

Mindfulness Instructions¹

Introduction

Mindfulness is the act of deliberately paying attention in a particular way. This particular way involves bringing the attention back to the present moment and being non-judgemental.

So we become aware of the full range of experience including sensory impressions, thoughts, imagery emotions, urges and impulses. We even can become aware of the quality of mindfulness itself - whether the mind is calm and clear or agitated or dull and foggy.

Because we do not judge either the content or the processes of our mind we become freer to observe without identifying with the contents of our thoughts. It is as if we are watching the stream of consciousness rather than swimming in it and being buffeted by its eddies and currents.

Sitting & posture

Even though we can practice mindfulness in any place and in any posture, some conditions are more conducive. So first we find a relatively quiet place where we are unlikely to be disturbed. We then adopt a relaxed but alert posture. The traditional position is sitting cross legged on a cushion on the floor, but sitting on a chair with the back straight and unsupported and relaxed will do just as well.

Eyes opened or closed

When beginning practice it is better to close the eyes. Ultimately it is very useful to be able to practise mindfulness with the eyes open as it allows us to expand its application to a much broader range of settings.

¹ Retrieved and adapted from http://www.mindfulness.org.au/mindfulness_instructions.htm

The anchor: breath

We then use the breath as an anchor for our attention. A repeated phrase called a mantra can be used for the same purpose. However, the breath has the advantages of immediately bringing the attention into the body. Moreover, awareness of the breath immediately focuses our attention on a function that is under both conscious and unconscious control. This is a very appropriate place for psychological work to occur. So we focus our attention on the breath without trying to control it. We let the breath breathe itself.

All thoughts are “just thoughts”

All thoughts including images are regarded as equal while meditating. It does not matter how noble or base they might be; how profound or banal they might be. This is how we cultivate the non-judgemental awareness that is the cornerstone of mindfulness. So for the purpose of mindfulness they are all “just thoughts”.

Dealing with distraction from the breath

Soon enough we will realize we have become distracted from our breath and immersed in our thought stream as is our well established habit. When this happens we gently bring attention back to the breath without criticism or struggle. We have just been for a dip in our thought stream. So we lightly return to the solid ground of our awareness of our breath. It is this gentle process of moving in and out of the mind-stream that creates the decentering effect described by Segal et al (2002)

Similarly, sensations such as sounds, aches itches and tingles are quite acceptable. We can just allow them to be. When these sensations lead to discursive thoughts, such as: “I wish that dog next door would stop barking”, then we treat that like any other thought. So we just gently return our attention to our breath.

Strong emotions can sometimes be problematic. They can lead to the practitioner being overwhelmed by a vortex of intense thoughts and feelings. In this case it is often helpful

to be mindful of the changing physical sensations in the body associated with the emotion. As the practitioner watches the fluctuations and changing nature of these sensations, the sense of being overwhelmed can often be replaced with interest or even curiosity about the experience.

Expanding mindfulness

We use the breath as an anchor as a way of developing our ability to witness the activity of the mind. As we get used to this, the mind settles. It is then easier to expand our mindfulness to include:

- Subtle body sensations - We can scan our body from head to toe or feel our breath expand into different parts of the body.
- Sights, sounds, smells & any other sensory impressions
- Emotions
- Thoughts in different modalities e.g.
 - verbal, visual, musical
- Thought types e.g.
 - planning, sexual, grandiose fantasies, worrying
- The quality of our mindfulness
 - calm & clear, agitated, or foggy/sleepy

Establishing a regular daily practice

Many people have great difficulty establishing a regular daily practice. Usually it is best if a practitioner links the mindfulness practice into their normal daily routine. Most people have a predictable morning routine into which mindfulness can be slotted. The important thing is that the practice should not be based on whether a practitioner feels up to it on a particular day or not. Instead it needs to be established as a good habit which is practised without internal disputation, much like brushing your teeth.

Sometimes flexibility and imagination are required to find an appropriate time and place. People with young children often find it easier to meditate at work in their office. Single parents of preschool children often find it very difficult to find time. Sometimes they can fit it in when the children are napping. Some people meditate on the train on the way to work in the morning.