

...
OHHHHMMMM
WHY
EVERYONE IS
TELLING US
TO BE

MINDFUL

Discover the (very real) reasons why focusing on the now can reduce your stress levels at work and at home.

Plus, an easy guide on how to get there.

Words  Brenda Roberts

Have you ever asked a question without listening to the answer?

Do you think about home at work, only to find yourself at home thinking about work? How much time do you spend on auto-pilot, getting to a destination without remembering the journey? Or finding your hand at the bottom of a bag of chips when you only meant to have one or two?



Even though we all have the natural ability to be present, most of us only connect fleetingly with the now before turning right back into our thoughts. This lack of focus leads to a lot of unwanted effects like bad moods, stress, anxiety and conflict that makes us less effective in general.

Living in the moment – also called mindfulness – is a mind-body approach to life that helps you relate differently to experiences. This practise involves paying attention to your thoughts and feelings in a way that ups your ability to cope with difficult situations and everyday struggles.

'It might sound a bit hey-shoo-wah, but mindfulness is actually a key element in fighting stress,' says Cape Town mindfulness-based coach Sarah Foale. 'Studies also show it can improve your general health, help regulate your emotions, boost your executive functioning at work, increase your job satisfaction levels and lower your risk of burnout.'

In short, it's about taking a pause, making the space to notice the fullness of the present moment and – through learning various practices – becoming more skilled at managing your life.

And although it used to be the domain of Buddhist monks and 'alternative hippies', mindfulness has made its way into modern medicine and modern life, and the world is taking notice.



IT'S A BICEP CURL FOR YOUR BRAIN

Think of your mind as a muscle, says Sarah. 'Just as you exercise your body to strengthen your muscles to perform better in sport, you can strengthen your 'mindfulness muscle' by engaging in new practices that allow new pathways to form in your brain.'

In time, this allows you to perform better in life. 'It helps you develop the capacity to make wiser, more supportive choices,' Foale explains.

To reap the full benefits of living in the moment, you need to practise regularly and often. The good news is it doesn't have to be a huge commitment. According to the experts, even 10 minutes a day can work. 'But remember, mindfulness isn't really something you can stop and start, pick up and then leave for a while,' Foale adds. 'Even if your personal practice waxes and wanes over time, living mindfully involves adopting a set of attitudes that fundamentally shifts how you engage with yourself and the world around you.'

SO WHAT EXACTLY DOES IT ENTAIL?

Mindfulness has two components – informal and formal practice.

TRY THIS INFORMAL PRACTICE TODAY

S

stop

T

take a conscious breath

O

observe all your present thoughts, emotions and body sensations

P

proceed wisely and kindly



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TRY THESE FORMAL MINDFULNESS PRACTICES

▶ **SITTING PRACTICE**

This practice depends on what you choose to make the focus of your attention.

▶ **BODY SCAN**

This is usually done lying down and entails a mental scan of your body parts, paying close attention to the sensations in your body as well as the related emotions and thoughts.

▶ **MINDFUL MOVEMENT**

While engaged in slow, conscious walking, you pay attention to your body and your related emotions.

▶ **THREE-STEP BREATHING SPACE**

This is a particular sequence of becoming aware of your breath and the thoughts, emotions and sensations of the present moment.

▶ **COMPASSION PRACTICE**

This is an advanced practice that entails opening yourself up to kindness in yourself and others.

Although you can learn more about mindfulness through books and online resources, experts suggest you take a group course in your area. That way, a trained expert can guide you... and you can benefit from the experience of others in the group.

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO MINDFULNESS

While mindfulness might seem simple, it's not necessarily all that easy.

The real work is to make time every day to just keep doing it. Here's a short practice to get you started:

▶ TAKE A SEAT

Find a place to sit that feels calm and quiet.

▶ SET A TIME LIMIT

If you're just beginning, set aside just five to ten minutes.

▶ PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR BODY AND FEEL YOUR BREATH

Follow the sensation of your breath as your chest rises and falls. (Practising mindfulness means using the sensation of your breath as an anchor to the present moment.)

▶ NOTICE WHEN YOUR MIND STARTS WANDERING

You'll start thinking about your to-do list or the argument you had with your partner. When you notice this, simply return your attention to your breath. The more you do this, the more likely you are to be able to do it again and again.

▶ BE KIND TO YOUR WANDERING MIND

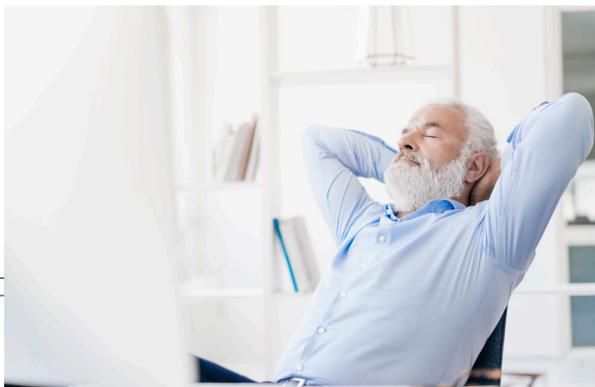
Try not to judge yourself for the thoughts that crop up. Just acknowledge them and let them go. Recognise the sensations they cause in your body, and let those pass as well.

▶ RETURN TO THE PRESENT

Don't obsess about your distracting thoughts. We're all guilty of listening to our inner voice a little more than we should. However, when you practise diffusing your 'judgy' thoughts, you learn to look at things differently – and respond differently.

▶ REMEMBER, THE GOAL ISN'T TO QUIET YOUR MIND

It's to pay attention to the present moment without judgement.



WHAT THE SCIENTISTS SAY...

Your brain constantly works to make itself more efficient and effective. When you complete a new task, it makes tiny changes so you can complete the task successfully the next time.

When you practise mindfulness, you send your brain the message that you are better at completing everyday tasks when you are aware, non-reactive and non-judgemental. Your brain makes the necessary changes. Too far-fetched for you? Scientific studies show it's true.

In 2011, a team at Harvard found that people who completed eight weeks of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) had increased thickness in the areas of the brain that deal with learning, memory and emotion regulation. They also showed decreased brain cell volume in the amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for fear, anxiety and stress.

MINDFULNESS CAN ALSO HELP TO...

- ▶ Improve the quality of life for patients with cancer
- ▶ Improve the experience of various conditions and illnesses such as gastrointestinal disorders, HIV, and fibromyalgia
- ▶ Alleviate asthma
- ▶ Alleviate hot flushes
- ▶ Boost immune function

According to the University of Massachusetts Medical School Centre for Mindfulness