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MORE THAN MEDITATION: How to make mindfulness work for you

Jutta Tobias Mortlock talks about how mindfulness can help you and your clients.

SUMMARY POINTS

- ⊕ Scientific research links mindfulness with better physical and mental health and with better relationships at home and at work.
- ⊕ One definition is: 'Mindfulness is a flexible state of mind that enables us to become actively engaged in the present' (Langer, 1989).
- ⊕ We can practise mindfulness anytime and anywhere by coming to our (five) senses: directing our attention to one of our five sensory perceptions, for example to consciously hearing the laughter of a child, or to fully appreciating the smell and taste of food.
- ⊕ The goal of mindfulness practice is to develop an awareness of what is actually happening in and around us, as opposed to *imagining* that we (already) know what is happening in the moment, and thus (perhaps) judging the situation prematurely.

What is this thing called mindfulness?

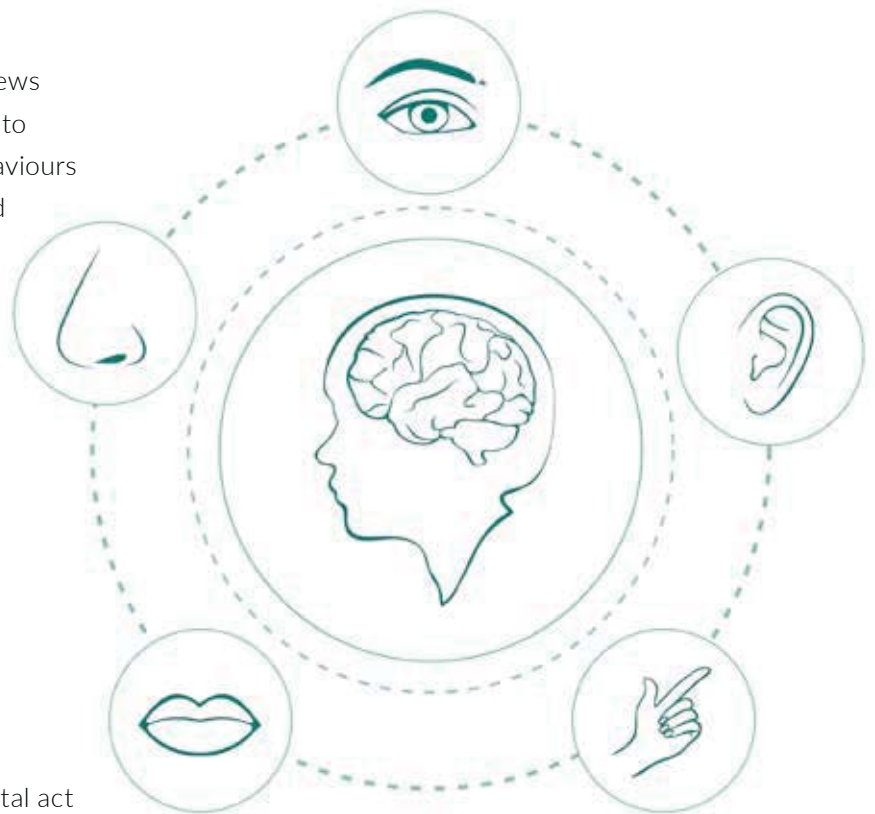
Why has mindfulness become so interesting to clinicians, mental health practitioners, and even businesses? Because a solid body of science links mindfulness with better physical and mental health and with better relationships at home and at work. And because mindfulness is not a quality that some have and others do not – mindfulness can be learned. Mindfulness helps individuals to



face difficult situations better. This is good news for anyone interested in helping others both to improve their wellbeing and to promote behaviours that are in line with who they want to be and how they really want to behave.

So, what is mindfulness? Many people cite the definition of Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the extensively researched Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme: paying attention to the present moment, on purpose, and non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn 1994).

This description sounds a lot like meditation. The word 'meditation' comes from the Latin *meditatum*, which means 'contemplating' or 'reflecting'. Although meditating is often associated with religious practices, it is, in itself, an ideology-free mental act or brain exercise, during which one often sits still and does nothing but use the breath as an anchor, to become more aware of thoughts and feelings.



The 'how to' of mindfulness: Coming to our (five) senses

Mindfulness is not the same as meditation. It is a state of mind or way of being that results from actions or (mental) practice. Some people are naturally mindful, they tend to live consciously and avoid making automatic judgments, but for many, mindfulness is the *outcome* of specific actions designed to increase it, for example, through mindfulness meditation.

Ellen Langer, a Harvard University professor who began researching mindfulness at the same time as Jon Kabat-Zinn, defines mindfulness as a flexible state of mind that enables us to become actively engaged in the present (Langer, 1989). In 1979, Ellen Langer conducted a ground-breaking study: she took a group of old, frail men to a location specially created for this experiment; a location that simulated the world of 1959, when all of these men were 20 years younger, more physically fit and mobile. The only instruction that Langer gave to the participants in this study was that they should fully immerse themselves (with all five senses) in this environment and engage with

Breathe slowly and deeply in and out three times. Where do you feel your breath in the body right now? In your nose? In your mouth or throat? Or maybe in your ribcage or stomach? As soon as you notice where you feel your breath, concentrate completely on this spot for a few moments. This is your breathing spot; you can use this spot in your body as an anchor to practise mindfulness. How does it feel to concentrate on this breathing spot; your anchor for noticing your breath at will? What is it like to find this breathing spot after losing your concentration for a few moments? How has your awareness of the here and now changed after practising this exercise for a few moments?

Jon Kabat-Zinn, as well as hundreds of scientists following in his footsteps over the past 30 years, has explored the connection between mindfulness meditation, stress management and mental health so extensively that there are literally thousands of scientific studies on the subject today.

each other *as if* they were in fact experiencing the world of 1959, rather than merely discussing this unfamiliar situation. Although these old men were all aware that this was an experiment, the researchers found that not only were their mental capacities improved when they returned to their normal lives at the end of the two-week immersion experiment, but also their physical condition had changed so positively that they were judged by strangers to be significantly younger than before the experiment, and much younger than another group of men of the same age who served as the control group, exclusively discussing the world of 1959 for two weeks. In other words, the experience of being in a 'younger' environment had led to physiological 'rejuvenation' of these men (Langer, 2009).

To become mindful, we need to come to our senses. Literally and metaphorically. Concretely, this means focusing our attention on one of our five sensory perceptions, for example, on seeing objects (such as a shape, colour or pattern), on feeling (such as sensing or noticing our breath), or on hearing stimuli (such as music, noise or other sounds in the environment). The goal of such mental exercise is to develop an awareness of what is actually happening in and around us, as opposed to *imagining* that we (already) know what is happening in the moment, and thus (perhaps) judging the situation prematurely.

Many of our thoughts come and go from moment to moment, constantly feeding us commentary about our situation and about our lives. Often this commentary is based on unconscious and sometimes outdated or rash judgments (such as,



'I'm too old for that'; 'this won't work for me'). So, coming to our senses means creating a certain degree of mental distance between our 'self' and this inner commentary. This mental distance arises from consciously directing one's perception in the moment, particularly by focusing on one specific sensory perception alone, or on fewer than we normally do. In this way we are able to become more aware of all the information available to us in the situation, literally through our five senses.

This conscious control over our perception of reality, through our five senses, also enables us *metaphorically* to come to our senses. By noticing information through consciously seeing, hearing and engaging our other senses, we can indeed perceive and process all the information available to us in the moment (for example, 'I notice that she is frowning'; 'I hear a pause in the conversation'). This is how mindfulness helps us to change our relationship with the situation in front of us and to make decisions that are in line with the actual situation rather than based on subconscious impulses or automatic (pre) judgments, especially in stressful situations.

You can do the next mindfulness exercise any time, without sitting still or closing your eyes. The only requirement here is that you are mentally 100 per cent present.

Come literally to your senses. Concentrate on two of your five senses over the next few moments, sequentially. Start by directing your attention exclusively to listening to all the sounds in your environment (without reading or doing anything else). Only when you have heard at least three sounds (voices, noise and so on) that you had not noticed before, change your sensory focus and concentrate exclusively on what you see before your eyes: look around you, up and down, behind you. Look out for at least three colours, shapes or patterns that you had not noticed before.

How are you feeling now? What has (literally and metaphorically) made sense for you in this moment?



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Why mindfulness practice works

For most people, such mental exercise feels relaxing. We literally come to our senses when we consciously focus on our senses. Why is that? Because when we consciously perceive our experience of the present through our five senses, our body automatically mobilises the parasympathetic nervous system, in other words, the resting/recovery nerve of the vegetative nervous system. The parasympathetic nervous system has a predominantly opposite function to its counterpart, the sympathetic. The sympathetic nervous system is especially active when we are feeling challenged or stressed, and it generates mental and bodily processes designed to master this challenge, based on emotional tags and patterns of behaviour we perceived in the past. This is often called the fight/flight reflex. When the parasympathetic nervous system is mobilised, the sympathetic nerve is deactivated, and vice versa. Our body is designed to balance the parasympathetic and sympathetic; or, in other words, we are not designed to feel we are in fight/flight mode more often than feeling relaxed.

Mark Williams of Oxford University, the founder of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), explains that mindfulness can help us switch from 'doing mode' to 'being mode', and this helps us feel more balanced (Williams, 2010). In 'doing mode' we act, or we think about acting. Quite often, we engage in several things at the same time, hence multitasking is a big part of 'doing mode'. We are also often engaged in 'multi-thinking': thinking about two or three other things while doing something, such as reading a text while thinking of something else, or making plans in our heads about

what we want to do when we finish reading the text (like this one here).

In contrast to the 'doing mode', the 'being mode' is not focused on actions, or thinking about (previous or future) actions, but about perceiving through our five senses, such as consciously feeling the wind or rain on our face when we are outdoors in stormy weather, or hearing the laughter of a child, or fully appreciating the smell and taste of food. In 'being mode' we are not goal-oriented. Words, thoughts and often also actions are not in the foreground. Problem-solving and analysing facts are pushed into the background. When we are operating in this mode, we become fully and flexibly present as well as actively engaged with all the information in front of us. This process slows down premature judgment and leads to better decision-making because we are able to grasp the situation more holistically.

To summarise, mindfulness practice is neither unnatural nor esoteric. We need 'merely' to come to our senses and, at least for a moment, switch gears: from the often fast-paced and sometimes impulsive 'doing mode' to a 'being mode'. The precise way in which we can learn to switch between these two modes, however, depends on our situation and life history. In my own work bringing mindfulness to high-stress work populations, I have found that not

everyone should learn to practise mindfulness by sitting still and following their breath; especially when there is latent trauma. My research has revealed that we need more than one mindfulness tool to create balance between 'doing' and 'being'. Knowing how to create your own balance between these two modes of operating will help you make mindfulness work for you.



Further information

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Think about how you came to your senses during the last week. What did you actually do to switch from 'doing mode' to 'being mode'? Do you need more or less sensory stimulation (sights, sounds and so on) in order to be able to switch off? To what extent have you been able to stop worrying or thinking about problems when you were away from work? If you've switched to 'being mode' at least once over the last week, did you also feel more relaxed, or even just a little bit more energised afterwards? If not, what could you specifically do or change about your personal approach to feel more balanced in your everyday life? What price would you be willing to pay to achieve this goal?



Jutta Tobias Mortlock, PhD, is a psychologist with over 20 years of experience in organisational development and capacity-building in six countries on three continents. She serves on the faculty at City, University of London, and draws on 'third wave' cognitive behavioural approaches such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and other evidence-based mindfulness frameworks to research, teach and advise on behaviour change initiatives geared at enhancing sustainable wellbeing and performance in teams and organisations.