

## Unhelpful Thinking Habits

Our thoughts are created by our mind, which is constantly helping us to interpret the world around us. It does this by describing what is happening, and trying to make sense of it by interpreting events, sights, sounds, smells, feelings, etc. This is just what the human mind does.

We usually don't even realise that we are interpreting and giving our meanings to everything happening around us. We might decide that something is pleasant or unpleasant, good or bad, dangerous or safe.

These interpretations and meanings we give events and situations, affect the way we feel, that is our emotions:

**EVENT → MEANING WE GIVE TO THE EVENT → EMOTION**

Something happens or we notice something, which triggers a thought. When these give rise to emotions like anxiety/fear or low mood/depression, we call these thoughts unhelpful thoughts.

**EVENT:** You have to pick something up off the floor and you move awkwardly. You feel something pull in your back.

- **UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS:** This means the pain is going to be dreadful for the next few days. I'll never be able to go to the shops for food. I'll be stuck here. No one will be able to help.

**EMOTION:** Anxious, very worried.

- **UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS:** This is awful. Why me? I used to be active and do lots of things. Now I have lost my job. I can't even pick this thing off the floor. I am a failure.

**EMOTION:** Low, depressed.

You may be able to think of further scenarios, and times when as a result of your unhelpful thoughts and negative predictions you may feel stressed, frustrated or angry.

What tends to happen over time is that unhelpful thinking habits develop.

Please read through the hand outs and see if any of these seem familiar to you.

Of course, our mood affects our physical sensations in our body. For example, anxiety gives rise to a whole host of symptoms, such as a dry mouth, 'butterflies' in our stomach, increased heart rate, and also tense muscles, which can further aggravate our pain.

This will impact on what you do (your behaviours); e.g. you may restrict your movement or avoid further activity. This, in turn, will lock you into a 'can't do' vicious circle which will result in 'physical deconditioning' (see Week 1).

It is important to notice your unhelpful thoughts and thinking patterns. The more you notice them, the more you can step back and distance yourself from them. Are they really true? What is the evidence to support the accuracy of them, and what is the evidence against these thoughts? Is there a more helpful way of giving meaning to this particular event. You might start with: 'Even though I .....'

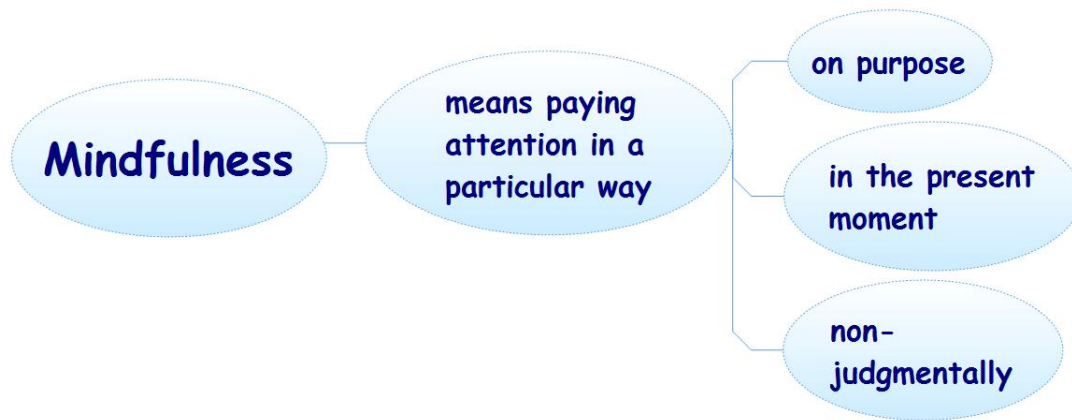
### **Key Messages**

**Focus on the factors affecting your symptoms which you can control: behaviours and thoughts**

**Adopt active behaviours despite your symptoms – don't pull back and avoid activity during difficult times (e.g. staying in bed) then acknowledge these positive actions**

**Thoughts affect the way you feel, and act. Notice your unhelpful thoughts and thinking patterns more. This will give you a chance to distance yourself from them and interpret the event in a more helpful way.**

## Mindfulness



*Jon Kabat-Zinn*

### What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is an ancient eastern practice which is very relevant for our lives today. Mindfulness is a very simple concept. Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally.

Mindfulness does not conflict with any beliefs or traditions, whether religious, cultural or scientific. It is simply a practical way to notice thoughts, physical sensations, sights, sounds, smells - anything we might not normally notice. The actual skills might be simple, but because it is so different to how our minds normally behave, it takes a lot of practice.



We might go out into the garden and as we look around, we might think "That grass really needs cutting, and that vegetable patch looks very untidy". A young child on the other hand, will call over excitedly, "Hey – come and look at this ant!".

Mindfulness can simply be noticing what we don't normally notice, because our heads are too busy in the future or in the past - thinking about what we need to do, or going over what we have done.

Being mindful helps us to train our attention. Our minds wander about 50% of the time, but every time we practise being mindful, we are exercising our attention "muscle" and becoming mentally fitter. We can take more control over our focus of attention, and choose what we focus on...rather than passively allowing our attention to be dominated by that which distresses us and takes us away from the present moment.

Mindfulness might simply be described as choosing and learning to control our focus of attention.

## Automatic Pilot

In a car, we can sometimes drive for miles on “automatic pilot”, without really being aware of what we are doing. In the same way, we may not be really “present”, moment-by-moment, for much of our lives: We can often be “miles away”\_without knowing it.



On automatic pilot, we are more likely to have our “buttons pressed”: Events around us and thoughts, feelings and sensations (of which we may be only dimly aware) can trigger old habits of thinking that are often unhelpful and may lead to worsening mood.

By becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, from moment to moment, we give ourselves the possibility of greater freedom and choice; we do not have to go into the same old “mental ruts” that may have caused problems in the past.

## Mindful Activity

If we washed the dishes each evening, we might tend to be “in our head” as we’re washing up , thinking about what we have to do, what we’ve done earlier in the day, worrying about future events, or regretful thoughts about the past. Again, a young child might see things differently, “Listen to those bubbles! They’re fun!”



Washing up or another routine activity can become a routine (practice of) mindful activity for us. We might notice the temperature of the water and how it feels on the skin, the texture of the bubbles on the skin, and yes, we might hear the bubbles as they softly pop. The sounds of the water as we take out and put dishes into the water. The smoothness of the plates, and the texture of the sponge. Just noticing what we might not normally notice.

A mindful walk brings new pleasures. Walking is something most of us do at some time during the day. We can practice, even if only for a couple of minutes at a time, mindful walking. Rather than be “in our heads”, we can look around and notice what we see, hear, sense. We might notice the sensations in our own body just through the act of walking. Noticing the sensations and movement of our feet, legs, arms, head and body as we take each step. Noticing our breathing. Thoughts will continuously intrude, but we can just notice them, and then bring our attention back to our walking.

The more we practice, perhaps the more (initially at least) we will notice those thoughts intruding, and that's ok. The only aim of mindful activity is to bring our attention back to the activity continually, noticing those sensations, from outside and within us.

## Mindful Breathing

The primary focus in Mindfulness Meditation is the breathing. However, the primary goal is a calm, non-judging awareness, allowing thoughts and feelings to come and go without getting caught up in them. This creates calmness and acceptance.



- ❖ Sit comfortably, with your eyes closed and your spine reasonably straight.
- ❖ Direct your attention to your breathing.
- ❖ When thoughts, emotions, physical feelings or external sounds occur, simply accept them, giving them the space to come and go without judging or getting involved with them.
- ❖ When you notice that your attention has drifted off and is becoming caught up in thoughts or feelings, simply note that the attention has drifted, and then gently bring the attention back to your breathing.

It's ok and natural for thoughts to arise, and for your attention to follow them. No matter how many times this happens, just keep bringing your attention back to your breathing.

### Breathing Meditation1 (Kabat-Zinn 1996)



Assume a comfortable posture lying on your back or sitting. If you are sitting, keep the spine straight and let your shoulders drop.

Close your eyes if it feels comfortable.

Bring your attention to your belly, feeling it rise or expand gently on the in breath and fall or recede on the out-breath.

Keep your focus on the breathing, 'being with' each in-breath for its full duration and with each out-breath for its full duration, as if you were riding the waves of your own breathing.

Every time you notice that your mind has wandered off the breath, notice what it was that took you away and then gently bring your attention back to your belly and the feeling of the breath coming in and out.

If your mind wanders away from the breath a thousand times, then your job is simply to bring it back to the breath every time, no matter what it becomes preoccupied with.

Practice this exercise for fifteen minutes at a convenient time every day, whether you feel like it or not, for one week and see how it feels to incorporate a disciplined meditation practice into your life. Be aware of how it feels to spend some time each day just being with your breath without having to do anything.

## Breathing Meditation2 (Kabat-Zinn 1996)

- ❖ Tune into your breathing at different times during the day, feeling the belly go through one or two risings and fallings.
- ❖ Become aware of your thoughts and feelings at these moments, just observing them without judging them or yourself.
- ❖ At the same time, be aware of any changes in the way you are seeing things and feeling about yourself.



## Using mindfulness to cope with negative experiences (thoughts, feelings, events)



As we become more practised at using mindfulness for breathing, body sensations and routine daily activities, so we can then learn to be mindful of our thoughts and feelings, to become observers, and then more accepting of them. This results in less distressing feelings, and increases our ability to enjoy our lives.

With mindfulness, even the most disturbing sensations, feelings, thoughts, and experiences, can be viewed from a wider perspective as passing events in the mind, rather than as "us", or as being necessarily true. (Brantley 2003)

When we are more practiced in using mindfulness, we can use it even in times of intense distress, by becoming mindful of the actual experience as an observer, using mindful breathing and focussing our attention on the breathing, listening to the distressing thoughts mindfully, recognising them as merely thoughts, breathing with them, allowing them to happen without believing them or arguing with them. If thoughts are too strong or loud, then we can move our attention to our breath, the body, or to sounds around us.

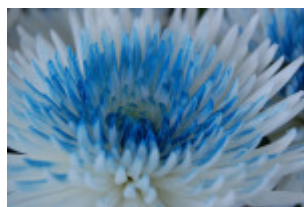
Jon Kabat-Zinn uses the example of waves to help explain mindfulness.

Think of your mind as the surface of a lake or an ocean. There are always waves on the water, sometimes big, sometimes small, sometimes almost imperceptible. The water's waves are churned up by winds, which come and go and vary in direction and intensity, just as do the winds of stress and change in our lives, which stir up waves in our mind. It's possible to find shelter from much of the wind that agitates the mind. Whatever we might do to prevent them, the winds of life and of the mind will blow.



***"You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf"*** (Kabat-Zinn 2004)

## The Seven Pillars of Mindfulness



**NON-JUDGING:** consists in taking the position of an impartial witness to your own experience. It requires that you become aware of the stream of judging and reacting to inner and outer experiences and step back from it. This habit of categorizing into good and bad or positive and negative locks us into mechanical reactions that we are not even aware of and that often have no objective basis at all. *Tip: observe over 10 minutes how much you are preoccupied with liking and disliking what you are experiencing.*

**PATIENCE:** it demonstrates that we understand and accept the fact that sometimes things unfold in their own time. Practicing mindfulness give us the chance to give time and space to our own unfolding. Why rushing to the next “better” moment when after all each one is your life in that moment.

**BEGINNER’s MIND:** practicing mindfulness means to take the chance to see everything as if it was for the first time and not allow our illusion of knowing prevent us from being present to our experiences. *Tip: next time you meet someone you know well try and see something new in this person.*

**TRUST:** developing a basic trust in yourself and your feelings is an integral part of meditation practice. Do not get caught up in the reputation and authority of your teachers. It is impossible to become like somebody else. Your only hope is to become more fully yourself.

**NON-STRIVING:** almost everything we do is for a purpose. Meditation not! Actually this attitude can be a real obstacle in meditation. Although meditation takes a lot of work and energy, ultimately it is about non-doing. It has no goal other than for you to be yourself. The irony is that you already are! Do not sit to get relaxed, enlighten or sleep better. Sit to learn, to carefully see what is happening and accept it.

**ACCEPTANCE:** often acceptance comes after we have gone through intense period of emotion turmoil and anger. Doing that uses up our energy in the struggle instead of using it for healing and change. You are much more likely to know what to do and have the inner conviction to act when your vision is not clouded by your mind’s self-serving judgments and desires or its fears and prejudices.

**LETTING GO:** when we pay attention to our inner experience, we discover that there are certain thoughts, feelings and situations that the mind seems to want to hold on to. If pleasant, we try and prolong our experience, if unpleasant, we try and get rid of them. In meditation, we try to intentionally put aside the tendency to elevate some aspects of our experience and reject others.

*As presented by Jon Kabat-Zinn in Full Catastrophe Living*



## **Mindfulness Web Resources**

### ***Frantic World***

A collection of information, resources and downloads.

N.B. this is a site that is a companion to the books: 'Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World' and 'Mindfulness for Health'.

<http://franticworld.com>

Free downloads

<http://franticworld.com/resources/free-meditations-from-mindfulness-for-health/>

<http://franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/>

### ***The Free Mindfulness Project***

*From their website:*

'The Free Mindfulness Project - Home to a growing collection of free-to-download mindfulness meditation exercises.

The aim of The Free Mindfulness Project is to provide easy and free access to mindfulness meditation exercises by inviting the wider mindfulness community to share their resources here. We now get around 20,000 visits each month and it is lovely to hear how people across the world are benefiting from practising mindfulness.'

<http://www.freemindfulness.org/home>

Mindfulness blog

<http://www.freemindfulness.org/blog>

### ***Free downloads***

<http://www.freemindfulness.org/download> NB - The Bodyscan used in week 2 can be downloaded for free using this link. It can be found in the Free Resources, under the Body Scan section and is the one called:

Body scan 13.3 14:36 Vidyamala Burch, Breathworks Download

### ***Palehouse Mindfulness***

The website of a free Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course.

This 8 week, online MBSR training course is 100% free and is modelled on the MBSR program founded by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

All reading, audio and video is provided on the site, and most of the material can be printed to create a paper manual to accompany the course..... Or, you just use the webpages!

<http://palousemindfulness.com/selfguidedMBSR.html>



## About Automatic Thoughts

Our thoughts are created by our mind, which is constantly helping us to interpret the world around us, describing what's happening, and trying to make sense of it by helping us interpret events, sights, sounds, smells, feelings. It's just what the human mind does.






Without even realising it, we are interpreting and giving our own meanings to everything happening around us. We might decide that something is pleasant or nasty, good or bad, dangerous or safe.



Because of our previous experiences, our upbringing, our culture, religious beliefs and family values, we may well make very different interpretations and evaluations of situations than someone else. These interpretations and meanings we give events and situations, result in physical and emotional feelings.

Something happens or we notice something, which triggers a thought. Particular types of thoughts tend to lead to particular emotions.

Thoughts	Emotion
I'm in danger and I won't be able to cope with it	Anxiety, Fear 
I'm being treated unfairly and I won't stand for it	Anger, Frustration 
Everything is hopeless – I'm totally worthless, no-one likes me, and nothing can change	Depression 

### Automatic thoughts...

- ❖ Can be words, an image, a memory, a physical sensation, an imagined sound, or based on 'intuition' – a sense of just 'knowing'
- ❖ Believable – we tend to automatically believe our thoughts, usually not stopping to question their validity. When another driver cuts me up, I might judge that he's a selfish thoughtless toad, but in fact, he might be taking his wife to hospital as she's about to give birth. Thoughts are not necessarily true, accurate or helpful. Often based on emotion (rather than facts), which drives our opinion.
- ❖ Are automatic. They just happen, popping into your head and you often won't even notice them.
- ❖ Our thoughts are ours – they can be quite specific to us, perhaps because of our present or past experience, knowledge, values and culture, or just for no good reason at all. Some thoughts are so out of keeping with all those things, and that can make them seem all the more distressing – because we add some meaning about why we had them (I must be a bad person!)
- ❖ Habitual and persistent – our thoughts seem to repeat over and over, and the more they repeat, the more believable they seem, then they set off a whole chain of new related thoughts that lead us to feel worse and worse. They can follow themes, for short periods, or very often, throughout years and decades.











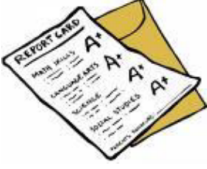
[www.getselfhelp.co.uk/thoughts.htm](http://www.getselfhelp.co.uk/thoughts.htm)

[www.get.gg](http://www.get.gg)

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## Unhelpful Thinking Habits

Over the years, we tend to get into unhelpful thinking habits such as those described below. We might favour some over others, and there might be some that seem far too familiar. Once you can identify your unhelpful thinking styles, you can start to notice them – they very often occur just before and during distressing situations. Once you can notice them, then that can help you to challenge or distance yourself from those thoughts, and see the situation in a different and more helpful way.

 <p><b>Mental Filter</b> When we notice only what the filter wants or allows us to notice, and we dismiss anything that doesn't 'fit'. Like looking through dark blinkers or 'gloomy specs', or only catching the negative stuff in our 'kitchen strainers' whilst anything more positive or realistic is dismissed</p>	 <p><b>Judgements</b> Making evaluations or judgements about events, ourselves, others, or the world, rather than describing what we actually see and have evidence for</p>
<p><b>Mind-Reading</b> Assuming we know what others are thinking (usually about us)</p> 	<p><b>Emotional Reasoning</b> I feel bad so it must be bad! I feel anxious, so I must be in danger</p> 
 <p><b>Prediction</b> Believing we know what's going to happen in the future</p>	 <p><b>Mountains and Molehills</b> Exaggerating the risk of danger, or the negatives. Minimising the odds of how things are most likely to turn out, or minimising positives</p>
<p><b>Compare and despair</b> Seeing only the good and positive aspects in others, and comparing ourselves negatively against them</p> 	<p><b>Catastrophising</b> Imagining and believing that the worst possible thing will happen</p> 
 <p><b>Critical self</b> Putting ourselves down, self-criticism, blaming ourselves for events or situations that are not (totally) our responsibility</p>	 <p><b>Black and white thinking</b> Believing that something or someone can be only good or bad, right or wrong, rather than anything in-between or 'shades of grey'</p>
<p><b>Shoulds and musts</b> Thinking or saying 'I should' (or shouldn't) and 'I must' puts pressure on ourselves, and sets up unrealistic expectations</p> 	<p><b>Memories</b> Current situations and events can trigger upsetting memories, leading us to believe that the danger is here and now, rather than in the past, causing us distress right now</p> 