What is mindfulness?

Paying attention, on purpose, to what is happening now, with kindness.

Mindfulness is a way of paying attention. It means noticing what is going on, inside you and around you, as it happens, and meeting it with curiosity instead of judgement.

Most of the time our attention is somewhere else: replaying the past, rehearsing the future, running on autopilot. Mindfulness is the practice of noticing that, and coming back.

Mindfulness is

- Noticing what is here
- Coming back when the mind wanders
- A skill that grows with practice
- Possible in any activity
- Being kind about what you find

Mindfulness is not

- Emptying the mind
- Stopping thoughts
- Relaxation (though that can happen)
- A religion
- Getting it right

How it helps

- You catch thoughts and moods earlier, before they snowball.
- You get a gap between a feeling and what you do about it.
- You spend less time in worry and rumination.
- You notice more of the ordinary good moments.

How to start

1. **Small.** Two or three minutes a day is plenty to begin with.
2. **Regular.** The same time each day, attached to something you already do.
3. **Simple.** Follow your breath. When your mind wanders, notice where it went and bring it back.
4. **Kind.** A wandering mind is not failing. Noticing and returning is the exercise. Each return is one repetition, like a lift in the gym.

In daily life

Pick one routine activity, such as the first cup of tea, brushing your teeth or the walk to the bus, and give it your full attention each day.

Go carefully

If you have a history of trauma, or if sitting quietly with your eyes closed brings up distress, keep practices short, keep your eyes open, and focus on something outside you such as sounds or your feet on the floor. Talk to me about adapting it.

My notes and questions

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Autopilot

What autopilot is, what we miss on it and ways to notice the present.

Have you ever driven a familiar route and arrived with no memory of the journey? Or finished a meal without tasting it? That is autopilot. The body does one thing while the mind is somewhere else.

Autopilot is useful. It lets us tie laces and drive cars without thinking through each step. It becomes a problem when we live most of our lives that way.

What we miss on autopilot

- **Good moments.** They happen, and we do not notice them.
- **Early warning signs.** Tension, tiredness and low mood build unnoticed until they are hard to shift.
- **Choices.** Old habits run by themselves: reaching for the phone, the biscuit, the sharp reply.
- **Other people.** We hear the words but miss how the person is.

Where the mind goes

When attention is not on the present, it usually drifts to worry about the future or to going over the past. Studies suggest the mind wanders for a large part of the day, and that people tend to be less happy when it does, whatever they are doing.

Ways to come off autopilot

Use a bell
Pick an everyday cue, such as a phone ringing, a red light or a door handle, as a reminder to notice where your mind is.

One breath
Feel one whole breath, in and out, with full attention.

Senses
Name three things you can see, hear or feel right now.

Do one thing
For one small task a day, do only that task.

When am I most on autopilot?

What do I tend to miss?

The cue I will use this week to wake up

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Mindful breathing

The basic practice: following the breath and coming back.

Set a timer for five minutes to begin with. Read this through once, then try it.

1. Sit in a way that is comfortable and upright, feet on the floor, hands resting. Close your eyes, or lower your gaze.
2. Notice the places where your body meets the chair and the floor.
3. Bring your attention to your breathing. You do not need to change it. Find where you feel it most clearly: the nostrils, the chest or the belly.
4. Follow one breath all the way in and all the way out. Notice the small pause before the next one.
5. Before long, your mind will wander: to plans, memories, sounds, an itch. That is what minds do.
6. When you notice it has wandered, note where it went ("planning", "worrying"), and gently bring your attention back to the breath. No telling off.
7. Do this again and again. Each time you come back is the practice working.
8. When the timer goes, widen your attention to your whole body and the room. Open your eyes.

Common experiences

- **"My mind would not stay still."** Nobody's does. You noticed, which is the point.
- **"I got sleepy."** Sit more upright, open your eyes, or practise at a different time of day.
- **"I felt restless."** Notice restlessness as a set of sensations. You can stay with it, or do a walking practice instead.

> **If the breath is not comfortable**
>
> For some people, focusing on breathing increases anxiety. Use another anchor: the sounds around you, or the feeling of your feet on the floor.

A week of practice

Day	How long	What I noticed
Mon		
Tue		
Wed		
Thu		
Fri		
Sat		
Sun		

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The three-minute breathing space

A short pause to step out of autopilot, any time of day.

This is a short practice in three steps, about a minute each. Think of the shape of an hourglass: wide, narrow, wide.

1. Check in	Ask: what is going on for me right now? What thoughts are here? What feelings? What sensations in my body? Notice them as they are, even if they are unwelcome.
2. Gather	Narrow your attention to the breath. Feel each in-breath and each out-breath in your belly. Use the breath to anchor you here.
3. Widen	Let your attention spread to your whole body: your posture, your face, the space around you. Carry this wider awareness into the next moments of your day.

When to use it

- [ ] At set times: on waking, at lunch, before bed
- [ ] Before a meeting or a difficult conversation
- [ ] When I notice stress or low mood building
- [ ] When I catch myself worrying or ruminating
- [ ] Between one task and the next
- [ ] Before reaching for the phone or a drink

The times I will practise this week

Cut along the dashed lines. Keep a card in your wallet or phone case.

Breathing space

1. What is here? Thoughts, feelings, body.
2. Gather on the breath.
3. Widen to the whole body and the room.

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My reminder

When I will use it

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The three-minute breathing space comes from Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, developed by Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale.

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Everyday mindfulness

Use things you already do every day as mindfulness practice.

Name _____ Date _____

Choose one or two things you do every day and use them as practice. Do them a little more slowly than usual, with all your attention.

Ideas

- ☐ The first drink of the day
- ☐ Showering
- ☐ Brushing my teeth
- ☐ Washing up
- ☐ Walking to the car, bus or shop
- ☐ Eating the first three mouthfuls of a meal
- ☐ Waiting in a queue
- ☐ Listening to one person, fully
- ☐ Putting the children to bed
- ☐ Getting into bed

How

1. Notice what you can see, hear, smell, taste and feel.
2. When your mind drifts to planning or worrying, notice, and come back to your senses.
3. That is all.

The activity I have chosen

Day	Did I do it?	What I noticed
Mon		
Tue		
Wed		
Thu		
Fri		
Sat		
Sun		

What difference, if any, did it make to the rest of my day?

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The body scan

Moving your attention slowly through the body, from toes to head.

Lie on your back or sit comfortably. Allow ten to twenty minutes. The aim is not to relax, though that may happen. It is to notice what is there.

1. Take a few slow breaths. Feel the weight of your body being held.
2. Bring your attention to the toes of your left foot. Notice any sensations: warmth, coolness, tingling, contact with a sock, or nothing much at all.
3. Move slowly to the sole, the heel, the top of the foot, the ankle.
4. Travel up the lower leg, the knee, the thigh. Spend a few breaths in each place.
5. Do the same with the right foot and leg.
6. Move through the hips and pelvis, the lower back, the belly. Notice the movement of breathing.
7. Continue up through the chest, the upper back and the shoulders.
8. Go down both arms to the fingertips, and back up.
9. Move into the neck, the jaw, the face, the scalp.
10. Finally, feel your whole body at once, breathing.

As you go

- When your mind wanders, notice, and return to the part of the body you had reached.
- If you find tension or discomfort, see if you can breathe with it and let it be, without having to fix it.
- If there is no sensation in an area, notice that.
- If you fall asleep, that is fine. Try sitting up next time if you would like to stay awake.

> **Adapting it**
> If any part of your body is difficult to pay attention to, skip it, or move your attention to your hands or feet. Keep your eyes open if that feels safer. You are in charge of this.

Day	How long	What I noticed
Mon		
Tue		
Wed		
Thu		
Fri		
Sat		
Sun		

The body scan is taught in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn.

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Mindful walking

A moving practice, for when sitting still does not suit.

Walking is a good practice if you are restless, sleepy, or find the breath a difficult anchor. There are two ways to do it.

Slow practice (5 to 10 minutes)

1. Find a place where you can walk ten or so paces in a line, indoors or out.
2. Stand still. Feel your feet on the ground and the weight of your body.
3. Begin to walk, more slowly than usual. Notice the heel lifting, the foot moving through the air, the heel touching down, the weight shifting.
4. At the end of the line, stop. Turn slowly. Walk back.
5. When your mind wanders, pause, notice where it went, and return to the feeling of your feet.

Ordinary walking

On any walk, at normal speed:

- For a few minutes, attend only to the sensations in your feet and legs.
- Then switch to sounds. Then to what you can see: colours, light, movement.
- Notice the air on your face and the temperature.
- When you notice you are lost in thought, pick one sense and come back.

Tips

- Leave the headphones off for the first ten minutes.
- You do not need to look any different from anyone else out for a walk.
- Nature helps, and a street works too.

Where and when I will try it

What I noticed

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When mindfulness practice is hard

The common obstacles, and what to do about each.

Everyone who practises runs into the same handful of difficulties. They do not mean that mindfulness does not suit you. Working with them is part of the practice.

What happens	What helps
"My mind will not stop wandering."	That is every mind. Noticing it has wandered is the moment of mindfulness. Come back, kindly, a hundred times if need be.
"I get restless and want to stop."	Notice restlessness as sensations: where is it in the body? Shorten the practice, or try walking.
"I fall asleep."	Sit upright, open your eyes, practise earlier in the day. Or accept that you may need the sleep.
"I am bored."	Get curious about boredom itself. What is it actually like?
"I do not think I am doing it right."	There is no perfect session. If you noticed anything at all, you did it.
"It makes me feel worse."	Slowing down can bring up what busyness has been covering. Keep it short, eyes open, anchor on sounds or feet. Tell me, and we will adapt it.
"I do not have time."	Try one minute. Or pick one daily activity and do it with full attention.
"Nothing is happening."	The effects are gradual, like fitness. Look back after a few weeks, not after each sitting.

What helps most

- A regular time and place
- Short and often, not long and rare
- An attitude of kindness, especially when it goes badly
- Someone to practise with, or a recording to follow

The obstacle I meet most

What I will try

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Mindfulness practice log

A record of what you did and what you noticed.

Name _____ Date _____

Day	What I practised	How long	What I noticed (thoughts, feelings, body, obstacles)
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

What am I learning from practising?

What would help me keep going?

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