

Information Sheet

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness refers to a state of complete awareness of the present, without judging or attempting to change it. It involves accepting our entire experience – physical, emotional and psychological - in this moment.

Research shows that regular mindfulness practice can improve quality of life and enhance relationships. It has also been shown to contribute to the alleviation of a multitude of afflictions, from depression and anxiety, to addictions, to stress and chronic pain. This makes sense, given that much of our time is spent mentally reliving negative experiences from our past (ruminating) or predicting negative outcomes in our future (worrying). Our minds like to problem-solve, and often get caught in these cycles of rumination or worry which feel somewhat like problem-solving. Our minds also like to categorise and label, which can be unhelpful in that often the labels contain extreme, judgemental aspects (e.g., good or terrible, perfect or wrong, complete success or total failure, pleasant or painful), which can compel us to struggle against or try to change our emotional, physical, situational or psychological experience. Mindfulness relieves us of these tendencies, allowing us to recognise and accept our entire experience as it is, rather than as our minds tell us it is. Mindfulness opens the way for us to fully live our lives – even the challenging aspects.

Any of our daily activities (e.g., writing an email, doing housework, walking, having a conversation, eating, driving) can be performed mindfully, even though many are often performed mindlessly. Mindfulness of daily activities simply involves focussing all of our attention on the task at hand and, upon noticing our mind wander (which it will!), gently returning it to focus on the task. We can, however, cultivate mindfulness by regularly practising more formal mindfulness meditation. This is the type of mindfulness linked to improved wellbeing as mentioned above and is most easily achieved, at least to begin with, using a recording to guide the practice. Apps such as Smiling Mind, Mindfulness Meditation and Headspace have various brief mindfulness meditation exercises. Alternatively, CDs or MP3s can be purchased online at various sites, such as www.actmindfully.com.au

Practising mindfulness is not easy to begin with and a few common pitfalls to look out for are:

- *My mind keeps wandering* – that’s what minds do! When you realise it’s happened, congratulations - you’re being mindful!
- *I’m not doing it right* –there is no “right”! This is where the non-judgmental stance comes in and part of the practice becomes noticing such thoughts and feelings, and returning to the practice. There is no success or failure in mindfulness practice.
- *I get painful emotions or sensations* – if difficult sensations, thoughts or emotions arise the task remains the same; note what arises and return your attention to the mindfulness practice. Part of learning mindfulness is learning to tolerate uncomfortable experiences without having to avoid or get rid of them.
- *The conditions aren’t right* – when things aren’t going to plan it’s a great opportunity to notice what is happening and how we are reacting. Mindfulness allows acknowledgement of the unpleasant and unwanted and enables more helpful responding in the moment.
- *It doesn’t work/I don’t feel better* – the purpose of mindfulness practice is not to help you feel better (although this sometimes happens), but to practise bringing willingness, curiosity and acceptance to your moment-by-moment experience, even if that includes thoughts such as “This isn’t working” or feelings such as boredom, discomfort, frustration or even anxiety.