

Mindful
Teacher,
Mindful
School

Improving Wellbeing
in Teaching & Learning

kevin
hawkins



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2

Mindfulness: What is it? How can it help?

This chapter:

- explores the nature of mindfulness, particularly in its modern context
- looks at how mindful awareness training can help us move from ‘thinking mode’ to ‘sensing mode’, opening up possibilities for greater choice about how we respond in various situations
- considers how mindfulness is being used to help with pain, stress, anxiety and depression.





'YOU ARE A YOUNG MAN IN INDIA AND YOU ARE THINKING TOO MUCH.'

This much I knew already, but to hear it coming from the mouth of a turbaned fortune-teller on the Bombay dockside seemed to give it a legitimacy that worried me even further. 'I know I think too much. But how do I stop?' That is what I didn't understand. Trying *not* to think wasn't working.

In the 1970s, whilst on a trip to India I ended up, by chance, taking part in a few meditation sessions with some local people in Pondicherry. This experience had a strong impact on me and I continued to explore meditation when I returned to London. Although I persisted through much of my life to practice yoga or Tai Chi, my meditation practice was very sporadic. Then, during a very difficult period in midlife, when death and divorce created challenges I felt ill-equipped to face, I rediscovered meditation and mindfulness.

I found myself once again journeying down some of those avenues towards self-awareness that I had explored in my youth. In doing so I developed some essential skills and capacities that really helped me to deal with these major life events and to cope better with managing the stresses of life, work and family at that time.

I had to learn how to allow and process strong emotions such as sadness, anger, guilt and grief and as I did so I began to notice, and then gradually to let go of, some self-created stressors. Those subtle, under-the-surface 'stories' about my difficulties that were only making things worse. I began to discover for myself the value of what it means to really be consciously present, even in the midst of difficulty. And beyond this, to sense a capacity for enjoying life more fully again.

Thus, decades later, the introduction to meditation I had received in my youth proved to be a highly significant experience for me. After I had established my own daily practice and done some further training, an obvious next step seemed to be to introduce students, teachers and parents to mindfulness. In subsequent chapters we will look in depth at how this can be done in schools, but first we will focus directly on what mindfulness is, where it comes from and how it can help.

FIFTEEN SECONDS

In the 1960s, a wave of 'seekers' (the trailblazers for my own overland trip in the following decade) travelled from the West out to Asia. It was the encounters of some of those individuals with Eastern practices that laid the foundations for some valuable, cross-cultural learning that has resonated down the decades into the present day, and into mainstream science, psychology and medicine. In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn, a molecular biologist at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA, was sitting in a meditation group in Barre, Massachusetts, when he had 15 seconds of insight around how to bring the essence of Buddhist meditation to mainstream

society - released from its cultural and historic trappings and made accessible to the general public.

Kabat-Zinn, keen to apply his insight in practical ways, was able to persuade the authorities at the University of Massachusetts Medical School to let him use a room in the basement to receive referrals from doctors. He took on patients who were experiencing long-term pain and illness that had not been 'cured' by traditional medicine. People who were prepared to try something different. That 'something different' was a weekly session, with lots of home practice and exercises, drawn from yoga and meditation - particularly mindfulness meditation.

The 8-week course that Kabat-Zinn devised went on to become the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme which today is taught by thousands of trainers in more than 30 countries worldwide. The University of Massachusetts Medical School Centre for Mindfulness alone has taken over 22,000 people through the 8-week course. Once a solid research base had been established, the MBSR framework and approach became the model for subsequent applications of mindfulness, which are used today in many different areas of mainstream mental health and medicine.

SO WHAT IS 'MINDFULNESS'?

'Mindfulness is the awareness that arises when we pay attention, on purpose, in the present moment, with curiosity and kindness to things as they are.'

This working definition framed by Kabat-Zinn does a good job of encapsulating the essential qualities of mindfulness. Mindfulness is not something we are 'taught' or 'given' as such; it's a natural capacity that we all have that may arise when we are deeply absorbed in something, or in a situation that demands our full attention. When people meditate they are cultivating the conditions that give rise to this mindful awareness.

All world religions contain elements devoted to reflection and to developing inner peace, but the Buddhist traditions seem to have especially focused on exploring these aspects of the human psyche. Mindfulness programmes draw on these explorations, but the competencies that are developed are naturally occurring, inherent, human capacities, and the courses for schools outlined in this book are completely secular.

Mindfulness is really the opposite of forgetfulness. We forget about what is happening right now because we are often busy thinking too much - worrying about the future or revisiting the past. 'Re-living and pre-living,' as Chris Cullen from the Oxford Mindfulness Centre puts it. When we train in mindfulness, we train in encountering the present moment, in making ourselves more available to what is happening *right now*. And, of course, the present moment is the only place where anything ever happens - so it's worth trying to spend more time here!

How Do We Do That?

You could be forgiven for believing that mindfulness and meditation are all about the mind, but in many ways, training in mindful awareness is often focused on the body - on consciously cultivating the connections between mind and body that can help us find greater balance in our everyday experiences and behaviours. While our *mind* might be off in the future, worrying or imagining, or back in the past, regretting or re-enacting, our *body* is only here in the present. So, on a basic level, if we train ourselves to be more directly connected with our bodies, then we can spend more time fully inhabiting our experience of life.

Modes of Mind

Let's take a moment to explore two key modes of brain functioning that are central to mindful awareness. Read the following passage, and as you read, take the time to allow yourself to imagine and 'feel' your way into the situation described. (This, by the way, is not a mindfulness exercise, it is a simple visualisation adapted from an example by David Rock, 2009.)



THE JETTY

Imagine it's summertime and you are on a small jetty on the edge of a peaceful lake. You are sitting on the wooden boards, your legs dangling over the water. It's a warm day and you can feel the heat on your skin and face. There's a refreshing drink in your hand and you can feel the coolness of the glass contrasting with the heat of the day. A light breeze blows across the water, stirring your hair, and the hairs on your arms. The breeze carries a faint smell of reeds, earth and lake water.

A cloud passes over the sun and then a cooler breeze blows across the water and gives you a slight shiver, reminding you that the summer is passing quickly. The new school year will soon begin. You recall that you still have some course planning to do when you get back home. You start to wonder about the new classes you have to teach - 'Will the new text books arrive in time?' - and some of the jobs you left undone at the end of the year - 'I never did clean out those old files'.

Whether or not you actually 'felt' any sensations, you probably noticed what happened there. We moved from full-on present moment sensory experiencing into thinking - planning the future with our internal narrative mode. Figure 2.1 illustrates two primary modes of mind.

These two main modes of mind - **sensing** and **thinking** - can be observed in action using brain scans. We all have this capacity to experience our senses and to move into our thoughts and we flip from one to the other and back again, usually without even noticing. Most of us, however, spend a lot of time in our thoughts and

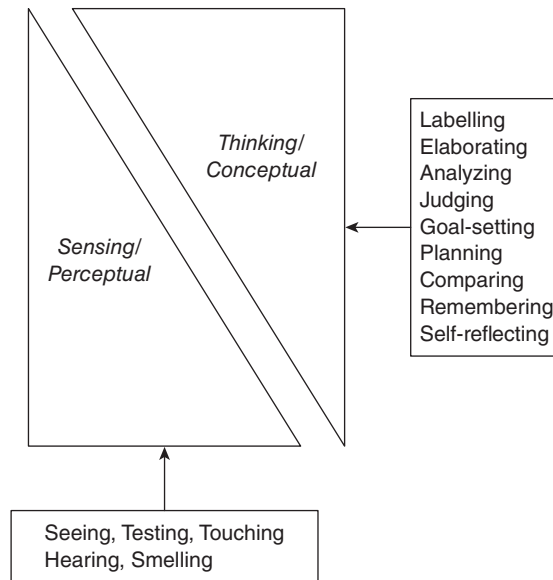


Figure 2.1 Modes of mind (adapted from Williams, 2010)

inner storytelling and not so much time experiencing the present moment directly through our senses.

A key component of training in mindful awareness is learning how to bring our attention out of thinking mode and into our bodies and senses - into sensing mode. We train for this not to stop our thinking, nor to be permanently in our bodies, but in order to have greater choice over where our attention goes. To be able to inhabit the full range of sensory *and* cognitive experiences, depending on what is most appropriate for the occasion. When we notice we are stuck in (or overwhelmed by) thinking, we can learn to drop our attention down into the body. When we want to focus on the future, to do some planning for example, then we can choose to do that with full consciousness, now, in this moment.

When we are having a difficult day - perhaps feeling stressed by an interaction with a parent or colleague, or under pressure from a pile of papers that need to be marked - we may be vaguely aware of discomfort, and that we are not really in the best state of mind to walk into a classroom. If, though, we have already established some mindfulness strategies, these may allow us to just take a moment to drop into sensing our body and breath, to acknowledge our thoughts and emotions, maybe take a deeper breath and let some of that tension go. We can thus make a small shift in our focus, even in a brief moment, that enables us to be more present with those students in front of us right now.

BEING WITH PAIN

By engaging in this type of focused, present moment awareness, many participants of those early courses created by Jon Kabat-Zinn found a significant difference in

their experience of their illness or their pain. Some seemed to change their relationship with pain - to see themselves less defined by their illness and to find more optimism through regaining a more active role in their lives. Others seemed to actually experience less pain. This is not just a theory or an idea - the powerful combination of ancient practices with modern science reveals that, when trained in this way, changes can often be observed in the brain. Researchers are discovering that, even with initial adult mindfulness training, some significant alterations in the structure and wiring of the brain can be detected (Massachusetts General Hospital, 2011). The original purpose of meditation practices, at least in Buddhism, was to understand the causes of human suffering and how to end it. Modern applications of these ancient approaches appear to confirm the validity of these techniques in a scientific setting.

Pain and Suffering

So we know from the research and from people's experiences that something significant is happening here. But what are we actually doing that makes a difference? Common to many of these applications of mindfulness is a more active role on the part of the person who is suffering - a decrease in the passivity that often accompanies a medical diagnosis. There is also an aspect of being able to accept and work with our condition as it is, and the paradox is that sometimes this active acceptance can reduce the intensity of the experience.

BILLY AND THE MOSQUITO

Whilst I was in the process of re-discovering mindfulness in my middle age, I took my son, Billy, on a trip to Egypt. He was about 14 at the time and as excited as I was by the amazing sites, stories and people we encountered. One morning we rode camels up to the tombs in Luxor and then went on to do a tour of other nearby sites. As interested as he was in the ruins we were exploring, he was also plagued by some nasty mosquito bites that he just couldn't resist scratching. Eventually this started to interfere with the whole experience for him. In the midst of all the magnificent ancient splendour, the irritation caused by those tiny insects had, for him, taken centre stage. In the bus between two sites he was becoming increasingly annoyed, and having no cream with me I decided to try out one of the techniques I had been learning. (I guessed that his suffering might be sufficient to motivate him to try it!)

'Instead of letting this drive you crazy, do you want to try a different way of dealing with it?'

'Like what?'

'Don't scratch the bites for a bit and just sit upright, close your eyes and let yourself feel the itching ... Just breathe gently and deeply and close your eyes and focus on exactly the spot where you feel most irritation ... Now just keep breathing and noticing and let yourself fully sense what those bites feel like on your skin...'

After a moment I asked him how it felt now.
 'The itching has gone!'

After a while the itch returned, but it wasn't so intense and Billy was able to go onto the next site and enjoy the experience. He told me years later that he had imagined his breath going to the itching spot like those TV adverts for pain relief pills that target a throbbing red spot in the body. Whenever the itching returned that day, he would breathe into it and it would 'disappear' again for a while. He had learnt a new way of actively dealing with discomfort.

Of course I am not trying to compare the pain experienced from serious illnesses to the itch of a mosquito bite, and we can't all overcome pain simply by accepting it. But it is true that we often solidify, feed and even magnify our difficulties by the way we react to them. Exceptional people like Nelson Mandela and Viktor Frankl have shown how, even in the most awful of situations, some individuals have been able to choose an attitude that reduces and even transforms their suffering.

Perhaps a partial explanation of what might be happening here is encapsulated in the formula:

$$\text{Suffering} = \text{Pain} \times \text{Resistance}$$

Or, as some put it, 'Pain in life is inevitable, suffering is optional'. We can't remove all negative experience from our lives, but we can at least 'work the edge' of how we are impacted by suffering - and especially how our story about pain and illness can sometimes add to, or feed, the experience of suffering.

TREATING PAIN

Over the last 30 years, research on the impact of MBSR courses on the experience of pain has increasingly shed light on the physiological and psychological processes involved. Here's one recent example:

The standard pharmaceutical approach to testing new drugs is to compare medications with a placebo, which we now know can have a significant effect itself and there have been some interesting research studies exploring placebo processes (Feinberg, 2013). In 2014 Fadel Zeidan and his team at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Centre in North Carolina, USA, designed an experiment to compare mindfulness meditation with a pain relief placebo (Zeidan et al., 2015). Participants were randomly trained either in mindfulness meditation or in how to use a neutral cream (the placebo) they could apply in case of burns. Later they were actually given a burn on their

(Continued)

(Continued)

arm in the lab and they then applied either the cream or their technique. The placebo cream significantly reduced pain sensation (-11 per cent) and unpleasantness (-13 per cent), but mindfulness meditation outscored the placebo effect in both categories (-27 per cent and -44 per cent).

Another group that was trained in a simple relaxation technique had a lower effect than the cream, but what surprised researchers the most was the way in which scans revealed that pain was being mediated in the brain:

‘We were completely surprised by the findings. While we thought that there would be some overlap in brain regions between meditation and placebo, the findings from this study provide novel and objective evidence that mindfulness meditation reduces pain in a unique fashion.’

(Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center, 2015)

The conclusion from this study was that, ‘Based on our findings, we believe that as little as four 20-minute daily sessions of mindfulness meditation could enhance pain treatment in a clinical setting’.

The application of mindfulness techniques in MBSR to treating pain, and the research that validated this, led to a flurry of studies, as illustrated in Figure 2.2. Mindfulness-based approaches have been researched with people with cancer,

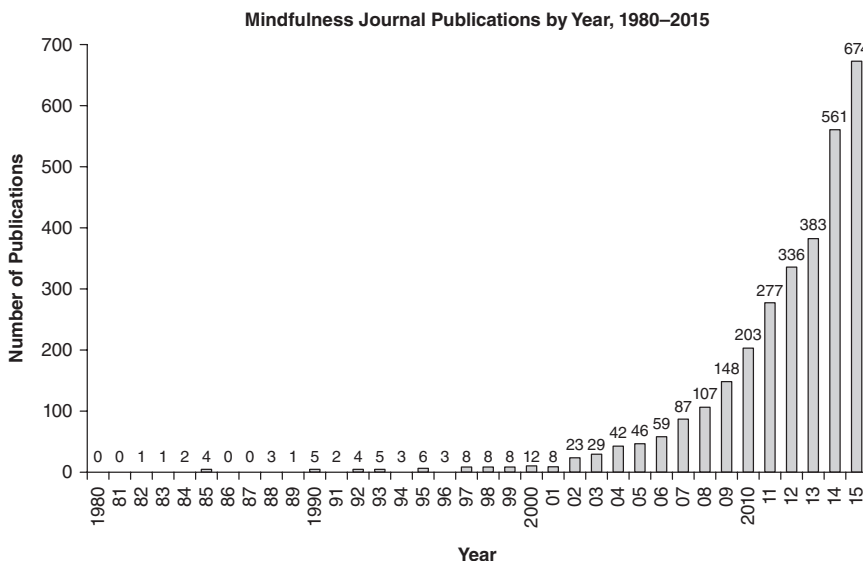


Figure 2.2 Exponential increase of mindfulness research publications since 2007/8 (American Mindfulness Research Association, 2016)

eating disorders, addictions and many other afflictions, often with significant results. In mental health, mindfulness has been used especially in treatment for depression, anxiety and stress. Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), based on the MBSR programme, targets people suffering from clinical depression and has been particularly successful in this area.

FEELING YOUR FEET

OK, enough theory for now; let's try something more directly experiential. The only way to really understand mindfulness is to *experience* it. Because we are exploring non-verbal experience these words can only be guides - we are trying to see if we can put words aside for a while - or at least to turn *down* the volume on our thoughts a little, while turning *up* the volume on the senses. Let's see if we can let go of these ideas and thoughts for a moment and just play with inhabiting our sensory experience.

The best way to do this is with someone guiding you, so you might want to do this using the audio track in the 'Try It Out!' section at end of the chapter.

If you prefer to read the guide yourself, just use the cues below to steer yourself towards slowing down a little.

You will need a few minutes (approx. 3-5) and a quiet space to try this out. If you are not in a good situation to do this right now, no problem - you can choose a better time later.



FEEL YOUR FEET ACTIVITY

If you are ready, start to build an intention to focus on this activity and to cue yourself as you read by:

Slowing down your reading a little,
... pausing every now and then ...
... seeing if you can notice
your body ...

.....
Now,
... just gently trying to focus your attention
on sensing

(Continued)

(Continued)

your feet.

See if you can notice the feel of your socks or shoes,
perhaps how they hold or constrain your feet ...

Try to notice the temperature of your feet (warm or cool)
- and their weight (or lightness).

... Now noticing the connection with the surface beneath your feet.

.....

Just pause your reading for a longer moment now, sensing again how your feet
feel,

from the inside (close your eyes for a moment if it helps).

.....

Try including with the feet a sense of the body sitting here supported by the chair
beneath you.

(Close your eyes again if it helps.)

And now, while you slowly, softly read this,
see if you can also notice the breath moving in your body.

The physical sensations of breathing,
wherever you feel them most vividly ...

Just staying with the breath if you can for a few cycles ...

.....

Finally, after reading this last part,

just for a minute, try

putting the book down,

feeling your breath, and your body,

letting your eyes move slowly around the room,

and gently allowing yourself to fully sense yourself,

sitting here in this room.

So how was that?
What did you notice?
Did you feel tired?
Or relaxed?
Could you stay with the sensations?
Did your mind keep wandering off?
Was it difficult to engage?
Maybe you couldn't feel your feet at all?
Or perhaps you were thinking 'What a waste of time!'

Any of these possibilities, along with a variety of others, could have been your experience during those few minutes. There is no right or wrong in these practices. At this stage we are learning to notice whatever we notice, so there's no need to feel that you got it 'wrong' if it was a struggle. We are just exploring, noticing what happens when we do try to move our attention into the body. If this is a new type of experience for you, as with any training of a new skill, it's important not to push too hard, not to be too self-critical. We can learn as much from challenging moments as we can from when things go more easily. We are just starting to work on building up our intention to pay attention.

WANDERING AND WONDERING

We worry about the future, obsess about the past, get drawn in by the mind's narrator, sometimes getting stuck on autopilot, not really paying attention to where we are and what we are doing. Even when focused on the present moment we may still have these, mostly subliminal, intermittent commentaries from our inner critic - we might be putting ourselves down ('I'm just not good/smart/strong enough') or puffing ourselves up, making comparisons with others and working out where we fit ('At least I'm not as ugly/short/tall/thin/fat/arrogant/shy/etc as him/her!').

Mindful awareness training can help us work with our wandering mind (and we all have one of those!), but this doesn't mean we can't appreciate and celebrate the wonders of mind wandering. Some of my best ideas have come when I let my mind wander and just see what turns up. Wisps of poetry, music or ideas might bubble up, sometimes as if from nowhere. It's true that, for me, most of the time when this happens I'm doing something physical at the time - walking, cycling, taking a shower, or maybe staring out of a train window and being gently rocked whilst travelling through the countryside. So I guess there's a degree of 'embodiment' even if I'm not focused on it. But this is different from the more 'disembodied', circuitous, thinking that can take over in the small hours of the morning or after a stressful day.

THE WORRY GENE

We are the descendants of Worriers as well as Warriors - it's those anxious genes that sometimes kept our ancestors alive and that have been passed down to us. I sometimes tell my students that my mother was a wonderful woman and also a great worrier and if there had been an Olympic competition for worrying my mum would have been able to represent Great Britain. 'And,' I tell them, 'I have inherited that capacity and perfected it - taken it to a whole new level.' Worrying comes easily to me - it's just the way my mind tends to go.

Because I am quite good at worrying it has been hardwired into my neurological circuitry. My habitual thought patterns travel down familiar inter-synaptic routes that have become well myelinated (insulated) through regular use. This makes it easier for the electro-chemical currents in my neurons to flow along these 'worryways'. Through training, however, I have learnt to notice this process and often now I can choose to *not* go down those default neural motorways and instead turn off down a gentler side road, one that is more conducive to having a calmer, more pleasant journey.

Most of us seem to have a built-in tendency to veer towards the negative when our thoughts are left to wander too long, and there's a danger of getting trapped in subliminal, negative thinking - especially when this is fuelled by an underlying low mood or a strong emotion such as fear, anger or sadness (Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010). As cognitive behavioural therapists have discovered, sometimes our attempts to think our way out of a depression can just keep us stuck in a downward spiral. Training in mindfulness has helped me to notice the difference between pleasant or creative daydreaming and circuitous worrying which serves no positive purpose.

The wandering mind can be a creative or restorative state when we daydream (Callard and Margulies, 2011), or it can fuel negative states when we obsess or catastrophise. With time and patience we can train ourselves so that we can choose to allow it to wander or, if we notice it is causing us problems or undermining us, we can learn to gently pull ourselves out of thinking into the present moment, through the sensory anchors we have established in our practice.

Meditators are not 'people whose minds don't wander';
people meditate *because* minds wander.

When we see an image of a room full of meditators everyone appears to be so calm and serene, but the reality is that at any one moment each person could be experiencing anything across the full range of human emotions and sensations - not all of them calm or pleasant. It's important to understand how difficult it can sometimes be to just sit still quietly for a few minutes - especially if you might end up training students in this one day!

When we introduce adults and children to these practices, we take care to normalise their various experiences. The last thing we want is for young people to conclude, 'I tried mindfulness but it's not my thing, my mind wanders too

much'. We help them understand the nature of the wandering mind - that it's just 'what minds do.'

In the next chapter we will explore in more depth establishing a personal mindfulness practice so that you can try this out for yourself. The more you practice, the more you are able to notice when the mind is fuelling worry, and then you can use your growing ability to focus your attention in ways that can help calm and centre yourself. Let's try a brief exploratory exercise, similar to the one we did earlier, but in a context you might be familiar with, just to give you an idea of how we might use mindful awareness for ourselves in school.

 BREATH BREAK

Imagine you've just come back to school after a week's holiday. You don't actually feel all that rested despite the break, and with reports to proofread and parent conferences coming up later this week, you feel unsure if you have sufficient energy to get you through this week. You certainly don't feel ready to face your class this morning - especially remembering the last lesson before the break, they were all over the place!

Then you remember that mindfulness exercise you have been practising and decide to give it a go now, even though it feels strange to do it in school. You turn your chair to face the window, look out over the trees at the clouds skimming across the apartments opposite.

Noticing the space above the crowded horizon, you take a deep breath.

You allow yourself to notice the cocktail of thoughts, feelings and sensations flowing around your mind and body. [Try this exercise now as you read - approx. 3 minutes]

Try to focus on *where* in the body you might notice any emotions or sensations. Then ...

...Take a good long in-breath.

Allow yourself to notice the exhale,

encouraging a sense of letting go as you follow it out,

trying to feel the breath moving in your body,

closing your eyes for a moment if that helps.

Then gather your attention and take it down to your feet.

Feeling the feet inside your shoes.

And the floor under your feet.

Take a few breaths whilst focusing on the feet.

Now expand your attention to notice your legs, thighs and the feel of your body sitting here in the chair.

Being aware of your breath, raise your eyes and look out and around you for a moment.

Take one more deep inhale and exhale.

Maintaining some awareness of your body as best you can, get up slowly and prepare yourself to meet - and greet! - your students.

MINDFULNESS AND STRESS

The MBSR approach has been found to be highly effective for helping people deal with stress as well as pain. And it can be used as a preventative as well as a coping strategy. One piece of research (shown below) on using mindfulness for stress that might be of interest to those sceptical of 'self-report' studies was carried out with the US Marines and relied solely on physiological measures. (NB: In the following chapters we will look in more depth at using mindfulness to manage stress at work and beyond.)

MINDFUL MARINES

This study (Johnson et al., 2014) was done by researchers from the University of California, San Diego School of Medicine and the Naval Health Research Center:

- Four randomly selected platoons were assigned mindfulness training and four were assigned training-as-usual.
- The platoons were assessed before and after an 8-week mindfulness training course and also during and after a stressful combat training session some months later.
- Based on physiological blood, brain and heart markers, the results showed that 'mechanisms related to stress recovery can be modified in healthy individuals prior to stress exposure, with important implications for evidence-based mental health research and treatment.'

MINDFULNESS AND DEPRESSION

According to the World Health Organization, depression is one of the leading causes of global ill health (WHO, 2012). In recent years, psychologists have been developing some effective approaches to the treatment of depression that incorporate mindfulness. One major study recruited groups of people who had experienced clinical, recurring depression, and trained them on an 8-week mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) course and then compared them with control groups (Teasdale et al., 2000). In this and similar, replicated studies, researchers have found that people with the MBCT training are half as likely to relapse into depression compared to control groups continuing their normal treatment. Whilst it may not work for everyone, MBCT does seem to offer a viable alternative to pharmacological options for reducing the reoccurrence of clinical depression, whilst avoiding any potential side-effects of medication. In fact, MBCT has become so well established now in the UK that the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (2009) recommends it be prescribed by doctors as a National Health funded form of treatment for depression.

CHANGING THE BRAIN

- A 2007 study (Farb et al.), entitled 'Attending to the present: mindfulness meditation reveals distinct neural modes of self-reference', showed that mindfulness training increases 'viscero-somatic' processing and uncouples 'narrative-based' processing. In other words, the two modes of mind we explored earlier in the Jetty Scenario (**sensory mode** and **thinking mode**) can be more easily 'uncoupled' when we have trained ourselves to become more aware of physical sensations. It may be that for people who are depressed and prone to ruminate, this uncoupling helps them be aware of when an episode of depression might be beginning and then take steps to actively prevent relapse.
- A Massachusetts General Hospital study (2011) showed that after an 8 week mindfulness training programme (average 27 minutes practice per day), brain scans detected changes in the structure of the brain in those areas connected with emotional regulation and stress. The scans showed:
 - increased grey-matter density in the hippocampus (which can increase memory and learning capacities)
 - decreased grey-matter density in the amygdala (which can decrease our fear responses).

Understanding how rumination contributes to depressive states has implications for all of us - not just because depression is becoming such a common 21st-century affliction, but also because we all have to deal with negative moods and mind states. When we understand more about how our mind, body and emotions function, we are better positioned to learn strategies to deal with such difficulties.

HEALTHY SCEPTICISM

When we introduce mindfulness to teachers and students we encourage them to be 'healthily sceptical' about the research and about their expectations. Not to be so cynical or closed that you aren't prepared to try something a bit different, but not to be so open that you quickly conclude that mindfulness is the answer to all problems (actually, not many school-kids reach this conclusion, but it can happen with adults in mid-life).

Meditation may not always be the best option for everyone, depending on mental and physical circumstances. For example, someone with asthma may not feel comfortable with a focus on the breath, and it's important not to feel pressured to do so. (Although if you do have asthma and are interested, there has been some research done on how mindfulness may improve lung function and quality of life, [Pbert et al., 2012]). The MBCT programme has been proven to be effective for some people suffering from depression, but it is designed to be used as a preventative when in relapse, not when experiencing a major depressive episode.

WEBLINK: To see an example of someone trying a mindfulness experience with a 'healthily sceptical' outlook, check out this short film about CNN's Anderson Cooper:

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-newly-mindful-anderson-cooper/>

Choosing what works for you is good practice in self-care. When we employ healthy scepticism we are prepared to try something and, even if at first it is a challenge, then we might choose to persist based on encouragement and guidance from others that we trust, or on our understandings from research. But ultimately, we are going to decide for ourselves, based on our own experience what works and what doesn't.

GOING PUBLIC

As results from scientific research spread, mindfulness became increasingly of interest to the general public. An MBCT book on *The Mindful Way Through Depression* (Williams et al., 2007) was followed in 2011 by a less clinical, more generally accessible book *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World* by Mark Williams and Danny Penman. This excellent self-directed 8-week course book has now been translated into more than 20 languages and is an international bestseller, showing that interest in mindfulness is coming not just from people who are clinically depressed or in pain. We are all in need of more space and downtime and many of us can benefit from practical guidance in how to achieve better balance in our lives. So, the combination of brain scan technology with the adoption and adaptation of Eastern traditional meditative practices in various secular forms in the West has opened up new horizons in mental and physical health. Exploring the benefits of these deep understandings of the human psyche without the trappings of organised religion has enabled a host of scientific research and new understandings in mental health interventions. Psychologists and educators have only recently begun to consider if the advances outlined above in applying mindful awareness training to mental and physical health could be of benefit to children and young people in schools.

MENTAL HEALTH AND YOUNG PEOPLE

A primary concern for us as teachers is the alarming rate of increase in mental health issues for children and young people:

- A meta-study in the USA found that children and college students in the 1980s were reporting average levels of anxiety higher than those of young psychiatric patients in the 1950s (Twenge, 2000).
- The onset of major depression is now most commonly reported to start in adolescence (Williams et al., 2012).

- According to a 2012 Chief Medical Officer report, 10 per cent of UK children have a diagnosable mental disorder (Murphy and Fonagy, 2012).
- In 2014 a survey of 830 USA college student counselling centres reported a 94 per cent growth of 'severe psychological problems'. These were mainly anxiety disorders and serious psychological crises that, according to one centre Director, have created a situation where counsellors 'can no longer do therapy ...[they] can only triage acute crises' (Gallagher, 2015).
- Self-harm rates among children and young people in the UK have increased sharply over the past decade (Murphy and Fonagy, 2012).
- The World Health Organization (2016) stated that 'depression is the top cause of illness and disability among adolescents and suicide is the third cause of death.' Suicide figures only indicate the tip of an iceberg of suffering amongst young people: in the USA among young adults (15-24 years) there is one suicide for every 100-200 attempts (Goldsmith et al., 2002).

We don't necessarily need surveys and statistics to convince us that lifestyles are out of balance these days - many of us have already either experienced mental illness ourselves or we know family, friends or students who have suffered or who are suffering. The World Health Organization (2016) advocates for education in this area to be augmented: 'Building life skills in children and adolescents and providing them with psychosocial support in schools and other community settings can help promote good mental health.'

Most of the research on mindfulness-based interventions has been done with adults but this situation is changing and research with young people and children, while still seen as an 'emergent field', is beginning to yield some positive indications. In Chapter 5 we will look at some of this research evidence and explore how some teachers have begun to adapt adult mindfulness programmes for children and teenagers in schools.

In this chapter we have focused on the use of mindful awareness training in medicine and mental health but I want to conclude by emphasising that it's not all about dealing with difficulty and avoiding despair or the problems of life - this work is just as much about enjoying life and appreciating the wonderful opportunity to be alive on this beautiful planet. Mindful awareness training can help us with challenging experiences and with difficult emotions, thoughts and sensations, but we can also use it simply for the ease and joy of slowing down, being more in our bodies and being more able to appreciate the present moment.

'Oh, I've had my moments, and if I had to do it over again, I'd have more of them. In fact, I'd try to have nothing else. Just moments, one after another, instead of living so many years ahead of each day.'

Nadine Stair, 85 years old (quoted in Kabat-Zinn, 1991)



WHAT REALLY MATTERS?

- The ancient art of cultivating mindful awareness is being applied in mainstream medicine and mental health with proven impact on pain, anxiety and depression.
- This is now leading to a range of initiatives in educational settings exploring the potential for positive mental health applications for young people and teachers.

TRY IT OUT!

- If you didn't yet try the activity on page 21, then consider setting aside 10 minutes sometime this week to slowly go through the exercise; alternatively, follow a guided audio version at www.mindwell-education.com.
- In the following chapters we look at specific ways to develop various mindful awareness practices. For now, if you want to explore a little, consider building a quiet moment into your day. Here are a few suggestions to choose from to get you started:
 - Take two minutes, maybe after you shower and before your breakfast, to just sit quietly and take a few conscious breaths. You don't have to sit cross-legged on the floor, a normal chair will also do.
 - If you normally drink tea or coffee in the morning, consider using this time to simply sit and sense, enjoying the experience of drinking rather than planning your day or reading the paper while you drink.
 - Set a timer for 5 minutes and sit quietly, sensing the body and feeling the movement of breathing wherever you can notice it. Expect the mind to wander off and when you notice it has, gently bring your attention back to the physical sensations of breath or body.
 - Try using the audio link as a daily guided settling (approx. 5 minutes).

With all these exercises remember to be kind to yourself - don't beat yourself up if it doesn't work out as you hoped or planned! Remember the qualities of mindfulness we are seeking to cultivate:

'Mindfulness is the awareness that arises when we pay attention, on purpose, in the present moment, with **curiosity** and **kindness** to things as they are.'



FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

Kabat-Zinn, J. (1991) *Full Catastrophe Living: How to Cope with Stress, Pain and Illness using Mindfulness Meditation*. London: Piatkus.

A fascinating insight into Jon Kabat-Zinn's MBSR approach and a great introduction to mindfulness. You can see a touching film of his early work in:

Healing and the Mind with Bill Moyers (1993) Public Broadcasting Service
<https://vimeo.com/39767361>

Williams, M., Teasdale, J., Segal, Z. and Kabat-Zinn, J. (2007) *The Mindful Way Through Depression: Freeing Yourself from Chronic Unhappiness*. New York: Guilford Press.

Contains an outline for a self-directed course and many insights into the use of MBCT to treat depression.

Gunaratana, B. (2011) *Mindfulness in Plain English*. Somerville, MA: Wisdom.

An accessible and illuminating guide to meditation from a well-regarded Buddhist author.