want. Both of these imply some sort of judgement. When I am attentive, that is exactly what I notice - that I am continually making judgements about things and

people; for example, that they are good or bad, right or wrong, nice or not nice, pleasant or unpleasant or neutral (neither pleasant nor unpleasant). In fact it is almost impossible for me, at least without practice, to be completely non-judgmental.

At least in the beginning, paying attention to the present without making judgements about it is very difficult. However, mindfulness is not actually as much about being completely non-judgmental as it is about being aware and observant of *how often* I make judgements and how I form my opinion about things and events and react to them based on these thoughts.

How mindfulness is applicable to day-to-day living

Normal mind states

1. Autopilot

Much of our day is spent in unawareness without paying attention to what is happening around us and inside of us. Doing things without paying attention to them is called autopilot.



For example, when I turn the water off at the end

of my shower, I cannot remember whether I washed my hair; I get in the car and arrive at the shops without remembering anything of the journey; I walk through the shopping center and realise I have missed the display in the center court, despite having gone right passed it; I finish my meal in front of the television and am surprised to find that this is the last mouthful,

and I realise I have not tasted much; I copy numbers into my spreadsheet, am surprised to get to the end and have to go back and check it all; I read a page in a book and, coming to the end of it, notice that my mind has wandered and I am completely unable to remember anything of what I have just read.

2. Self-referential mind wandering

The normal state of the mind is to mind wander out of the present moment and to thoughts that relate to myself. This is the usual inattentive default state of the mind. We spend approximately one third to one half of our lives in mind wandering.

The areas of the brain that are more active during this state are collectively called the default mode network (DMN). They include areas concerned with emotion, memory and emotional attachment to memory (amygdala and hippocampus); searching for past memories about myself, gathering information about myself and predicting how I should feel (medial prefrontal cortex); and thoughts and memories about me (posterior cingulate cortex).



Although mind wandering is normal and has important functions in a healthy brain, activation of the DMN and mind wandering are also associated with lapses in attention, and often with anxiety and lower levels of happiness.

Greater activity in the DMN also occurs in a variety of unhealthy states, including in

Of course we cannot pay close attention to absolutely everything, and, naturally, paying attention to one thing might mean I am inattentive to others. However, living in autopilot means that much of life and its experiences pass us by without us even being aware of it.

depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and dementia.

It is important to point out however, that functional connections within the DMN may be different in healthy people and those who are ill. For example, in major depressive disorder, a severe and long-lasting form of depression, because of the way the various parts of the brain communicate, mind wandering is excessively self-focussed and predominantly to negative thoughts (rumination). These thoughts help to feed and maintain the depressed mood.

Although this may be particularly severe in people with major depressive disorder, and is a predominant reason for depressive relapses, it also applies at least to some extent, and some of the time, to healthy people. It can create a vicious cycle of self-defeating thoughts and negative emotion.

Our self-focussed mind wandering is seldom, if ever, focussed on the present, but rather turns our thoughts to the future and the past. Especially if I have a troubled past, poor relationships, difficult past events, low self-image, or a tendency towards anxiety, depression and/or sensitivity to stress (who doesn't?!), these thoughts can be extremely emotionally charged.

Examples of thoughts during mind wandering

Mind wandering to past events

- Reminiscing (pleasant memory, I would like to be back there)
- Regret and guilt (I am sorry for what happened)
- Self-pity
- Rehashing (replaying what has happened in my mind & how it might have been different)
- Resentment (re-feeling anger associated with a past event or person)
- Shame (I am a bad person for what I did or said)

Mind wandering to future events

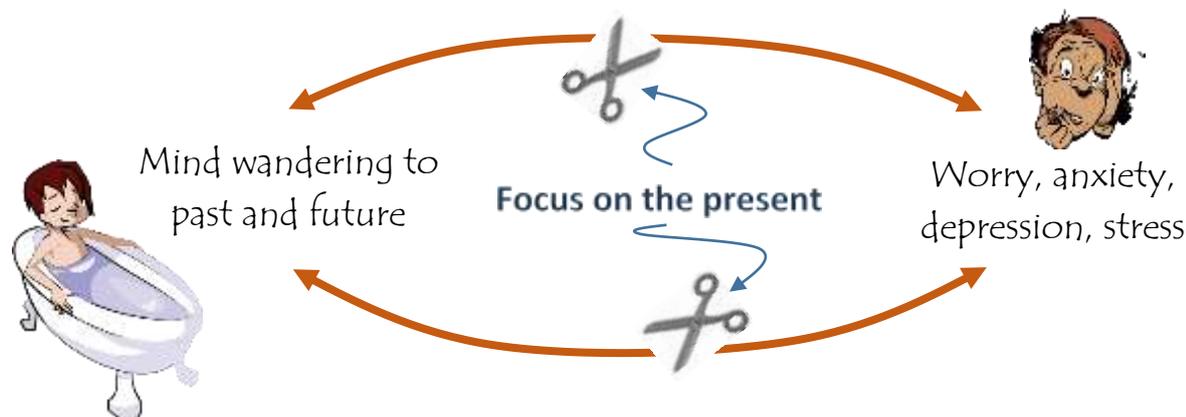
- Anticipation, looking forward
- Hope
- Excitement
- Worry, anxiety
- Stress
- Rehearsing (playing over what I think will happen and creating a reality in my mind that does not yet exist)
- Expectation (what I think will happen, or what I want to happen)
- Fear of losing what I have
- Fear of not getting what I want
- Fear of things not turning out the way I want them to

Of course, not all mind wandering is negative, and memories and anticipations can be, and often are, happy and contented or exciting. Nevertheless, note that none of these places of the mind are in the present moment. And yet, 'now' is exactly where I always am *right now*. Of course, this present moment has been in the future and will soon be in the past. But right now, it is here. This is a simple, but exquisitely exciting insight. Although I cannot do anything about the past, knowing that what I do right now in this present moment will *change the future* and create a past on which I will have opportunity to look back

with contentment, tells me how acutely important these present moments are. By really experiencing the present moment, I have an opportunity to experience life to the full. In itself this engenders *personal fulfilment* and *happiness*.

If I am focussed on the past and on the future, I miss out on the present. And if I miss out on what I am experiencing right now, I miss out on the opportunity to insightfully enjoy the present and a future present moment of *my own careful creation*.

By bringing my mind out of rumination and back into the present, I break the cycle of sinking into negative mind states.

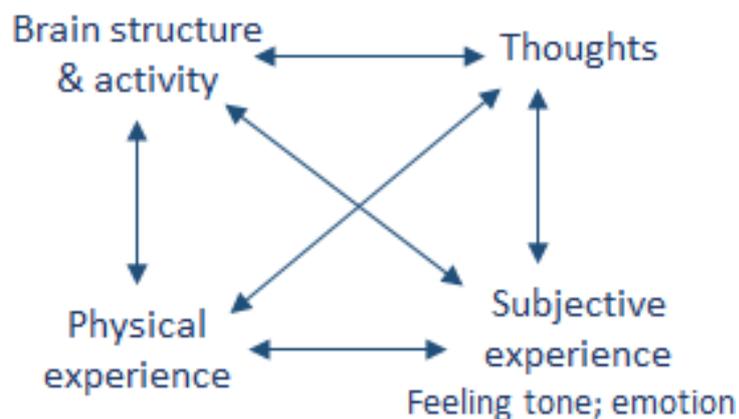


3. Thoughts, feelings, sensations and brain structure are not independent of each other

Thoughts, emotions and sensations are interwoven in that they profoundly influence one another and can even create one another.

Consider the following examples:

- Physical pain can create unhappiness and worry (sensation changes thoughts and emotion)
- Thinking about a loved one can make us feel happy (thoughts influence emotion)
- Thinking about a recent argument can create feelings of anger
- Moving your mouth in the shape of a smile, whether the smile is real or not, can lift your mood
- Thinking about something frightening can change the physical sensations of your body
- Worry and anxiety are frequently associated with discomfort in the chest, shoulders, neck and abdomen
- Noise can cause frustration and anger
- Being tickled makes you laugh
- Depression is associated with chronic pain, slowed thoughts, tiredness and slowing of movement
- Posture changes emotions and thoughts; thoughts and emotions are reflected in posture



Feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant or neutral

Moreover, when we are subjected to persistent sensations, thoughts or emotions over a sustained period, it actually influences our brain structure. Much like learning to play the piano rewires the brain, such that with sustained practice one is able to play a complicated piece of music, sustained 'practice' at being happy or depressed, worrying, or sensations (e.g., sustained pain) creates new connections in the brain that sustain the tendency to these thoughts, feelings or sensations.

Noticing that thoughts can influence emotion is key to understanding why people with

depression are prone to relapses, and why it is so difficult for addicts to not return to drinking or using drugs, even after a lengthy and sustained period of sobriety.

The corollary to this is:

1. *I can manage emotions and how I relate to bodily sensations by becoming aware of them and paying attention to my thinking.*
2. *Changes in emotions and bodily sensations influence my thinking.*

4. Perspective is changeable and may be different at the same time for different people

The perspective that I take of a particular situation, person or event is strongly influenced by myself.

For example, if I am in no hurry and in a good mood, then it may be inconsequential that someone in the traffic indicates they want to enter the lane in front of my car. In that event, I may hang back and wave them in. In contrast, if I have just left a difficult meeting and am feeling stressed and angry, I may see them as trying to push in, take their gestures threateningly and personally and quickly close the gap so they cannot get in front of me. The situation is the same, but my attitude is different – and so are the consequences of my actions. It is interesting to note that after letting someone into the lane ahead of me, I often feel benevolent and it improves my good mood. When I behave angrily and suspiciously, hoot and block them from coming in, it actually increases my anger and bad mood. Each behaviour has consequences for which I am responsible and which directly affect *me and others*.



The difference in these scenarios is how I interpreted the event, which, in this case, was strongly influenced by my mood.

As a second example, many people, at first sight might be more inclined to trust doctor in a white coat with a stethoscope around her neck, than one in tight fitting lycra and a crop top. Our past

experiences and expectations of what a qualified doctor should look like influence our attitude towards the person we see in front of us.



My perception of the world is filtered by a myriad of emotions, preconceptions, expectations, past experiences and attitudes towards myself and others. Although it sounds trite to suggest that reality is a myth, in that it is different for everybody, it is true to observe that my attitude towards a situation influences my interpretation of it and reaction to it. This is the natural state of the mind. Without filtering, zooming in on certain details and ignoring others, magnifying and minimising and changing the appearance of certain information, I could never cope with the flood of information that assails me every day. What is important is to bear in mind that, whether I am aware of it or not, my mind is doing it. I cannot see exactly what other people are seeing, and, because much of the influences of my own perception are unconscious, I can never express completely what I am seeing. In the same way, although the aim is to not become too suspicious and paranoid (!), without questioning and checking, I can never fully trust that what I am perceiving is the truth.

Some of the things that might influence my perception and attitude include:

- My personality
- Habitual behaviour patterns (e.g., assertiveness, withdrawal, independent, sarcastic, trusting, etc)
- What I think about myself; how I see myself
- Self-talk: the voice in my head
- Degree of self-esteem
- Self-efficacy: how much control I feel I have over my own life
- Current mood
- Expectations – how I want things to turn out
- Immediate past experiences (what has happened to me in the past hour, day, week, month, year)
- Current relationships
- Childhood and past experiences
- Past experience with events of this nature
- Current state of health
- Past experiences with this person or other people that I regard as similar to them
- How this current event unfolds and my reaction to that
- Level of education
- How I was brought up and the society in which I was brought up
- My culture
- The society in which I live
- My values, beliefs and prejudices
- My parents
- My schooling and teachers
- Church and religion
- My friends and work colleagues
- The opinions of people I respect and trust
- The media (internet, TV, radio, newspapers)
- Social media

While I cannot ever completely escape from the influences of these things, by being aware of them and of myself, by learning and trying new

experiences, by questioning and checking, and by **talking to others**, I can get a clearer sense of what is really happening in any situation.

When I am mindful, I notice.....

1. Mind wandering

No matter how hard I try to pay attention, thoughts come into my mind and my mind wanders. I do not choose these thoughts to which my mind wanders. They just arise. I am not in control of my thoughts all the time. I can decide where to turn my thoughts, but even then, my mind tends to wander to other thoughts that I don't necessarily choose.

I may not notice when my mind has wandered, as I get caught up in the thoughts. However, when I do notice my mind wandering, I can notice the thoughts to which it wanders and

observe them (I can turn my attention to my thoughts). I can even notice my thoughts come, pass over and go – I can watch them do so. When I have noticed my mind has wandered, I can gently and purposefully turn my attention back to what I am doing in this present moment.

It is interesting to observe that when I purposefully pay attention to something and my attention becomes focussed on that, my mind stops wandering for a little while. When I pay attention, there is a space in between my mind wandering and rumination.

2. *Paying attention purposefully and non-judgementally*

We spend much of our life in autopilot. In this partial awareness of what is going on, we miss out on a lot. Paying attention (being present, aware of thoughts, feelings and sensations) enables us to fully connect with the experience. We might also notice things we did not notice before.

Being aware of things as they are, both the 'good' and the 'bad', enables me to fully appreciate the 'good' and puts me in a position to carefully respond to the 'bad'.

In the space afforded by awareness I have **choices** on how to respond to the present moment. And with choices comes **freedom to create my own future**.

Training the mind with awareness exercises (mindful meditation)

As human beings, we are naturally capable of being mindful and can cultivate that ability through regular practice, which includes awareness exercises (mindful meditation).

The word meditation means "to reflect; to carefully consider". Mindful meditation is to apply *purposeful attention*. The intention is *not* to 'clear' or 'empty' the mind of thoughts or emotions. It is to develop the skill to *notice and experience* what is happening in the mind and body: thoughts, emotions, feelings and sensations as they arise.

During meditation, no matter how hard we try to pay attention, the mind will wander. This is what minds do! We may even get caught up in thoughts as the mind wanders naturally. The purpose of meditation is, when we notice the mind wandering, to acknowledge that and purposefully bring our attention back. During any meditation, this will happen over and over again, and *this is where the benefit of meditation happens*. Every time the mind wanders and we bring it back we strengthen existing connections and grow new connections in our brain. *The brain develops as the mind wanders and we bring our attention back*. It's a two way process.



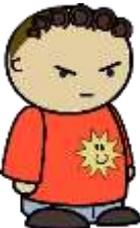
In this sense, meditation has been described as 'gym for the brain'. Just like our muscles develop when we exercise, so our mind develops when we train our attention.

Purposefully paying attention and repeatedly bringing attention back when noticing the mind wandering engages specific parts of the brain; and which parts engage depends on what we choose to pay attention to. With practice, just like our brain develops new connections when we learn other things, like playing a musical instrument or speaking a new language, as we learn to pay attention the brain develops new connections and we become more skilled at paying attention and developing awareness of

thoughts, emotions and feelings. In time, with awareness, we can develop some sense of mastery over our emotions and feelings.

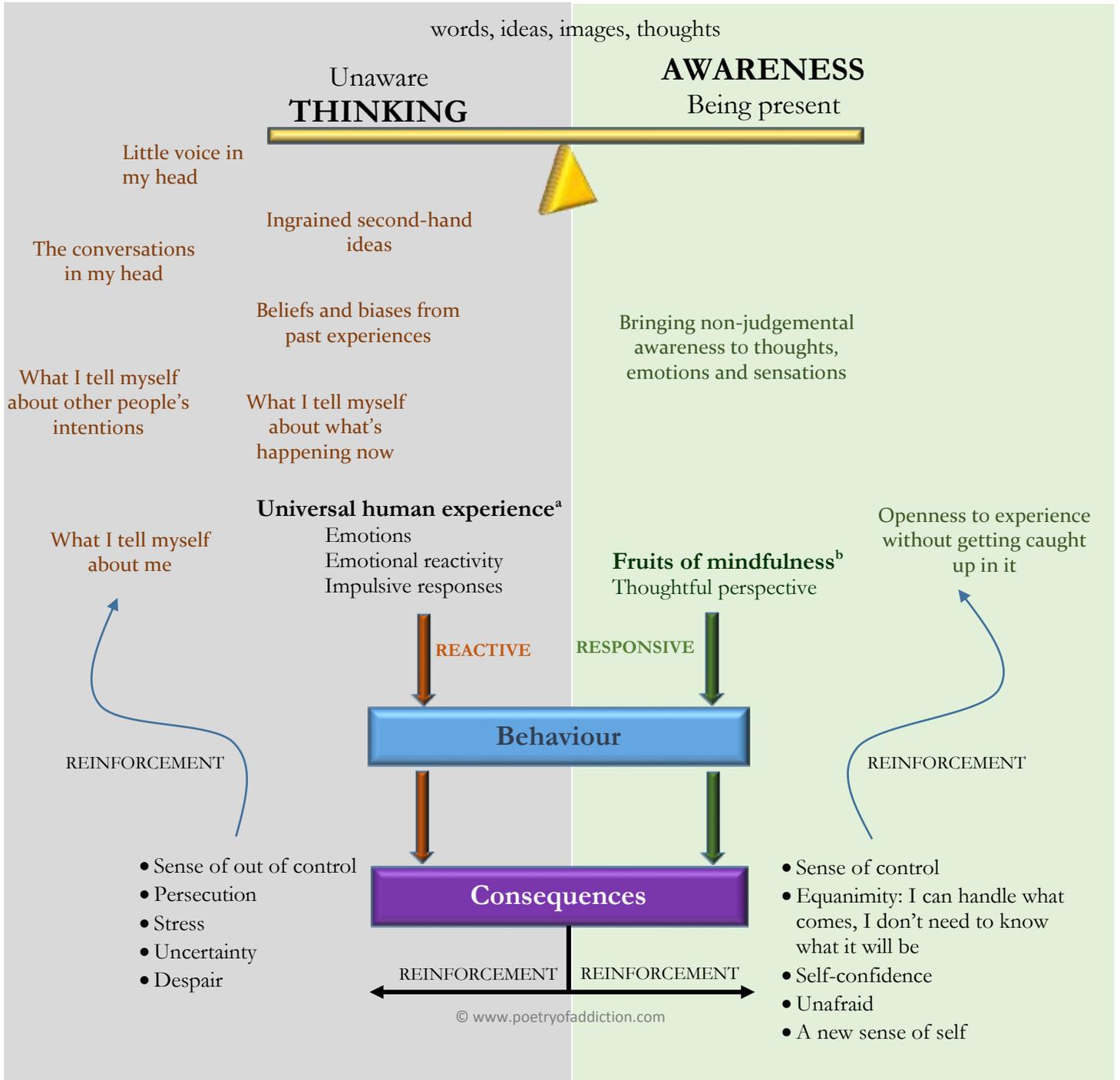
Mindful meditation has been shown to influence structure and activity in areas of the brain including those which are associated with the stress response, regulation of emotions, memory, self-awareness, empathy and applying rational thought and consideration instead of impulsively reacting.

On courses aimed at managing stress, we use different forms of awareness exercises with three core intentions that engage different areas or 'networks' in the brain. These are listed below.

Intention	Examples of awareness exercises	Benefits
<p>1. Awareness</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of breath • Body scan • Listening • Walking • Open awareness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased awareness of sensation, thoughts and emotions • Ability to separate myself from thought and emotions, without getting caught up in them • Ability to pay attention and to switch attentive states
<p>2. Regulation of emotions</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Body scan • Attention to feeling tone • Mindful movement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reconnection of mind and body • Identifying emotions and linked sensation • Increased awareness of how my body reacts to stress and emotions • Separation of emotion from thoughts and events • Resilience
<p>3. Compassion</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compassion meditation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of a sense of common humanity (connection to others) • Development of compassion for others and for self

Mindful awareness guides development of perspective

Self-awareness engenders a sense of common humanity and nurtures compassion



a. Universal human experience

1. Judging (like/dislike; good/bad; pleasant/unpleasant/neutral; right/wrong): Interpretation through filters; preconceived ideas based on likes, dislikes, opinions, past experiences, second hand ideas of what others tell me I should believe, what I can and cannot do, what I am capable/not capable of. So I cannot gain a fresh perspective. What I see might not even be real.
2. Mind wandering: Lose focus on the real issues and events.
3. Rumination and preoccupation with past and future.
4. Self-centered thinking (preoccupation with self): Lose sight of interconnectedness with

others and my common humanity. This only happens to me, never to anyone else. Everything always happens to me.

5. In this moment it seems so important and it will last forever. I do not know how I will get through this.
6. Self-blame, recrimination, self-talk. This is me. I am a bad person. I am no good. I can't do anything right. I deserve what I get. I don't deserve better.
7. Making things out to be worse than they really are. Actually, it is the end of the world.
8. Striving for unobtainable perfection.

b. Fruits of mindfulness: Wisdom

1. Ability to place things into context: awareness, clarity and perspective.
2. More able to regulate emotions – reduces reacting without thinking, improves carefully considered responding.
3. Resilience – being able to 'bounce back'.
4. Equanimity. I can handle whatever comes my way. It will be OK.
5. This is an event, it is not me. Events are transient, it will pass.

6. I can get through this as I have done before.
7. Common humanity: This happens to everyone at some time or another. All human beings feel like this at times. I am human.
8. Self-compassion. It's OK to feel angry, depressed, hopeless, happy, excited, nervous, at some times, even if it doesn't feel nice. It's *what I do with it* that is important.
9. Learning from the past.

Practicing mindfulness enables us to separate the event, the thought and the emotion. In clinical studies, mindfulness practice has been associated with a reduced psychological and physical responses to stress, and improvements in depression and anxiety.

By bringing awareness to thoughts feelings and sensations, mindfulness may be helpful for people with chronic pain and in sustaining sobriety in people with addictions.

Mindfulness is not a cure

From the outset, it is extremely important to understand what mindfulness is not. It is not a cure for anxiety or depression, for stress, pain, cancer or for addictive cravings. It will not take them away and will not make them better. In fact, especially in the early stages of learning mindfulness, some people find the opposite to be true as awareness of self and body increase with practice.

However, as the practice of mindfulness develops, there is a change in the nature of these challenges and in the relationship between them and myself. I may develop a sense of being separate or distant from them – that *they are not*

me. That I can observe them without getting tangled up in them. This perspective enables me to relate to them differently. They come to have less of an impact on my thinking and day-to-day life.

Reduced judging and reactivity are associated with improved psychological and subjective well-being. I feel more at ease with things as they are.

And because each moment is born from the moments that precede it, that changes everything.

Mindfulness takes effort and practice

Cultivating attention and presence is simple, but not always easy

At first it may not be pleasant and it may seem difficult to find the time to practice. However, it

becomes easier with time and clearer as I begin to experience the benefits of mindful living.

Home practice to become more aware in the present moment

Ask yourself.....

What does it feel like to

- Walk?
- Brush my teeth?
- Eat?

....and experience mindfulness for yourself.

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