



Mindfulness

This resource provides information on mindfulness, how to practice it and how it can help with mental health problems.

If you need this information in Word document format for compatibility with screen readers, please email: publications@mind.org.uk

Contents

About mindfulness	2
What is mindfulness?	2
How does mindfulness work?	2
Can mindfulness treat mental health problems?	3
What exercises can I try today?.....	3
Mindfulness exercises to try	3
Tips on getting the most from mindfulness exercises	4
How can I learn mindfulness?	5
Introductory courses, taster sessions and groups	5
Formal mindfulness courses (MBCT and MBSR).....	6
Buddhist mindfulness courses	6
One-to-one sessions with private practitioners	7
Online courses, apps, books and CDs	7
Is mindfulness right for me?.....	7
What if it doesn't work for me?.....	8
Useful contacts	9
Who else could help?	9

About mindfulness

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a technique you can learn which involves making a special effort to notice what's happening in the present moment (in your mind, body and surroundings) – without judging anything. It has roots in Buddhism and [meditation](#), but you don't have to be spiritual, or have any particular beliefs, to try it.

It aims to help you:

- become more self-aware
- feel calmer and less stressed
- feel more able to choose how to respond to your thoughts and feelings
- cope with difficult or unhelpful thoughts
- be kinder towards yourself.

Many people find practising mindfulness helps them manage their day-to-day wellbeing, but it doesn't always work for everyone (see our page on [is mindfulness right for me?](#))

Mindfulness is a skill. It requires work like any therapy and practice like any skill. It isn't a shortcut and courses only set the scene, but I find it enjoyable and rewarding. Most of all I find it brings some peace into my life.

How does mindfulness work?

The way we think (and what we think about) can affect how we feel and act. For example, if you think or worry a lot about upsetting past or future events, you might often feel sad or anxious.

The theory behind mindfulness is that by using various techniques to bring your attention to the present (usually focusing on your body and your breathing), you can:

- **Notice how thoughts come and go in your mind.** You may learn that they don't have to define who you are, or your experience of the world, and you can let go of them.
- **Notice what your body is telling you.** For example, tension or anxiety can often be felt in your body (such as in a fast heartbeat, tense muscles or shallow breathing).
- **Create space between you and your thoughts,** so you can react more calmly.

[The Oxford Mindfulness Centre](#) has more information about how mindfulness works.

When I feel anxiety building, mindfulness helps me to keep calm by becoming more in touch with the situation.

Can mindfulness treat mental health problems?

- **Common mental health problems.** Studies show that practising mindfulness can help to manage [depression](#), some [anxiety problems](#) and feelings of [stress](#). Some structured [mindfulness-based therapies](#) have also been developed to treat these problems more formally. In some cases these treatments are recommended as evidence-based treatments by the [National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence](#) (NICE).
- **Complex mental health problems.** Research into whether mindfulness could help treat more complex mental health conditions, such as [psychosis](#) and [bipolar disorder](#), is still in the early stages. It's not clear yet how helpful mindfulness could be for managing these conditions – but you might find it works for you.

NICE recommends against using mindfulness-based treatments for [social anxiety](#) as there's some evidence that mindfulness might make your symptoms worse rather than better. Talk to your doctor about what kinds of treatments might suit you best.

Mindfulness does help me with my mental health issues. It's not the cure and it won't work every single time, but it has helped me to alleviate anxiety and depression by centring my thoughts.

What exercises can I try today?

Mindfulness exercises to try

Here are a few exercises you could try. You don't need any special equipment:

- **Mindful eating.** This involves paying attention to the taste, sight and textures of what you eat. For example, when drinking a cup of tea or coffee you could focus on how hot and liquid it feels on your tongue, how sweet it tastes or watch the steam that it gives off.
- **Mindful moving, walking or running.** Notice the feeling of your body moving. You might notice the breeze against your skin, the feeling of your feet or hands against different textures on the ground or nearby surfaces, and the different smells that are around you.
- **Body scan.** This is where you move your attention slowly through different parts of the body, starting from the top of your head moving all the way down to the end of your toes. You could focus on feelings of warmth, tension, tingling or relaxation of different parts of your body.
- **Mindful colouring and drawing.** Focus on the colours and the sensation of your pencil against the paper, rather than trying to draw something in particular. You

could use a mindfulness colouring book or download mindfulness colouring images.

- **Mindful meditation.** This involves sitting quietly and focusing on your breathing, your thoughts, sensations in your body and the things you can hear around you. Try to bring your focus back to the present if your mind starts to wander. Many people also find that yoga helps them to concentrate on their breathing and focus on the present moment. See our page on [types of alternative and complementary therapy](#) for more information meditation and yoga.

Different things work for different people, so if you don't find one exercise useful, try another. You can also try adapting them so that they suit you and are easier to fit in with your daily life.

You can find more examples of exercises to try in our page on [relaxation exercises](#). Some people find practising mindfulness in nature can have extra benefits – see our page of [ideas to try in nature](#) for suggestions.

The mindfulness colouring really helps me unwind and relax in the evening. It promotes better sleep and I go to bed feeling ready to rest rather than anxious and wired.

Tips on getting the most from mindfulness exercises

When you do any mindfulness exercise, the key steps are:

- **Pay attention** – for example, when you shower in the morning, make a special effort to really pay attention to the feel of the water on your skin.
- **Notice** – when your mind wanders, which is just what minds do, simply notice where your thoughts have drifted to.
- **Choose and return** – choose to bring your attention back to the present moment, usually by focusing on your breathing or another sensation in your body.
- **Be aware and accept** – notice and be aware of emotions you are feeling or sensations in your body. Try to observe and accept these feelings with friendly curiosity and without judgement.
- **Be kind to yourself** – remember that mindfulness is difficult to do and our minds will always wander. Try not to be critical of yourself. When you notice your mind wandering, you can just gently bring yourself back to the exercise.

It can also help to:

- **Set aside regular time to practise.** Regular short periods of mindful meditation can work better than occasional long ones. If you struggle to find the time, you might want to decide on one or two routine activities which you will try to do mindfully each day.

- **Make yourself comfortable.** It can help to do mindfulness in a space where you feel safe and comfortable and won't be easily distracted.
- **Go slowly.** Try to build your practice slowly. Remember, you're learning a new skill so it'll take time to develop. Most people find it hard to sit and meditate for long periods of time at first, so try to do a few minutes and gradually build up to more.
- **Be patient.** There's no need to set ambitious goals or put pressure on yourself. Many people find it takes a while to feel comfortable doing mindfulness exercises.

Mindfulness makes me feel safe because even when I can't access my counsellors, carers, medication and relapse prevention plan, mindfulness is still there. Nothing can take it away.

How can I learn mindfulness?

This page gives an overview of the following options, and lets you know where to find out more about them:

- [Introductory courses, taster sessions and groups](#)
- [Formal mindfulness courses \(MBCT and MBSR\)](#)
- [Buddhist mindfulness courses](#)
- [One-to-one sessions with private practitioners](#)
- [Online courses, apps, books and CDs](#)

Our information on [deciding whether mindfulness is right for you](#) and [getting the most from mindfulness](#) also suggests some useful things to bear in mind.

Check your mindfulness teacher's qualifications

Mindfulness courses should always be delivered by an appropriate person. Check your teacher is listed by the [UK Mindfulness Network](#). This shows that they are properly trained, hold insurance and are supervised by another experienced professional.

Sometimes mindfulness makes you turn towards things you would normally avoid. That can be challenging. But if you have an experienced mindfulness teacher they can help you to pace yourself.

Introductory courses, taster sessions and groups

'Introduction to mindfulness' courses:

- can range from one day courses to eight week courses
- are typically very structured and will go through the basic concepts and exercises
- may be tailored to particular groups, such as students, people serving in the military or people with a particular diagnosis.

Brief taster sessions and informal mindfulness groups are also common.

You might find introductory courses, taster sessions or groups are organised through your place of work or education, or a local library or community centre. Some [local Mind branches](#) may run mindfulness courses and groups. [Private practitioners](#) may also offer introductory courses for a fee.

I went on a mindfulness course once a week for about eight weeks. It covered body mindfulness, mindful eating, mindful walking, mindful environmental awareness and more.

Formal mindfulness courses (MBCT and MBSR)

Some structured mindfulness therapy programmes have been developed to treat specific problems. The most well-established courses are:

- **Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT)** – for [depression](#) and [anxiety](#).
- **Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)** – for general [stress](#). It can also help you manage long-term health conditions.

In some cases these are recommended treatments on the NHS, as studies show that they can work well. But their availability on the NHS varies across the country, and waiting lists can be long. Different courses may have slightly different structures, but in general they:

- are **delivered by qualified practitioners**
- **last for a fixed number of sessions**, across a specific time frame (typically weekly two-hour sessions run over eight weeks) – although some courses may offer introductory sessions which are much shorter.
- are **group-based**, involving group work and group discussion (you can usually contribute as much as you feel comfortable with)
- **involve a mixture of meditation daily mindfulness exercises**, which you're asked to practise in between sessions.

[Talk to your GP](#) or use the online [NHS service finder](#) to find out if these programmes are available near you. They may also be offered through the [private sector](#), although this involves paying a fee.

You can also find out more from our pages on [cognitive behavioural therapy \(CBT\)](#) and [talking therapy and counselling](#), and the [MBCT website](#).

Buddhist mindfulness courses

These kinds of courses include traditional Buddhist practices of mindfulness meditation and other mindful techniques. They're usually taught at Buddhist centres in the context of Buddhist teaching, and are likely to promote general mental wellbeing (not be a tailored treatment for specific health problems).

See [Buddhanet's world Buddhist directory](#) to find a Buddhist centre near you, and contact them directly to see what they offer.

One-to-one sessions with private practitioners

Some mindfulness teachers offer one-to-one sessions through the [private sector](#). Some therapists and counsellors also have mindfulness training and can integrate mindfulness-based techniques into their approach. One-to-one sessions are more likely to be tailored to your particular situation, and don't include any group work, but they may be expensive.

You can look for a qualified mindfulness teacher or therapist in your local area through:

- The [UK Mindfulness Network](#) and [Be Mindful](#) online search tools, which only list qualified teachers.
- One of the professional bodies for therapy listed in our information on [how to find a private therapist](#).

For more information on things to consider when starting any kind of therapy, see our page [getting the most from therapy](#).

Online courses, apps, books and CDs

There are many self-guided mindfulness resources available to guide you through different mindfulness exercises. Apps, books and CDs are typically less structured than an online courses.

There's no formal regulation of self-help resources and they vary greatly in quality and cost, so it can be hard to judge what might work for you. But in general, it's a good idea to look for course or resource that:

- is designed and delivered by qualified mindfulness teachers
- gives you clear information about its potential benefits and risks
- provides information about research studies that have explored how effective it is
- is supported by the NHS or a mental health organisation, or has been recommended to you by someone you trust.

For example:

- [Be Mindful](#) (part of the Mental Health Foundation charity) runs a 4 week online mindfulness course developed by qualified teachers. It's listed in the [NHS Digital Library](#).
- [Breathworks](#) offers mindfulness courses to manage pain, stress and illness.

Our page of [mindfulness exercises](#) gives more tips on doing mindfulness by yourself. For support with using digital mental health tools, see our pages on [staying safe online](#).

Is mindfulness right for me?

Although anyone can try it, being mindful isn't always easy to do. It can take practice, and might not be right for everyone. It might help to consider:

- **How do I want to learn mindfulness?** There are lots of ways to learn mindfulness, and they won't all suit everyone. (Our page on [where to learn mindfulness](#) discusses different options.)
- **What will it cost?** Many [everyday mindfulness exercises](#) are free to do, but formal courses and learning materials may cost money.
- **Am I prepared to notice my difficult thoughts?** This could make you feel worse at first. If you find the exercises distressing then it's best to get advice from a trained professional.
- **Am I able to put the work in?** Learning mindfulness takes regular practice. If you're attending a [mindfulness course](#), you might also have to travel to weekly sessions, which can be demanding.
- **Are all the exercises safe for me to do?** Some may involve sitting still for long periods of time and focusing on your breath, which might not be suitable for everyone – for example if you have mobility issues or breathing problems. Talk to your GP or a trained mindfulness practitioner if you have any concerns.
- **Is mindfulness the right tool for my problems?** Mindfulness tends to be quite a general wellbeing tool. If you want to work on a specific issue then you might find a more focused treatment more helpful.
- **Am I well enough to start something new right now?** If you're feeling very unwell trying to learn a new skill might be overwhelming. You might need more [treatment and support](#) in place before you start.

Sometimes mindfulness puts me in touch with feelings I've been pushing away. In the long term that's better but at the time it can be really distressing.

What if it doesn't work for me?

Although some people find mindfulness helpful, not everyone does. If you've tried something and it hasn't helped, **it's important not to blame yourself**.

Looking after your mental health can be really difficult, especially when you're not feeling well. It can take time and may not be straightforward. But many people find that when they find the right combination of treatments, self-care and support, it is possible to feel better.

See our pages on looking after your wellbeing and [seeking help for a mental health problem](#) for other options you could explore.

When I'm in a particularly unwell state mindfulness is not beneficial, as I cannot bring myself into the present at all.

Useful contacts

Mind's services

- **Helplines** – all our helplines provide information and support by phone and email. Our Blue Light Infoline is just for emergency service staff, volunteers and their families.
 - Mind's Infoline – 0300 123 3393, info@mind
 - Mind's Legal Line – 0300 466 6463, legal@mind
 - Blue Light Infoline – 0300 303 5999, bluelightinfo@mind
- **Local Minds** – there are over 140 local Minds across England and Wales which provide services such as [talking treatments](#), [peer support](#), and [advocacy](#). [Find your local Mind here](#), and contact them directly to see how they can help.
- **Elefriends** is a supportive online community for anyone experiencing a mental health problem. See our [Elefriends page](#) for details.

Who else could help?

Be Mindful

bemindful.co.uk

Information about mindfulness and an online course, as well as a search tool to find mindfulness practitioners in your area.

Breathworks

breathworks-mindfulness.org.uk

Provides mindfulness courses for managing all types of long term health conditions, including pain and stress.

Buddhanet

buddhanet.net

A not-for-profit organisation which provides information about Buddhist groups around the world. Has a searchable directory to find groups near you.

Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)

mbct.co.uk

Information about mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) including online resources.

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)

nice.org.uk

Reports and guidelines on various mental health problems and treatments.

NHS service finder

nhs.uk/service-search

Search facility which enables you to look for a health service, including a GP, in your area.

Oxford Mindfulness Centre

oxfordmindfulness.org

A charity and academic research centre with information and research about mindfulness. It also runs sessions and offers training for mindfulness teachers.

UK Mindfulness Network

ukmindfulnessnetwork.co.uk

Provides a search tool to find registered mindfulness teachers in your local area.

© Mind June 2018

To be revised in 2021.

References are available on request.