HAY HOUSE BASICS

MINDFULNESS

How to Live Well by Paying Attention

ED HALLIWELL

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'To live is the rarest thing in the world.
Most people exist, that is all.'
Oscar Wilde

Mindfulness brings us to our senses, enabling us to live in and with reality. As we practise opening to the senses, a new way of being can emerge within us. We develop a friendly awareness of what's going on, and are able to learn from it.

Walking down the street, you hear the sound of a horse's hooves from behind. You turn to see a friend on top of the horse, which is galloping by at a furious pace. You call after the friend: 'Where are you going?' The rider yells back: 'I don't know. Ask the horse!'

Many of us live our lives like the friend in this scene: hurtling through the days, feeling driven, rather than in charge. Life may be happening, but are we really choosing our course? And when we *are* making choices, to what extent are they wise ones, expressing our true intent?

The cost of relentless *doing*

Surveys suggest that despite huge economic growth, people in Britain and the US are generally no happier than they were 50 years ago.[1] We may even be *less* happy than former generations: the World Health Organization warns that by 2030 depression will create the largest burden of any illness,[2] overtaking cancer, heart disease and diabetes.

We may be richer in monetary terms, but most of us agree that 'the pace of life and the number of things we have to do and worry about is a major cause of stress, unhappiness and illness'.[3] The pressure we feel to compete and achieve, pushing harder and faster and for longer hours, doesn't seem to lead to wellbeing, even if it produces material gains. Nevertheless, like the rider on the horse, we keep being driven, perhaps without considering where we're headed, or why we might be going in that direction.

With all our modern means of communication, consumption of information has increased by 350 per cent over the last three decades.[4] Multi-tasking is often tried as a way to cope – if we can manage more things at once, perhaps we'll clear the decks? But research suggests this doesn't help; in fact, trying to multi-task reduces our productivity by as much as 40 per cent.[5] We waste energy by switching our attention from one thing to the next in quick succession. As T.S. Eliot put it, well before the creation of the internet, we get 'distracted from distraction by distraction'.

As we become more stressed, our mental capacity decreases – we feel overwhelmed and can't think straight. We're relegated to paying 'continuous partial attention'[6] – a fractured, frantic way of life that only frazzles us further.

Stress appears to shrink parts of the brain that help regulate mind and body functions, putting us at a greater risk of mental and physical illness.[7] In trying to get everywhere faster, we actually make our journey harder, and less enjoyable.

People are creatures of habit, and relentless doing (or thinking about doing) seems to have become an ingrained human tendency. Evolutionary biologists tell us this habit stems from benign intent – to survive and prosper, our ancestors learned to look ahead, be alert and responsive to possible threats, and to think back and learn from mistakes.

But when it gets out of hand, or is applied to situations in which we have little control, this 'doing' mode, as it's sometimes called, leads to anxiety and rumination. We can get so focused on solving problems that we miss the good we have right now. Dissatisfaction becomes our default condition.

Root causes of stress

Around 2,500 years ago, a great psychologist not only recognized this issue but saw its causes and worked out a remedy. By observing patterns of mind, body and behaviour, he realized that at the root of human distress is a tendency to cling, crave and resist. Each time we grasp at something, discomfort is inevitable. We also suffer when we reject our experience, wanting something other than what's actually happening. When we try to prevent what's already here, or hold on to what's changing, we engage in a losing battle.

Fortunately, said the psychologist, we get caught in these tendencies only due to lack of awareness. We play out our patterns in a state of semi-sleep, propelled through life by habits that have built up over time. The good news is we can begin to free ourselves from these habits – by becoming willing and able to look at our predicament, learning gently to let go of unhelpful old ways, and starting to engage with the world in a more conscious, courageous, and compassionate manner.

Such a transformation can occur by practising mindfulness. This means learning a set of skills that brings us to our senses, enabling us to live more in tune with present-moment reality. Using his own experience as a guide, the psychologist reported that mindfulness was 'all-helpful',[8] leading to real happiness.

The mindful path to wellbeing, he said, helps us arise from slumber. With this observation, the psychologist made his name. He became known as 'Buddha' – which means 'one who is awake'.

Mindfulness as medicine

Buddhism can seem like a religion, but it may be more helpful to see the basic message as medicine. We can taste and test mindfulness for ourselves. If we're able and willing to practise, we *can* find greater contentment. The path laid out is an applied training in the art of living well.

Over the centuries, many people have tried some or all of it, whether practising in the Buddhist tradition, through engaging with other contemplative paths, or by discovering similar insights and methods through their own ingenuity

and investigation. They often report that, over time, the approach transforms their lives. It doesn't require belief – intrigued by his radiance, the Buddha's contemporaries reportedly asked him if he was a god: 'No,' he is said to have replied, 'I am awake.'

In modern times, analyses of the human condition have been gloomy. When describing his new science of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud said its aim was to turn neurotic misery into common unhappiness, while Western medicine has tended to focus on fixing broken body parts, until no more repair is feasible. So-called mental health problems, not easily treated with these methods, have often been swept under the carpet, or left to fester. The possibility of turning discontent into joy is an idea that's received scant attention.

But things are shifting. Scientific research and technology have become more sophisticated, and we now know the brain can change in ways once thought unlikely. Just as the body's muscles can be strengthened by exercise, areas of the brain can be activated, connected, and grown with training in certain skills.

We have long known that physical exercise has health-promoting benefits. Science is now showing that mindfulness – traditionally cultivated through meditation practice – is also good for us. These practices, it seems, have powerful effects on the brain and body that lead towards peace.

In the field of wellbeing, results from mindfulness research may be among the most interesting discoveries since it was

found that physical exercise has health-promoting benefits. Non-religious mindfulness trainings have become more available, and many health practitioners have embraced them with interest.

Contentment, it turns out, isn't a lost cause. We know this intuitively: when asked, 86 per cent of people agreed that 'people would be much happier and healthier if they knew how to slow down and live in the moment'.[9]

Mindfulness: the science

Hundreds of mindfulness studies are published every year. The research has found that not only are mindful people more prone to wellbeing, but mindfulness training helps cultivate it. Below is a summary of what's been learned.

Overall health

A 2012 review looked at 31 high-quality trials of an eight-week mindfulness course (mindfulness-based stress reduction), and found it effective for working with anxiety, depression, stress and distress, as well as aspects of personal development such as ability to empathize and cope with life's challenges. Mindfulness was also found to be helpful for physical health.[1]

In 2013, a review with an even larger scope looked at 209 studies of mindfulness courses with a total of more than 12,000 participants, and concluded that mindfulness is 'an effective treatment for a variety of psychological problems, and is especially effective for reducing anxiety, depression, and stress'.[2]

Stress

Studies indicate that people who practise mindfulness experience less stress, and also have lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol.[3]

Depression

Combined data from six high-quality trials of another eight-week mindfulness course (mindfulness-based cognitive therapy) found it leads to an average 44 per cent reduction in relapse rates among people prone to depression. People who take the course also become kinder to themselves.[4]

Pain

After practising mindfulness meditation for 20 minutes a day over three days, people given a painful heat stimulus reported their pain as 40 per cent less intense and 57 per cent less unpleasant than before the training. They also showed less activity in the somatosensory cortex, an area of the brain associated with pain processing, and increased activity in areas of the brain involved in cognitive and emotional control.[5] Other studies have also reported significant effects of mindfulness on pain intensity.[6]

The immune system

Participants in an eight-week mindfulness programme were compared with another group following an eight-week exercise regime, and a third set of people who neither exercised nor meditated. They were all monitored to see who fell ill over the next cold and flu season.

The mindfulness group had half as many sick days as those who exercised, were ill for less time, and reported less severe symptoms. The group who did nothing fared worst of all.[7] Other studies have shown the benefits of mindfulness for speed of healing and the ability to cope with a wide variety of illnesses, including cancer, heart disease and diabetes.[8]

Cognitive skills

Mindfulness appears to have benefits for focus, concentration and memory.[9] Some studies suggest that it may aid creative, flexible

problem-solving,[10] and people who practise meditation have been shown to make more rational decisions.[11]

Behaviour regulation

Mindfulness seems to help people manage addictive patterns with food, cigarettes and alcohol, as well as emotions and urges more generally.[12] People who practise mindfulness also tend to sleep better,[13] and engage in more pro-social and environmentally friendly actions.[14]

Relationships

Mindfulness helps us relate to others more skilfully. As well as cultivating empathy, which can lead to mutual understanding, mindful people feel more connected with others, are more likely to enjoy satisfying relationships, and are better able to cope with relationship conflicts.[15, 16]

Other studies

Taking a mindfulness course has been shown to reduce anger, rumination and medical symptoms, and improve people's sense of internal cohesion. Those who are more mindful tend to be more conscientious, independent, competent, resilient and optimistic, and less neurotic, absent-minded, reactive, and defensive.[17]

How does mindfulness happen?

It *is* possible to move towards wellbeing, but it doesn't occur in the way we might expect – through straining, searching and struggling for answers. Actually, the benefits seem to come from not doing much at all, at least to begin with, Rather, mindfulness means observing and feeling what's really going on in the moment.

To return to the story of the rider on the horse, practising mindfulness means that, instead of unconsciously digging

in the heels and spooking the horse to go faster, our rider friend might begin to notice the feet clenching in fear – gripping on for dear life. They might become aware of a pulling back on the reins that strains the horse's neck.

Mindfulness means an open-hearted awareness of what's happening, and learning from what we find. This comes first of all from paying attention to the senses. Rather than getting caught up in ideas, we tune in to our world with awareness of sight, sound, feeling, taste and smell.

As we experience more fully this amazing sensory palette, we notice how thoughts occur as well as sensation, and we notice how this additional layer of concept often drives us, even though it isn't always an accurate reflection of events. We begin to realize that although we rarely question its validity, our thinking is often off-base, tricking us out of step with the truth.

We observe how our misinterpretations create stress – a tension between how things are and how we mistakenly perceive them to be, or would like them to be. This stress drives automatic thoughts which spin round and round, reigniting distressing sensations and leading to even more thoughts – a vicious cycle which keeps on pulling us into reaction and distraction.

Watching our own mind and body like our friend on their mount, we see how the horse bolts and feel how the rider panics. By noticing this, rather than getting caught up with it or struggling against it, we're already loosening the ties that bind. With gentleness, we bring our attention back to direct experience in the moment. We sit steady and lighten our grip.

Over time, as we practise opening and re-opening to sensory awareness – coming back to attention as the mind wanders – a different way of being (a real *wellbeing*) can unfold within us. By repeatedly shifting how we attend to experience, we strengthen the muscle of mindfulness.

Mindfulness and neuroplasticity

Neuroscience has shown that the brain changes with experience. For example, taxi drivers who have ferried passengers around London for years have larger hippocampi, a region of the brain important for spatial awareness and memory, compared to newer cab drivers. It appears the practice of taxi driving grows this part of the brain over time.[1]

Similarly, experienced musicians show higher grey matter volume in motor, auditory and visual-spatial regions,[2] suggesting their brains have been altered through hours of daily practice. When the brain is damaged – such as during a stroke – it is possible to recover lost capacity through rehabilitation therapy. Other areas of the brain take over from those damaged by the stroke.[3]

The brain's ability to change and adapt in response to experience is known as neuroplasticity. Just as how we exercise affects the body's weight, health, flexibility and strength, the same is true of the brain. This process can happen quite quickly: learning to juggle or play the piano over just a few days alters brain density.[4] Remarkably, even mentally rehearsing piano keystrokes results in similar brain changes, almost as if you were actually playing.

This is empowering news because it suggests that we aren't stuck with our old brains and our old habits. We can plough new furrows, cultivating freedom to shape the future, based on what we do in the present, or how we train the mind.

Researchers have explored the neuroplastic changes that occur with mindfulness training, and are finding that practitioners' brains seem to reflect their expertise. Activity, structure and volume are different in parts of the pre-frontal cortex,[5] the most recently evolved area of the brain, which is associated strongly with reasoning and decision-making. Experienced meditators also show high levels of gamma wave activity, which is thought to be related to increased awareness.[6]

Changes start to be seen in the brains of new meditators after a few days or weeks of training. As they practise mindfulness, regions of the brain related to learning, memory, mind-body awareness, cognitive control, emotional reactivity, sense of self and other markers of wellbeing are all affected.[7]

It doesn't take much, it appears, for patterns of activity and connectivity in the brain to shift. As new grooves are formed in our ways of seeing, relating and behaving, so these are reflected and perhaps reinforced by neural shifts.

Gentleness and commitment

Like any other skill, mindfulness takes a kind of effort. We're learning a new way of being with our minds, bodies and environment, and this may bring up feelings of awkwardness, discomfort, disappointment or irritation. We may fall off the horse sometimes, and think we'll never get back on. We might sometimes believe that mindfulness isn't for us, or that we're a hopeless case.

Some descriptions of mindfulness training suggest it's more like riding an elephant than a horse, which perhaps gives an indication of the challenge (and fun) that may lie ahead. But with guidance and a gentle commitment,

we can work with the impulsive reactions that govern us, perhaps even finding that, like a tamed wild animal, they might eventually become our friends and helpers.

Practice: Coming to your senses

Mindfulness begins when we move from a mode of doing and thinking, and into a way of being, where sensing takes centre stage. Because most of us aren't used to working with our senses in this way, it helps to practise. For this five senses practice, the only equipment you need is yourself, a chair, and a glass of water.

Allow about three minutes for each stage (15 minutes in total). Once you've read the guidance, put the book down while you practise, one sense at a time. For a guided audio version of this practice, and all the other practices in this book, please visit www.edhalliwell.com.

Feeling

If possible, sit upright (although not stiffly so) on the chair, with your back self-supporting and feet on the ground. Let your hands come to rest on the thighs, and, if you like, close your eyes.

What sensations do you notice? How are your feet feeling: perhaps there's contact between the soles of the feet and the socks, shoes or the floor? Can you feel the weight of your sit bones on the seat? How about in your back – what sensations are here? Do you feel air on your face? What temperature is it just now – warmer or cooler?

And what about internal sensations? Are you noticing any aching, itching, or buzzing? Or maybe there's not much sensation at the moment – a numbness, perhaps? Be aware of the location of any feeling (or lack of feeling), and whether it's changing in intensity. You don't have to try to

hold on to or get rid of sensations, or even to name them. See if you can just allow them to be experienced.

Hearing

Now, as you let body sensations fade into the background, allow sounds to be noticed. What are you hearing? You don't have to go searching for sounds: wait for them to come to you, as if your ears were microphones, receiving and registering vibrations. Louder, softer, closer, further away, short or long sounds?

Or sudden, repeating and continuous sounds? Are they high or low pitch? Perhaps there's silence, or gaps in-between sounds – are you noticing these too? Open your microphone ears and let hearing come in, whether the sounds seem pleasant or unpleasant. Whatever symphony is playing right now, can you let it be heard?

Seeing

Now open the eyes to seeing. Rather than fixing on what you can see as 'things' (e.g. table, chair, book, carpet, etc.), see if you can let the visual field be colours, shapes, shades, or lines. Allow the eyes to linger rather than darting about. Be interested in depth and height and shade.

If you find yourself thinking about what you're seeing – drawn into a memory or a concern, or automatically giving things a name as they come into view – that's fine, just acknowledge that the mind has wandered into thought, and gently come back to seeing.

Smelling

Perhaps closing the eyes again, allow yourself to smell. Whether what you're smelling seems nice or not so nice, let there be a connection with the odours. Is there more than one fragrance, and if so, how are they mixed together? If there are no smells, what's the smell of 'no smell'? The in-breaths don't need to be deep – see if you can let breath happen

naturally and offer curiosity to the coming and going of smell sensation. Isn't it amazing to have a nose?

Tasting

Pick up the glass of water, and take a sip. Notice the arising of sensation on the tongue as the liquid makes contact. How does it taste? Clear, cool, refreshing? Let the describing words fade into the distance, allowing the sensation of taste itself be known.

Gently swirl the water around your mouth, and notice if the flavour changes – perhaps as it mixes with saliva. Does it become warmer, duller, thicker? Let these sensations be experienced. Decide when you're ready to swallow the water; notice the dissolving of taste – does any trace remain, and if so, for how long? Now take another, maybe bigger, sip and repeat – are the sensations the same, or do they seem different? What, if anything, has changed?

When you've practised working with each of the senses, you might reflect on any differences between this way of sensing and how you normally relate with your environment. If it seems different, how so? What were you doing that made it this way? Be interested in the answers that come up. Is the quality of your experience changed by how you attend to it?

Week 1: practices to explore

- Work with the Coming to your senses practice once a day. If you like, explore different locations for practising, noticing what happens each time. For tasting, you can use any food or drink.
- Choose one daily activity that you normally do on autopilot (e.g. brushing your teeth, walking the

dog, washing the dishes, etc.) and practise bringing mindfulness to it each day this week, experiencing it with the senses. Notice what happens.

- Bring awareness to the senses at other times, whenever you remember. When you find yourself caught in rumination or distraction, gently bring yourself back to sensing. What effect does this have, if any?
- Ask yourself: what are my intentions for exploring mindfulness? What would I like to learn? If you like, write these down, noticing how it feels to put them on paper, and what it's like to look at them written in front of you.
- Once you've recorded your intentions, see if you can let go of any explicit attempt to achieve them. Can you allow intentions to inspire your exploration, but without making them a goal to measure yourself against? Can you allow yourself just to let go into mindfulness training – giving it your full energy as you focus on what's happening right now?

Simon's experience

I'd just turned 50 and thought being happy would arrive at some point if I kept trying hard enough. It was August, which is always when my work goes quiet, and once again I'd built this up to be the time when life would be wonderful. And it wasn't.

That August my mum wasn't very happy and I'd scraped my car. There were all these hassles happening in my perfect month! They weren't particularly serious, but they didn't fit my picture. I was doing what I'd always done

– trying to reach contentment by working very hard for most of the year and then having a huge expectation that time off was going to be great. When those expectations weren't met, the frustration was enormous.

I got to a breaking point where I realized my aspirations and what I was doing to achieve them weren't meeting – one wasn't leading to the other. It took almost a mini-breakdown for me to look for something different. I saw that if I carried on like that it wasn't going to lead to my holy grail of happiness.

Soon after my birthday I started reading a book that had been recommended to me by a friend – it was based on the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction course. I found it really useful for exploring new perspectives on things. Just at that time my partner said she was going on a mindfulness course, and we realized that it was the course of the book I was reading. I joined her on the course and it was like practising what I'd read. The book opened the door and the course enabled me to walk through it.

Ann's experience

The trigger of my eldest son leaving home made me realize family life was never going to be the same, and it led to quite a severe depression. I just felt unbalanced, and it was also the start of a difficult menopause. Once I felt a bit better, my GP said I needed to have some strategies for coping with the underlying anxieties, so I had some counselling, and I also booked a mindfulness course.

One of my biggest problems was that I didn't control my own life. I let others control me to the point where I didn't have my own identity. I felt that I always had to please other people, doing things I didn't want to, and I realized that was a source of my anxiety. When I made decisions I wasn't making them in an informed way – I was like a hamster on a treadmill, just going from one thing to another without having time to breathe.

Andy's experience

I was introduced to meditation in the early 1990s, by a friend who was interested in Buddhism. We were backpacking around India and he went off to a retreat. He'd split up from his partner and was really struggling, but there was a different depth to him when he came out. I was interested, but I was also a little cynical.

In my late twenties/early thirties, I had a 'break-up', as I call it, I was drinking too much, travelling all over the world with my job. It was unsustainable, living life at that speed, and I ended up in quite a bad place. I was in hospital for a period of time because I'd lost touch with reality.

I recovered from that, but I still carried a lot of anxiety. I'd get very anxious in public places. I was also beating myself up about stuff from the past – each day I'd have dozens of what I call 'shame attacks'. Thoughts about the past were blocking my ability to be present.

The opportunity to do a mindfulness course came up through work. A lot of people said it would be good for me if I could slow down and be less busy in my mind.

Catherine's experience

I knew I had a good life, but I didn't seem able to appreciate it. As a mum, I was constantly living in the future, a few minutes, a few hours, or a few days ahead, striving hard to make things right. Life was going by and I was in 'management mode'.

With my kids, I tended to think I had to sort out every problem right away or they would never succeed in the future. Wanting to be in control and wanting everything to be perfect piled on a load of expectations. There was a feeling that if I didn't do parenting right*, it'd have consequences down the road, which meant I felt threatened and under pressure.*

I'd been aware of mindfulness and meditation, but I didn't think it was for me because I had too much to do. I thought I wouldn't be able to sit down for a long time. I also thought it might be a bit shallow, more of a relaxation technique that would benefit me in the immediate term – maybe like exercising and getting the endorphins. I didn't understand then that it was a practice, and that you can train your brain to think differently. But mindfulness kept coming up in the reading I was doing, and with the people I spoke to, so I thought: I've got to give it a go, with an open mind, to see if it works.

SUMMARY ✍

- Mindfulness is a powerful practice of mind and body that can move us in the direction of peace.
- For this we need to pay attention with the senses, which connect us to what's actually happening right now.
- More mindful people are prone to optimal wellbeing, and training in mindfulness helps people cultivate greater happiness, in mind, body and behaviour.
- Neuroscience has shown that the brain changes with experience. Practising mindfulness changes the brain in ways that are associated with wellbeing.
- Mindfulness begins when we move from a mode dominated by doing and thinking, and into a way of being, in which sensing takes centre stage. We can use the Coming to your senses practice to help cultivate this.