

Mindfulness:

being at ease here and now.



Not feeling great about life?

It's important to ask yourself whether the way you feel is

- because of a specific situation, or
- you've just been feeling like this for a while, without any obvious cause, with no reason to imagine you'll stop feeling like this anytime soon.

If you're feeling 'down' because of a situation, then you just need the situation to change and your troubled mind will feel better. You need to find a solution to specific problem that is troubling you. We've all been there.

However, it could be that you are feeling stress, anxiety or depression – and it's important to realise we've all been there too.

Perhaps you feel like this:

- unable to enjoy anything
- negative self-judgement
- always tired and 'heavy'
- unable to sleep
- inability to focus
- physical discomfort, such as stomach cramps or headaches.

You can see that some of these things we can experience without stress, anxiety or depression being the cause. So don't jump to the conclusion that you're stressed or depressed if these things apply to you sometimes.

If you feel that you are struggling with stress, anxiety or depression then that is the most important sign of all.

So what is stress?

Stress is what we experience when we feel that life is demanding more from us than we feel we are able to give.

Now that is something we all feel from time to time because we all find ourselves in situations where we feel 'Whoa!' The situations that can lead us to feel like this are called 'triggers' and triggers could include work-pressures, exams, friendship issues, family issues. Throw-in a sense of none of it any getting any easier or ever coming to an end.

The experience of stress is our experience of a *bundle* of things which all bounce off each other and feed into an overall experience of just not being able to cope. **Thoughts, feelings, moods, bodily sensations** can *react to each other* in such a way that leaves us feeling



overwhelmed. A negative thought can create a feeling, which leads to a mood which can cause a headache which makes us feel even more at odds with the world and more joyless than before. This is a *viscous cycle* and it can turn bad into worse.

A mind that is troubled like this can then have the trouble *multiplied* by beating itself up: 'why am I feeling like this?' 'What's the matter with me?' 'Why can't I snap out of it' and a host of other negative self-judgements where we blame ourselves for not feeling happier. Then we get stress².

If this is how you feel, you probably know intellectually that you're not alone - but you *feel alone*, right? A bunch of numbers on a graph showing you that there has been a significant increase in stress, anxiety and depression in young people in recent years probably isn't going to help you – **but DO realise that you're not weird because there are many, many people of all ages experiencing what you experience. The government and the medical profession both acknowledge this to be true.**

That's easy for you to say - you're not going through what I am!



Stress, anxiety, depression, loneliness, low-self-esteem are experienced by *all of us* during our lives – and that includes those people you may know who always *appear* to be happy, confident and just surfing through life without a care in the world.

Painful experiences are part of the deal of being human – no matter who you are; no matter how attractive, popular, clever, rich or how old you are. It's just that you don't always see it in others.

Think of the most famous, glamorous, successful people you know of. You won't see their self-doubt, their insecurities, their anxiety or depression, but they **will** certainly experience these things - just like you and everyone else

Why is stress a problem?

Well, actually, it isn't. Stress is a sign that we are experiencing new things, challenges, and that life is quite dynamic. Learning to ride a bike can be stressful at times.

It becomes a problem when there is too much or when we go past our ability to cope with it.

It is our reaction to stress that can be harmful.

Think about how we react when we have a painful physical experience. If you touch something that is too hot, your instinct is to pull your hand away from the cause. That's fine for physical pain, but the mind cannot pull-away from the feelings of stress, anxiety and depression in the same way – but it tries.

When we experience stress, anxiety and depression the mind tries to move away from the experience in the way that a hand flinches away from being burned.

Our instinct is to resist mental/emotional pain:

- Seeking distraction by going online, watch TV, listen to music, text a friend etc.
- Going over and over things in your mind – repeatedly telling yourself how awful things are, how awful you are and so on.
- Alcohol / drugs
- Sciving school

We discover that we cannot escape mental pain in the way that we can escape physical pain, and we discover that many of the ways we might try to usually make things a whole lot worse – ***possibly far worse***.

Good news:

It doesn't have to be like this!

We can be at ease, here and now.

The most powerful tool we have to deal with stress is **'mindfulness.'**

Rather than hopelessly trying to fight or run away from a troubled mind, mindfulness shows us how to work skilfully with our mental pain so that we stop struggling and can start to free ourselves.

What is mindfulness?

To be mindful is simply ***to be aware***. That doesn't sound very special, does it?

'Aware of what?'

Aware of what we are actually experiencing right here and now – in this moment.

That is special, because awareness is something we don't have very much of most of the time; we spend most of the time being very *unaware*, because we are running on 'auto-pilot' - lost in the past or the future, regretting, worrying, planning, imagining, or trying to do too many things at the same time, and getting lost in stress. **This is how we become trapped into repeating negative thinking or worrying about what might happen in the future.**



Often we may do all kinds of everyday things, like brushing our teeth, eating, sitting-down, without being aware of very much of it at all – as if we are sleepwalkers.

'So why would anyone want to be mindful?'

It's something very simple that you can do to **help reduce feelings of stress, anxiety and depression.**

Millions of people have experienced the benefits of mindfulness and scientific research concludes that **those benefits are real.**

So, what have you got to lose - other than your stress, anxiety and depression?

[How do I do Mindfulness?](#)

This is what being mindful feels like:

Get a full-size pencil or pen and try to balance it across your thumb or little finger for 60 seconds.
If it's easy, start sitting down and then stand-up, keeping the pen balanced on your finger. Now stand on one leg. No close your eyes.



That simple level of paying attention to what you were doing is mindfulness

'So what?'

For the 60 seconds that you were doing that activity, were you worrying or feeling stressed?

When you are paying attention to something in a mindful way, there is no room for stress or anxiety to take hold.

You can't keep stress and anxiety at bay by being mindful constantly, but you can learn to **develop the habit of mindfulness so that stress and anxiety don't overwhelm you and make you feel lost and hopeless.**

'What kind of thing should I pay attention to?'

Anything!

Mindfulness is paying attention to *what is present in experience at any moment*; awareness of the *reality* of experience - experiencing things as they are – *not we think or imagine they are*. This can include being fully aware of what we experience:

- through our senses
- sensations in the body
- thoughts and feelings
- Mental states and 'moods' - and it is paying attention to what those experiences are actually *like*.

Mindfulness Activity 1: Say 'Hi' to your feet.

Get comfortable in a quiet space where you won't be disturbed.

Sit on a cushion, or on a solid, straight -backed chair that enables you to sit up-right, or lie on the floor where there is a rug or carpet.

Sitting: legs loose and comfortable, lightly crossed at the ankle, or with feet flat on the floor. Your hands can rest lightly in your lap, perhaps folded together.

Lying-down: have your legs reasonably straight, ankles un-crossed, allowing your feet to fall away to the side. Have your arms running alongside and slightly away from your body with the palms of your hands facing up towards the ceiling or facing down towards the floor.

A good position is one you will be comfortable to remain in for a few minutes, without feeling tense.

You can close your eyes to help you focus your mind, or keep them open allowing them to focus on a simple object two or three feet in front of you. A candle flame works well.

For a minute or so, allow your mind to notice and be aware of whatever stands out- it may be sounds you can hear, sensations in the body or thoughts and feelings.

Gently bring your awareness to the sensations you can feel in your feet. *What can you feel in your feet, right now?*

- Which areas can you feel touching the floor?
- What do you feel in the other areas?
- Are there some areas of your feet that have no sensations at all?
- Are some areas warmer than others?
- Do the sensations you have stay still, or do they move around each foot?

Allow your attention to gently scan all the areas of your feet - the soles, the toes, heels and the tops of your feet.

There is no 'correct' thing to be aware of. Just be aware of what you experience. You don't have to create an experience that is not there. Be aware of what you are actually experiencing, not what you think or imagine you will experience.

Allow your mind to pay attention to what is going on in your feet for a minute, two minutes or however long you feel comfortable.

It is normal for the mind to wander-off away from what you want it to focus on. You suddenly realise that you have spent the last 30 seconds day-dreaming. If this happens, just gently return your attention to your feet.

The mind that is not used to being aware may well struggle to keep focus. That's not a problem. Treat it like a puppy that wants to wander-off in all directions and patiently return your attention to what is going on in your feet, like bringing a puppy on a lead back to walking with you.

This is likely to happen over and over again - especially at first. You wouldn't yell at or hit a puppy, so don't be hard on yourself if you find your mind wanders. Congratulate yourself for having moments of mindfulness, and for seeing how the mind really is.
Give it a go... right now.

That spell of mindfulness won't make everything different, but you've taken a step towards freeing yourself from auto-pilot mind dragging you into the grip of negative mental habits that dunk you back in the grip of stress, anxiety and depression. Now you know what it feels like to be mindful – even if for a few seconds.

Focusing on the sensations of the feet can **calm** the mind, and while you're being mindful in that way, you can't, at the same time, be indulging stress and anxiety.

Saying 'Hi' to your feet in this way can be done anywhere in any normal situation. If you're standing in a queue, with the person ahead of you taking forever while you have to be somewhere important very soon, you can bring awareness to the feet in exactly the same way as in the exercise above and just reduce any growing agitation.



As you're walking to a lesson, to work, to an interview, through a crowded street, sitting in a lesson, sitting at work, on a bus ...you can be mindful of what is happening in your feet and so avoid sinking into thoughts of dread or feelings of stress.

This is a good introductory activity that you could do perhaps twice each day. Once you're familiar with what mindfulness of the feet involves, you could choose to develop it in the kind of situations out-lined above to see what affect it has.

'But I'm no good at this!'

That's what everyone says to begin with. Actually, being mindful is natural. We are all mindful when something really has our attention. Toddlers are super-mindful, simply because everything is new and so they give full awareness to their experiences. If you get the chance, observe a two-three year old and how long they can spend simply looking at something.

Heaven forbid, but if you suddenly found yourself in immediate danger, just watch how mindful you would become!

You are good at it, but you just have to get used to it. You don't need any special knowledge or intelligence and it makes no difference whether you are 10 or 80 years old.



The mind is a creature of habit and you can use that to your advantage. The mind will effortlessly and naturally do what it is used to doing and expects to do again, because it has done that thing repeatedly in the past.

If someone has made the choice to bite their nails two or three times, in no time at all their mind will direct them to biting their nails again and again – because it expects to do so. Nail-biters won't even be aware of having made a choice to bite their nails – they will automatically do it and only be aware of it when they are in the middle of biting. This is called a 'habit' and the mind develops habits all by itself, thank you very much.

Not all habits need to be bad ones. **The mind can be trained very easily to create habits that work in your favour.** Once you have made a conscious effort to be mindful of your feet for example, you should find that the mind becomes used to it – then expects to do it and sometimes will focus on the feet all on its own and you may find yourself being mindful where you had not planned to. This is especially true if you do that activity at the same time every day. In no time at all, the mind will expect, at that time of day, to be aware of what is happening in the feet. When you train the habit of mindfulness, you will find that you can focus for longer and notice far more.

It can be helpful to think of your mind as being like a puppy; a puppy has to learn what is expected of it and after being shown a few times, it starts to get the idea and begins to alter its behaviour without you having to tell it to do so. Puppies just need to be shown what to do a few times.

Mindfulness Activity 2: Full body scan.

Make yourself comfortable in a quiet space where you won't be disturbed for 5-10 minutes, either sitting or lying down, as described already.

Take your time to notice any sounds, general sensations or thoughts and feelings before focusing on which points of your body are making contact either with the chair, cushion or floor.

Gently bring awareness to what is happening in the feet, as in Activity 1. What sensations do you experience in the various areas of the feet? What is happening with the temperature in those areas?

Once you have scanned your awareness over your feet, allow it to move to both legs. In the same way, simply become aware of what is happening in your legs. Which points touch the chair, cushion or floor. Simply observe what sensations you can actually experience, without feeling the need to change what is present or create anything new.

Slowly move your awareness up to your hips and then to your torso - your stomach, rib-cage and chest, paying attention to sensations in the same way as you did your feet and legs:

- What do you notice?
- Temperature?
- Do sensations shift and change, or stay the same?
- Are feelings, pleasant, painful or neutral?

Next scan your focus in the same way over each arm, then the shoulders, up to your neck and finally your head.

There may be certain sensations that stand-out: the beating of your heart perhaps or the feeling of your stomach and chest rising and falling as you breathe in and then out.

Allow your mind to observe and be aware of whatever stands out in this way.

When your attention wanders away from the body to sounds, thoughts, day-dreams, remember to accept that this is how the mind is and gently return your awareness to the body.

Mindfulness Activity 3: Breathing mindfully

Being mindful of the sensations connected with breathing is part of full-blown meditation, but that does not mean that anything religious is going on. The act of breathing is really useful to be aware of because it is happening all the time, whatever we are doing, whether we feel relaxed or stressed.

The sensation of breathing is quite neutral – not anything that will make us feel tense or anxious. As with mindfulness of the feet, mindfulness of breathing can be done in almost any normal situation you may find yourself in.

This is why it has been used for thousands of years as a way to calm the mind and develop concentration.

Being mindful of breathing can be done for whatever amount of time you feel comfortable with: 30 seconds up to 5 minutes. You could try keeping awareness of the breath going for a cycle of 10 breaths and then starting with another 10. Of course, you will find that easier said than done, but as with anything you do, the more the mind gets used to doing it, the more natural it will become.

**just
breathe**



Get comfortable sitting in an upright chair. It can be more difficult to experience some of the bodily sensations of breathing lying down or slouching.

Sit with your legs loose and comfortable, with your ankles crossed. This is a statement to yourself that you are not going to suddenly leap to your feet and dash-off after 30 seconds. Your hands can be folded or placed one inside the other, resting in your lap. You may close your eyes to avoid distraction, or allow them to focus on a plain and simple object two to three feet ahead of you. A candle flame works well.

Allow the mind to take notice of any sounds, bodily sensations, thoughts or feelings that may arise to begin with.

Breathing normally, with your mouth closed, gently bring your awareness to what it *feels* like to breath as the breath moves in and out of the body. There are two places you can observe this: at **the abdomen** (tummy area) and the **tip of the nose**.

Abdomen: focus awareness on the sensation of how your rib-cage softly rises and falls with each breath and how the abdomen moves. It may feel as though it rises and lowers or moves in and out.

Tip of the nose: be aware of the feeling at the tip of the nose as air enters the nostrils with each in-breath and leaves with each out-breath. The tip of the nose may feel slightly cooler as the breath is drawn in and warmer as breath leaves.

Try to be aware of changing sensations in the abdomen or the nose for the whole duration of each breath - in and then out. How do sensations change? Is there a pause between breathing in and out? Can you keep your awareness focused on breathing in and then out, 10 times?

It is important not to alter your breathing - just breathe naturally. You may find that your breathing slows and becomes deeper after a while, as the mind becomes focused and the body relaxes.

As with all mindfulness activities, when the mind wanders, be patient and gently return your awareness to the feelings of simply breathing.

Re-cap: 'Why am I doing this again?'

Most stress, anxiety and depression comes upon us from thinking about what has happened in the past or imagining (worrying) what might happen in the future. Then the mental and emotional pain grows as the mind obsessively

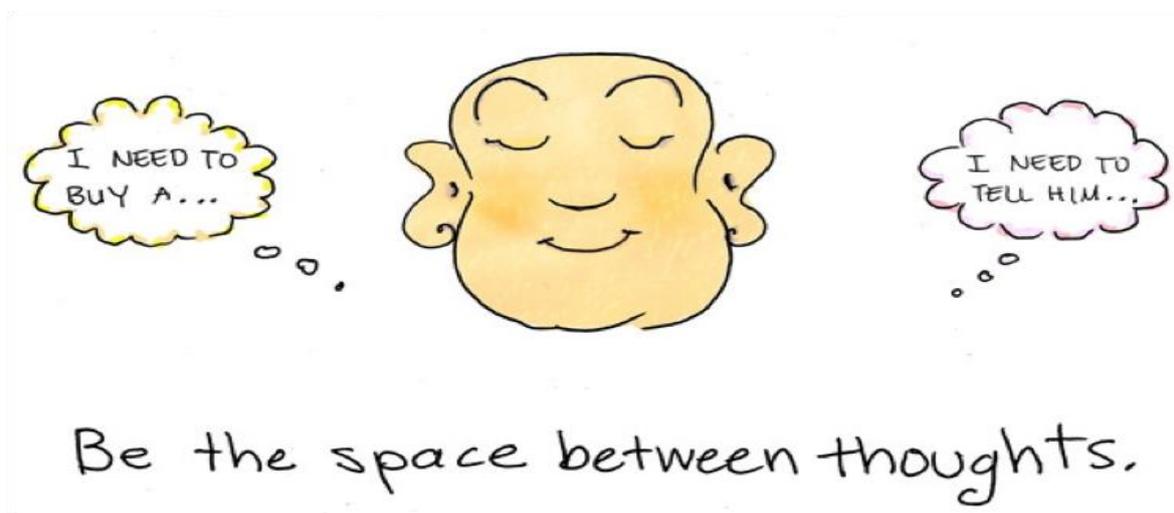
repeats negative thoughts and feelings over and over again, or tries to push them away. Before we know it, we are lost in a troubled mind.

During moments of mindfulness, when the mind is simply aware of what is actually experiencing in the feet, the body or the breathing, there is no room for stress, anxiety and worry to take hold. Also, the mind becomes calm and it begins to learn the positive habit of awareness that can guard us against becoming lost in overwhelming stress.

'Is being mindful just about sensations in the body?'

No. This is where the power of mindfulness really pays off. We can be mindful of *whatever* is happening in body **and the mind itself**. That means we can *focus our awareness on thoughts and feelings and general moods*, in exactly the same way we focused on sensations in the body.

Instead of automatically reacting to our thinking, our memories, our imagination and our feelings, we can simply be aware that the mind **is** thinking, remembering, imagining or that there are feelings – pleasant, painful or neutral – or that we are calm or agitated. Paying attention to what the mind is doing, can stop us from becoming overwhelmed.



We can be aware of how long these mental experiences last.

We can be aware of what they turn into.

We can be aware of whether we are in control of them or whether they come and go all on their own.

Now here's the thing: simply being aware that there is stress or anxiety or depression, distances us from them slightly; we are noticing those mental states rather than leaping into them or trying to run away from them. We are aware of them, rather than blindly reacting to them.

Stress, anxiety, depression themselves cannot hurt us – it's how we react to them that brings the pain.

- A feeling is just a feeling.
- A thought is just a thought.

Being mindful of thoughts and feelings means they remain 'just a thought' and 'just a feeling' – we don't have to give them any more power to hurt us.

It might be useful to think of your mind as being like a drama you are watching on a screen. You can safely be on the edge of your seat, laugh or be tense because you know that what is happening isn't real – *it's just on the screen.*

Being mindful of your thoughts, feelings and moods means you can safely feel them because you understand that they are short-lived, they are not you and they come and go, come and go – like something you're watching on a screen.



Mindfulness activity 4: Thoughts and feelings.

You can be mindful of thoughts and feelings anywhere - either alone in a quiet space, sitting on a chair or in the middle of a busy situation, surrounded by other people. You choose.

Start by gently bringing your attention to your breathing or the feeling in your feet and then simply allow yourself to become aware of the general tone of the mind: is it calm, focused, agitated, confused, anxious?

Whatever thoughts pop into your mind (what you are thinking *about* is neither here nor there) simply take note of them as if they are happening on a screen in front of you, coming and going. Try to avoid reacting to them or indulging them, just watch them and see if you can notice how one thought leads to another ...and another.

How long does a thought last before it changes into a different thought?

If you get caught-up in the thoughts and find yourself on the screen too, gently go back to watching thoughts as though they are on the screen and you are sitting watching them.

Remind yourself: 'These thoughts are not me.'

Thoughts can lead to feelings. If strong feelings or emotion become the main event in your mind, simply take notice of them in the same way. Take note of the emotions as if they are on a screen and you are watching them.

Try to avoid reacting to them or indulging them, just watch them and see if you can notice how one emotion might lead to another.

What was the trigger for this emotion popping up?

How long does an emotion last before it changes into a different one?

Is it pleasant, painful or neither - just neutral.

If you get caught-up in emotions and find yourself on the screen too, gently go back to watching them as though they are on the screen and you are sitting watching them.

Remind yourself: 'These feelings and emotions are not me.'

Because thoughts and feelings can seem so real and personal, it is easy to get drawn into them without noticing. If you find that you have spent the last few minutes daydreaming about your future or getting emotionally worked-up in response to something you thought about, then bring your awareness back to something physical, such as breathing or the feelings in your feet. This will bring the mind back to the reality of the present moment.

Mindfulness activity 5: Emergency mindfulness

There are times when the fear, worry and sense of hopelessness is so strong, when the negative thoughts and feelings are so relentless that mindfulness just gets washed away.

There is something you can do to stop the tidal-wave from wrecking you. Be aware of the tidal wave and how you are reacting to it.

Sure, it takes a little effort to bother, but so does climbing into a lifeboat when you're drowning and you wouldn't complain about that if you knew it would save you. This 'Emergency' mindfulness is as useful as a lifeboat when it all gets too much.

Remember, being aware of something puts a brake on that thing, reduces its speed and power. If we are looking at it, we cannot be reacting to it completely.

- What has triggered feelings of stress?
- What's going on in the mind?
- How is the body reacting?
- How strong are those experiences?

Mind - is the mind flooded with mainly thoughts or feelings?

Body - what's happening with your breathing or heart beat?

Are you reacting to the original trigger or to new thoughts and feelings that are present as a result of your stress?

- What's happening in your **feet**?
- What does your **breathing** feel like?

Connect with the Positive You

Your mind can be just as positive as the next person's – you just have to create the habit of being positive. Remember – **our minds like to make new habits**. If we do something two or three times our minds expect to do it again and it becomes easier and more natural to do.

New habit 1: count your blessings.

There are good and even great things about our lives, but the habit we have is not to notice them. There may be things about our lives that other people are desperate to have in theirs. So, let's start noticing them. All we need do is stop and think about what works for us and supports us; what we would miss if it was removed from us.

There is always, always,
always something to be
thankful for.

- There are friends, family and people who care about me
- I have skills (think about what they are: cooking, fixing a bike, being able to use technology, being able to read/write)
- I have a home
- I have plans for a future
- I have a nice smile
- I have access to people who can help me get to where I want to be

Think of positive things friends or family have said in the past, or have written in birthday cards. Ask a friend or family member or teacher one thing they like about you. You may be surprised. Others see in us qualities we cannot see in ourselves. Someone may tell you that they admire how you don't give up easily or how you always listen to people or how you cheer them up or that you say interesting things. Who knows? Ask someone you **trust** and find out.

Simply take 30 seconds every morning to remind yourself of what you have:

'I am fortunate, because...' and list them in your head.

This might sound like a crazy thing to do – *but we do the opposite regularly: we remind ourselves all too easily of the list of things we don't like about our lives don't we?*

So – reverse the habit! It is no more difficult and takes no more energy for the mind to develop the habit of noticing what there is in our lives that is worth having. If you're immediate reaction is to think 'I don't have anything in my life worth having' – that's just the old habit, and it's also nonsense.

Counting your blessings is a powerful and simple tool that can change the whole way you feel about yourself. People are drawn to positive people. Others will respond more favourably towards you when you start to feel more favourably towards yourself – which can happen if you simply make the effort to spot the good things that most definitely are there. Do it! Do it every morning and / or every evening – 30 seconds. Soon you'll start to add more things to the list once the mind gets the habit.

Activity: aim to count one blessing for each of your fingers after one week.

New habit 2: smile

The physical act of smiling releases pleasure hormones called **endorphins**, natural painkillers and antidepressant hormones such as **serotonin**. Smiling can help reduce stress and boosts your immune system. You don't have to feel like smiling at all – but you can still do it.



Smile at yourself in the mirror every morning as the first thing you do in the bathroom. Look at what your face looks like when it smiles. It is pleasant to see. You can create an image of yourself smiling that you can carry around in your mind. If you smile at yourself enough in the mirror, it will be easier for you to picture yourself as a smiley person.

Greet yourself with a smile everyday – it takes seconds and no one need know. Create the habit. Remember how habits work? Once you start to smile at yourself in the mirror, it becomes easier to smile in other situations, with other people. Everyone responds warmly to those who are smiling and you will be releasing hormones that make you feel good about yourself.

New habit 3: make friends with yourself – and the world.

If we were asked to list as many things as we could think of that we disliked about ourselves in 60 seconds, most of us would have a fair-sized list. Yet, if we were asked to make a list of qualities we actively like about ourselves, many of us would struggle to think of even three things. *This is because most of us are stuck with the habit that makes it very, very easy to put ourselves down.*

We need to start the habit of having a friendly attitude towards ourselves.

This is known as ‘Loving Kindness’ and it can be an extremely powerful and effective way of shifting the way we view ourselves, others - and how the world responds to us. This is an ancient technique known in ancient Indian as ‘Metta’ (Met/ ar) that can be done as a full meditation or as a lighter mindfulness activity. Loving kindness is an attitude of mind that encourages you to be friendly and kind towards yourself as well as to others.

The idea of being friendly or loving to yourself is something many of us might feel is a bit weird. You feel friendly or loving to other people, right? Being friendly and loving to yourself sounds a bit...*up yourself?* **Wrong.** Think of it this way: if I am going around silently disliking much of myself,

silently putting myself down and even hating myself, how can I expect to be able to truly feel friendliness, kindness and a loving attitude towards anyone else? If I am secretly dumping my self-worth in the trash-can on a regular basis, this is a habit of mind that will want to have the same attitude towards everyone.



So we start by learning to like ourselves in the same way that we say we like other people.

This is a very effective meditation or mindfulness activity if it is practised and returned to over time. There are said to be specific benefits to the person who takes the time to develop Loving Kindness / ‘Metta’ and they include:

- Sleeping well.
- Being liked by others.
- Conflict does not come near you.
- Having a bright, healthy look to your face that others notice.

Mindfulness Activity 6: Loving Kindness

Get comfortable in a quiet space where you won't be disturbed.

Sit on a cushion, or on a solid, straight-backed chair that enables you to sit upright, or lie on the floor where there is a rug or carpet.

Gently become aware of your breathing or the feeling in your feet for a couple of minutes.

- 1) Picture yourself smiling and happy. It might help to think of an actual time and place where you felt happy or to picture yourself as a child, smiling or laughing. You may try picturing yourself as if you are looking at another person.

Say the following phrase in your mind:

'May I be well and happy.
May I have peaceful ease.'

- 2) As you bring those ideas to mind, think of qualities about yourself that you think are worthwhile. You might want to recall times when you have acted in a way you approve of and you can list these good things about yourself in your mind:

'I am hard working.
I am a good friend.
I am honest.
I am trying to do something positive.'

'May I be well and happy.
May I have peaceful ease.'

The key thing is to actually feel warm towards yourself as a person. To feel that 'This is a good person' about yourself.

If you find that you are thinking negatively about yourself, just stop and return your awareness to your body and allow the mind to relax, before trying again.

You can be creative in this meditation. You could picture yourself in a place you like, such as a beach, or picture yourself in an imaginary landscape. Some people picture themselves with a favourite animal at their side

- 3) When you feel at least positive, bring to mind a person you like and admire. A good person to use is someone who has helped you or who you respect. This could be a parent, a sibling, friend or work colleague. It doesn't matter who it is, as long as you will be able to think about them in a positive way.

Repeat what you have just done, but have this new person as the focus. Picture them smiling. A good idea is to remember a time when they were helpful to you. You could picture the two of you standing in your favourite place and they are smiling as you hand them a gift.

- 4) Say the following phrase in your mind:

'May _____ be well and happy.
May _____ have peaceful ease.'

Bring to mind what it is you like or respect about this person and say it in your mind:

'_____ is helpful.
_____ is generous.
_____ has a good sense of humour.'

'May _____ be well and happy.
May _____ have peaceful ease.'

- 5) If you feel comfortable that you are encouraging positive feelings, you can extend the meditation to focus on a 'neutral' person. This could be someone you see quite regularly but have little to do with and your feelings are neither positive or negative towards them: a shop assistant who serves you, a bus driver, someone you see as you set out to school / work each morning. It doesn't matter who it is. Picture them smiling and bring to mind the phrase and the feelings:

'May you be well and happy
May you have peaceful ease.'

- 6) Once you have tried Loving Kindness a few times and you are comfortable with it, you can direct feelings of friendliness towards 'all people' in a certain place: 'May everyone in my class be well and happy.' / 'May everyone in my street be well and happy.' / 'May everyone in my school be well and happy.'

7) It is very important that you close down this meditation by re-tracing your steps. Go through the stages in reverse, 'May all ... be well and happy' or 'May you be well and happy', back to the person you respect and trust and finishing by repeating 'May I be well and happy.' In this way you signal to yourself that the meditation is finished and you stop sending out connections to others.

If practised several times and continued with as a regular activity, the Loving Kindness meditation is a powerful activity that can bring real, noticeable benefits over time.

You may prefer a lighter, less intense activity for developing Loving Kindness. You can do this by simply repeating in mind 'May I be well and happy. May I have peaceful ease' as you are waiting in a queue, walking to a lesson, going home... Remember to picture yourself smiling. As you pass someone you may simply wish that they are well and happy and that life is good for them. You are creating the *intention* to view yourself and others positively. Again, you are creating a new habit for the mind to pick up naturally on its own. You may find that feelings of friendliness and loving kindness may come out of nowhere – and when they do it is a joyful experience.

Re-Cap: Putting It All Together

- Everyone experiences stress, anxiety and depression from time to time. You know when it has become a problem.
- Feeling stressed or anxious cannot harm us – it is how we react that causes us difficulties.
- Mindfulness is being aware of sensations in the body and of the thoughts, feelings and moods that we experience. Focussing attention on the feeling in our feet, on the breathing **calms the mind**. When we are aware of thoughts and feelings we cannot at the same time be indulging stress. Being mindful of stress itself puts a brake on it and reduces its power by stopping it becoming worse in that moment.
- Mindfulness is simply a habit we need to get going – and our minds love habits and will start them very easily. We can be mindful sitting on a chair in a quiet space or while doing everyday things.
- Choose two or three **activities that you do regularly** and make the decision to be mindful when doing them, *every time you do them*. For example:

- ✓ Getting out of bed
 - ✓ Getting dressed
 - ✓ Washing and cleaning your teeth
 - ✓ Brushing your hair
 - ✓ Eating breakfast or another meal
 - ✓ Walking downstairs
 - ✓ Packing your bag for the day ahead
 - ✓ Sitting in a car or on a bus
- We can create a more positive view of ourselves and the world around us (and others will respond positively to us) by counting our blessings, smiling and working at loving kindness.

And Finally

Research suggests that it takes, on average, 12 weeks to create new habits, but once mindfulness is established, you should feel less anxious or stressed generally and more able to focus and concentrate. From this comes a sense of confidence, which further reduces stress, anxiety and destructive thoughts. You should feel more able to simply experience life as it is. Depression, anxiety and stress will not vanish from your life – there is no magic spell for that - but you will have a tool for loosening their grip so that they cannot hold you prisoner.

Congratulate yourself for having the courage and initiative to do something about making your life feel better than it does at the moment.

May you be at ease here and now, may you be well and happy.

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