



# Listening points

## Mindfulness

### Introduction

It can be easy to rush through life without stopping to notice. Mindfulness is when you pay attention to the present moment – to your thoughts and feelings, and to the world around you.

Professor Mark Williams, former director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, says that mindfulness means knowing directly what is going on inside and outside ourselves, moment by moment.

"It's easy to stop noticing the world around us. It's also easy to lose touch with the way our bodies are feeling and to end up living 'in our heads' – caught up in our thoughts without stopping to notice how those thoughts are driving our emotions and behaviour," he says.

"An important part of mindfulness is reconnecting with our bodies and the sensations they experience. This means waking up to the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of the present moment. That might be something as simple as the feel of a banister as we walk upstairs".

"Another important part of mindfulness is an awareness of our thoughts and feelings as they happen moment to moment".

"It's about allowing ourselves to see the present moment clearly. When we do that, it can positively change the way we see ourselves and our lives."

### How to be more mindful

Reminding yourself to take notice of your thoughts, feelings, body sensations and the world around you is the first step to mindfulness.

### Notice the everyday

"Even as we go about our daily lives, we can notice the sensations of things, the food we eat, the air moving past the body as we walk," says Professor Williams. "All this may sound very small, but it has huge power to interrupt the 'autopilot' mode we often engage day to day, and to give us new perspectives on life."

## **Keep it regular**

It can be helpful to pick a regular time – the morning journey to work or a walk at lunchtime – during which you decide to be aware of the sensations created by the world around you.

## **Try something new**

Trying new things, such as sitting in a different seat in meetings or going somewhere new for lunch, can also help you notice the world in a new way.

## **Watch your thoughts**

"Some people find it very difficult to practice mindfulness. As soon as they stop what they're doing, lots of thoughts and worries crowd in," says Professor Williams.

"It might be useful to remember that mindfulness isn't about making these thoughts go away, but rather about seeing them as mental events.

"Imagine standing at a bus station and seeing 'thought buses' coming and going without having to get on them and be taken away. This can be very hard at first, but with gentle persistence it is possible.

"Some people find that it is easier to cope with an over-busy mind if they are doing gentle yoga or walking."

## **Name thoughts and feelings**

To develop an awareness of thoughts and feelings, some people find it helpful to silently name them: "Here's the thought that I might fail that exam". Or, "This is anxiety".

## **Free yourself from the past and future**

You can practise mindfulness anywhere, but it can be especially helpful to take a mindful approach if you realise that, for several minutes, you have been "trapped" in reliving past problems or "pre-living" future worries.

## **Different mindfulness practices**

As well as practising mindfulness in daily life, it can be helpful to set aside time for a more formal mindfulness practice.

Mindfulness meditation involves sitting silently and paying attention to thoughts, sounds, the sensations of breathing or parts of the body, bringing your attention back whenever the mind starts to wander.

Yoga and tai-chi can also help with developing awareness of your breathing.

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mindfulness/>