

HOW TO DEVELOP MINDFULNESS

Are you having thoughts you don't want?

Are you worried about lots of different things?

Are you feeling anxious a lot of the time?

If you can answer 'yes' to one or more of the questions above, you may find this leaflet helpful.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is all about listening to your thoughts, recognising that each one may carry a judgement, and helping you let go of thoughts that are not helpful, untrue or are disturbing.

Mindfulness is based on several thousand year old Eastern religious thought, mainly from India, and is now being used in counselling and other psychological services.

Why be mindful?

You may not realise this, but your brain is busy 'chatting' to you all the time!

Some of the things your brain says will be completely true, like 'It's time to get up for school' or 'Great, today is Saturday – no school!'.

And some of the things it says may be untrue, like 'I'm too fat' or 'I always hate playing sport'.

When we are mindful, we make an effort to listen to our brain very carefully; we learn to question what our brain is saying, and to let go of thoughts that have no or little truth in them.

Some theory...

For a while now, some counsellors and psychologists have believed that what we think can change how we feel about things. In fact, some people believe that before we can feel something we have a thought about it first and that shapes how we end up feeling.

For instance, say you are about to go into an exam. Your brain thinks 'I'm going to fail this, I'm going to do really badly'. With this thought in your brain you begin to expect to fail and your feelings and body begin to get ready for the failure – so you start to panic, or feel dreadful, or become very worried and upset. You might start to sweat or shake, your heart may start pounding faster.

We don't *know* we are going to fail, but we think we will.

This is an example of how thinking sets up our feelings. Even though the thought may not be true!

Imagine this...

You are riding a bike to school. It's a simple journey, one you've made lots of times before.

Your brain is, as always, chatting away – 'Will I hit that kerb?', 'Must avoid that bump', 'Should have worn my gloves', 'Did I pack my planner?', 'Is that person going to step out in front of me?' – and so on.

Now the trick to being mindful, listening to your thoughts, is to become an observer.

So let's imagine that somehow part of you can float up off the bike, while the rest of you is still riding it.

As you float next to yourself riding the bike, you listen to what's going on.

Some of the thoughts you have are useful, necessary and true.

'If I have to stop I must put my foot down or I'll fall off!' – Yes, this is completely true. As you float alongside yourself you can accept this thought.

'I hate Mondays, they're always bad.' Ah, this may not *always* be true! It may feel like the truth, but it isn't. What about all those Mondays when you're on holiday? Or the Mondays when it's been your birthday or Christmas? Let this thought go, tell yourself it's not true, let it go and start listening again.

'I'll die if I'm late again!' OK – this one is definitely not true! You won't die, but it's already setting up a feeling of being very worried. As you float, tell the part of you that's riding the bike, 'This is not true, let it go, I will not think this thought any more.' And then start listening to yourself again.

Used as a technique

Mindfulness used as a technique can help us let go of thoughts that are untrue, yet worry us or trouble us in some way. It is also known as a meditative technique, something that calms and clears the mind, and helps us to relax.

By listening to ourselves, but not judging our thoughts, just weighing up their truth, we can free ourselves of many anxieties.

This maybe a difficult technique to learn at first. Once you have learnt how to be mindful you'll soon realise you can apply the technique in most situations to help you calm down or focus your thoughts.

As with all meditative techniques, the more you practise them, the better the result.