

Mindfulness Information Sheet

*“Mindfulness means **paying attention** to something in a **particular** way, in the **present moment, on purpose and non-judgmentally**”* Jon Kabat-Zinn

Mindfulness as a concept, philosophy and practice is ancient, yet it is a relatively new discovery to the Western world especially its application in the health arena. It has repeatedly been used to demonstrate its capability to improve health and wellbeing. In fact it is so effective that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) recommends the use of a mindfulness approach called Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) to treat recurrent depression in the National Health Service (NHS).

Eastern societies have been benefiting from what the Western world have only recently discovered: in life, we only ever have this moment. The past has already been written, and the future is uncertain; yet we all seem to spend a lot of our lives either in the past (when things were better or worse in some cases) or in for some imagined future (where we yearn for things to be better than they are, or fail to see things improving for us at all and even getting worse!). Mindfulness practice can help us to **free ourselves** from habitual behaviours (thinking and doing) which are not helpful to us.

We often do things whilst on **automatic pilot**: without conscious awareness. Mindfulness helps us to **wake up** from this mode of **doing** and enter a mode of **being**, where we are more **aware** of our thoughts/feelings, sensory experiences as they unfold in **the present moment** and not as our mind says they will be in the **future** or have been in the **past**.

Once **free** from our habitual patterns of behaviour, we are in much stronger position to make **meaningful decisions** in our lives, and we may start to **notice new experiences things** which were under our noses all the time but we were previously oblivious to – try being mindful whilst eating and see what you notice – you may become more aware of present moments as they arise, and each moment may be an opportunity to learn, do or experience something new.

To be Mindful means to **turn towards** our personal experiences, whether they are difficult feelings, thoughts or bodily sensations, rather than try and push them away or attempt to get rid of them. The **aim** of mindfulness is not change how we feel, or change our thoughts, or to stop thinking certain thoughts. It is not aimed at making us feel relaxed or happy, although these feelings may arise. If we strive for these changes to occur we may start to feel self-critical and doubt that we are *doing it right*. We **accept** personal events (thoughts/feelings/sensations) as they are and look at them with a **non-judgmental attitude** of **openness** and **curiosity**. Over time we may start to feel more **contented** with our life which is more stable than happiness, which tends to come and go.

Our **minds** have a **natural tendency** to judge and evaluate our (selves) experiences; this adds an additional layer to our everyday experiences, which is not always helpful. In a mindful state of mind we attempt to **describe** our experiences rather than **judge** them, this process helps us to **disconnect** the actual experience (say a bodily sensation) from our automatic **problem-solving cognitive processes** (thinking about the experience, what does it mean? Is it harmful? How to I get rid of it? This is awful). Once we are able to do this, we can experience personal events as they **truly are**, and not as our minds tell us they are, have been or will be. This state of mind is called the **Observing Self**, from here we can see how your mind operates, we can notice our thoughts/feelings as they arise and choose whether or not to engage with them.

Thoughts can be very powerful, especially the ones which carry an *emotional punch*, at times we can buy into these thoughts and whole heartedly believe in them. This is when we enter a state of **cognitive-fusion**, mindfulness helps us to **de-fuse** from our thoughts and create **psychological space** from them. As we de-fuse from thoughts we notice that certain thoughts start to lose their emotional impact, but we haven't changed the thought in any way, just seen it for what it is – just a thought, word, image or memory made up of language.

Key Mindfulness Skills and Points to Remember

- ✓ Allow a thought to drift into your mind, step back from it, observe it, describe it, label it for what it is (example, *there's that thought about my weight again, thanks mind!*) and then let it go, before you know it another thought will drift in.
- ✓ Thoughts are like trains which are joined up – one leads to another and another, and so on. If you decide to get on a thought train (**cognitive fusion**) it may take you on an emotional journey into the past or lead you to some imagined future. Once you notice you are on this train, you might end up feeling a lot worse (more depressed more anxious) than when you first started. **Recognise** when you are on the train and make a **choice** to stay on or get off.
- ✓ You can **do lots of things mindfully** – cooking, cleaning, walking, eating, having a shower – as long as you pay attention to what you are doing and when your mind wanders off **gently** bring it back to what you are doing.
- ✓ Mindfulness is beautifully simple by definition, but difficult in practice. It is essentially **attention training** underpinned by a **philosophical framework**. Understandably then, to **re-train** our minds to enter the **being mode** when we want to requires **time** and **committed practice**.