SANE

FACTSHEET

MINDFULNESS

QUICK FACTS

- Mindfulness is a mental and physical technique you can use to focus your awareness on the present moment. Being in the moment helps you acknowledge, accept and cope with painful or intrusive thoughts, feelings and sensations.
- Mindfulness practice is simple, powerful, takes just a few minutes and can be done almost anywhere, so it can be a great addition to your everyday mental health self-care.

THE FACTS

- **Mindfulness has been around for 2,500 years** and has been part of psychological therapies since the 1970s.
- **Mindfulness can help reduce stress**, boost creativity, improve attention, working-memory and concentration and strengthen relationships.
- **Mindfulness can help manage depression**, anxiety, suicidal ideation, chronic pain, addiction recovery and relapse prevention and eating disorders.

THE MYTHS

- **Mindfulness isn't religious or mystical**. It can be part of spiritual practice, but being mindful is a technique anyone can use.
- **Mindfulness isn't about emptying your head**. Instead, you let your thoughts and feelings and sensations come and go without judgement.
- **Mindfulness isn't a shortcut to joy.** It's a gentler way to be in the moment, and to cope if the moment is stressful.

HOW MINDFULNESS WORKS

It's easy to dwell on painful memories, old problems, worries and fears about the future, especially during periods of depression or anxiety. Without an anchor to the present, minds can get overwhelmed by stress.

Mindfulness is that anchor. By focussing on the present moment, usually by turning your attention to your breath, body and senses, you can learn to let those stressful thoughts and feelings come and go without getting caught up in judging or controlling them.

Mindful moments

Mindfulness isn't something you have to stop everything to do. In fact, it's most useful when you're in the middle of a daily activity where your mind tends to wander into stressful thoughts and tension.

With practice, you can grow and strengthen your 'mindful muscle', so that a sense of calm and stillness becomes easier to reach in your everyday life.

Mindfulness therapies

Mindfulness is part of several evidence-based therapies, including:

- Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction (MBSR)
- Mindfulness-based Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (MCBT)
- Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)
- Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT)

These therapies are now widely used by psychologists in individual and group sessions.

Mindfulness meditation

Mindfulness meditation involves spending specific time focussing on your senses and allowing your thoughts to come and go calmly, without judging or trying to change them.

THE EFFECTS OF MINDFULNESS

The benefits of mindfulness meditation have been talked about for centuries, but recently neuroscientists have found evidence that mindfulness meditation helps to:

- preserve the brain's grey matter — the thinking part of your brain
- grow the parts of the brain associated with learning, thinking, emotional regulation, empathy, compassion and taking perspective
- reduce fear, anxiety and stress
- improve attention, concentration and memory.

GETTING STARTED WITH MINDFULNESS

To start having mindful moments, identify an everyday activity where your thoughts tend to wander into painful memories, ruminating on problems or worrying about the future. It could be brushing your teeth, eating lunch, walking, taking the train — any part of your day.

Next time that happens, try this mindfulness starter:

- Focus on what your senses say to you. What can you see, hear, taste, touch and smell? Don't analyse or think about it much, just notice what you're sensing.
- If your attention wanders, that's okay. Noticing is part of mindfulness. Gently bring your mind back to your senses.
- Thoughts and feelings will come and go while you're being mindful. Let them. They're

just thoughts. Keep your awareness on your senses, anchoring you in the present moment while everything else drifts harmlessly by.

- Now focus your attention on your breath. Feel the air go in and then go out, noticing the pauses in between. Try not to control or change your breath: instead allow the air to come and go.
- Try this for a couple of minutes or so at first. It's normal to feel distracted and find it hard, but that can change quickly with practice.

If it's working for you, let mindfulness spread into other parts of your day. Practise more little moments of mindfulness, when you're waiting for the kettle to boil or the bus to come. Try it sitting still or moving around, in the morning, last thing at night.

Find the right amount of mindfulness for you — five minutes of really great mindfulness is better than trying to make it happen all the time. And keep practising — it gets easier and more satisfying the more you do it.

If you're interested, there are courses and apps out there to help you take mindfulness further and increase the benefits.

Related: What mindfulness app is right for you?

THE LIMITS OF MINDFULNESS

Most people can benefit from mindfulness meditation, but in rare cases it can lead to feelings of intense anxiety or dissociation from reality. If doing mindfulness is making you feel worse, stop.

There's some indication that people prone to symptoms of psychosis should be cautious with intensive mindfulness meditation. If that's you, speak to your GP, therapist or other health professional for specific advice.

Related: Psychosis factsheet

This SANE resource was created with support from The Vizard Foundation.