

Looking after your mental health using mindfulness

Mental wellbeing does not have a single universal definition, but it does encompass factors such as:

- The sense of feeling good about ourselves and being able to function well individually or in relationships.
- The ability to deal with the ups and downs of life, such as coping with challenges and making the most of opportunities.
- The feeling of connection to our community and surroundings.
- Having control and freedom over our lives.
- Having a sense of purpose and feeling valued.

Of course, mental wellbeing does not mean being happy all the time and it does not mean you won't experience negative or painful emotions, such as grief, loss, or failure, which are a part of normal life. However, whatever your age, mindfulness can help you lead a mentally healthier life and improve your wellbeing.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a way of paying attention to the present moment, using techniques like meditation, breathing and yoga. It helps us become more aware of our thoughts and feelings so that, instead of being overwhelmed by them, we're better able to manage them.

How can mindfulness help?

Mindfulness can be used as a tool to manage your wellbeing and mental health. Some people call mental health 'emotional health' or 'wellbeing'. We all have times when we feel down, stressed or frightened; most of the time those feelings pass, but sometimes they develop into a more serious problem, and this could happen to any one of us.

It's important to maintain your mental health but being mentally healthy doesn't just mean that you don't have a mental health problem. With good mental health, you can:

- Make the most of your potential
- Cope with life
- Play a full part in your family, workplace, community and among friends

While research is still growing in the area of mindfulness, evidence has suggested the benefit of mindfulness to health and wellbeing, with results showing positive effects on several aspects of whole-person health, including the mind, the brain, the body, and behaviour, as well as a person's relationships with others.

Mindfulness has also shown to help with a number of conditions, including stress, anxiety, depression, addictive behaviours such as alcohol or substance misuse and gambling, and physical problems like hypertension, heart disease and chronic pain.

One-minute mindfulness strategies

Mindfulness can be used in your everyday life and doesn't have to take a lot of effort or time. You can practise mindfulness in just one minute. In this section, we describe various one-minute mindfulness practices so that you can try it yourself anywhere and at any time that suits you.

Breathing

This is a chance for you to step out of the daily grind and to allow time to be present with yourself; that is, being present with yourself, and with whatever arises in your mind and body. Take a minute to observe your breathing. Breathe in and out as you normally would: notice the time between each inhalation and exhalation; notice your lungs expanding. When your mind wanders, gently bring your attention back to your breath.

Body scan

It can often feel like we're an observer of our own body caught up in our heads. Spend your one mindful minute bringing awareness to your body and your body's sensations. Close your eyes and begin scanning your body. Start with your feet, and then slowly bring your awareness upwards in your body until you reach your hands. What sensations do you feel? Heaviness in the legs? Strain in the back? Perhaps no sensations at all. Now move your focus out from the hands and become aware of your environment and the space all around you.

Mindful walking

Mindful walking is something you can practise at any time as you go about your day. It's good to try it slowly at first, but once you're used to it, you can practise it at any pace – even when you're rushing. Walk slowly: become aware of the sensations in the soles of your feet as they make contact with the floor, and any sensations in the muscles of the legs. You don't have to look down at your feet. When your mind wanders, use the contact of the feet on the floor as an anchor to bring you back into the present moment. Just take a minute to focus on the sensations generated by walking.

Mindful eating

Eating mindfully can take us out of autopilot, helping us appreciate and enjoy the experience more. The next time you eat, stop to observe your food. Give it your full attention. Notice the texture: really see it, feel it, smell it, take a bite into it – noticing the taste and texture in the mouth – continue to chew, bringing your full attention to the taste of it.

Mindful listening

By taking this time out to tune in to your environment and listen to what it tells you, it will help you to bring mindfulness into the rest of your life – bringing your awareness as you move through the day. Take a minute to listen to the sounds in your environment. You don't need to try and determine the origin or type of sounds you hear, just listen and absorb the experience of their quality and how it resonates with you. If you recognise a sound then label it and move on, allowing your ears to catch new sounds.

Reference: www.mentalhealth.org.uk