

'Mindfulness' is a word we hear a lot these days, but what exactly does it mean? Find out what it is, what the benefits of mindfulness are and how you can start to practise it.

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–d) with the vocabulary (1–4).

Vocabulary

1. to be aware of something
2. to deal with something
3. to pay attention to something
4. to plan for something

Definition

- a. to find a way to manage something
- b. to know or notice that something exists
- c. to think about and decide what you are going to do
- d. to watch or listen to someone or something carefully

Mindfulness

Have you ever driven somewhere and realised when you arrived that you couldn't really remember anything about the journey? Or have you ever eaten a whole packet of biscuits when you were planning to only have one? Or have you stayed up much later than you planned, or even all night, watching 'just one more' episode of a TV series? All of these are examples of mindlessness. When we live this way, we are not fully awake and not fully living our lives.

What exactly is mindfulness?

When we are mindful, we are more conscious of our thoughts, our actions and what is happening around us. We might notice a beautiful sunset or really listen carefully to what a friend is saying, rather than planning what we're going to say next. We are also more aware of our own feelings and our thoughts. Jon Kabat Zinn, who has done a lot to make mindfulness popular, says mindfulness is: 'Paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and without judging.'

So we are consciously deciding what to pay attention to, we are not worrying about the past or planning for the future and we are not trying to control or stop our thoughts or feelings – we're just noticing them.

Why is mindfulness so popular now?

For most people life is getting busier and busier. Technology means that we always have something to do and there isn't much opportunity to just 'be'. People are often doing two or three things at the same time: texting while watching TV, or even looking at their phone while walking along the pavement. People are working longer hours and bringing work home. All this can make us stressed, and mindfulness can be a way of reducing this stress.

What are the benefits of mindfulness?

Research shows that mindfulness reduces stress and depression. It can help you to concentrate, have a better memory and to think more clearly. It can also help people to manage pain better and to improve their sleep, and it can even help you lose weight because you won't eat that whole packet of biscuits without thinking!

How to become more mindful

Mindfulness Day is celebrated on 12 September, so maybe that would be a good day to try a few mindfulness techniques and see if they make a difference. But, of course, you can try these on any day of the year.

A very simple technique that you could try right now is to close your eyes for a couple of minutes and count how many sounds you can hear. This will help to focus you on what is happening right now.

Another technique is to focus on a piece of food, typically a raisin. Instead of eating it without thinking, slow down. Look carefully at it and notice how it feels in your fingers. Smell it. Then put it on your tongue and taste it. Only then start to eat it slowly, noticing how it feels and how it tastes.

Both of these techniques force you to slow down and focus on the present moment, and there are plenty of other ideas you can find online if you want to try mindfulness for yourself.

Tasks

Task 1

Are the sentences true or false?

	Answer	
1. Really noticing a beautiful sunset is an example of mindfulness.	True	False
2. To be mindful we need to stop ourselves from thinking.	True	False
3. Technology has made our lives busier.	True	False
4. Mindfulness can help you to feel calmer and happier.	True	False
5. Mindfulness won't help you lose weight.	True	False
6. To eat a raisin mindfully you should eat it quite quickly.	True	False

Task 2

Are these actions examples of being mindful or of not being mindful?

	Answer	
1. Being aware of your own feelings.	Being mindful	Not being mindful
2. Accidentally doing something you didn't plan or want to do.	Being mindful	Not being mindful
3. Planning what to say next when listening to a friend.	Being mindful	Not being mindful
4. Being conscious of your thoughts.	Being mindful	Not being mindful
5. Focusing on what is happening right now.	Being mindful	Not being mindful
6. Worrying about something that happened yesterday.	Being mindful	Not being mindful

Discussion

Have you tried any mindfulness techniques? What was your experience?

Answers

Preparation task

1. b
2. a
3. d
4. c

Task 1

1. True
2. False
3. True
4. True
5. False
6. False

Task 2

1. Being mindful
2. Not being mindful
3. Not being mindful
4. Being mindful
5. Being mindful
6. Not being mindful