

Mindful Living

Introduction to the course & Chapter 1: What is Mindfulness?



Call 0300 123 1503
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Introduction to the Mindful Living Course

Welcome to the Mindful Living course. This is an introductory programme designed to help you bring mindfulness into your daily life. It is suitable for both beginners and those who want to refresh their existing practice. The full course is available via our website, so you can do the training from the comfort of your own home.

Mindfulness is a way of connecting to your experience in the present moment. This is learnt by practicing a skill known as meditation. This course explores the ideas and concepts that underpin mindfulness practices and aims to help you get familiar with a range of brief meditations.

Although this is a bespoke course for the Wellbeing Service, much of the content is based upon existing approaches, such as 'mindfulness-based cognitive therapy', which have been used extensively in the NHS over the last decade.

Course content:

The course is made up of three elements:

- Four video tutorials
- Four accompanying booklets
- A selection of audio and written meditations

The course is presented over four chapters, each with its own video and booklet. In the first chapter we focus on understanding mindful awareness regarding the world around us and in how we go about our daily activities. In chapters two and three we explore meditation more deeply through breath and body-based practices. In the final chapter we consider what it means to respond mindfully to whatever arises, both in meditation and our wider lives.

- Chapter 1: What is Mindfulness?
- Chapter 2: The Breath
- Chapter 3: The Body and Its Mind
- Chapter 4: The 3Cs

Tips for the Mindful Living Course

As a self-directed course, you are encouraged to work through the material at your own pace. However, if you would like some guidance regarding this, our recommendation would be to attempt to undertake the course over about eight weeks. This allows you to spend a couple of weeks on each chapter. However, do feel free to modify this timescale to meet your own needs.

The videos and their corresponding booklets focus on different mindfulness themes. As the course progresses, the chapters build upon each other and the practices become more advanced, so it's best to work through them in the suggested order where possible.

Begin with Chapter 1 by reading through the booklet and watching the video tutorial. Over the following weeks explore the mindful awareness practices and consider starting a journal to record what you are noticing about your experience.

When you are ready, move on to the second chapter, again, reading through the booklet and watching the video. We introduce a range of mindfulness meditations in Chapter two that you can download from the website as audio files. The meditations will likely take a week or two for you to become familiar with them. Try to practice on most days, even if it's only for a few minutes. Again, it may help your learning to record in your journal what you are noticing from this process.

Repeat this process at your own pace with Chapters three and four. These chapters also have audio meditations to accompany them on the website.

When you have become familiar with the whole course, feel free to pick and choose which meditations you want to focus on during the following months. Aim to develop a meditation routine that meets your needs and is practical for your life (such as choosing shorter or longer practices depending on your schedule).

Is this the right course for me?

We hope you find this course to be helpful in your recovery journey. However, it's important to note that not everyone benefits from mindfulness. If for any reason you start to feel worse, please do feel free to stop the course. Different things work for different people, and if mindfulness isn't right for you then please speak to your clinician about other options.

We would also suggest that you don't try to learn mindfulness at a time when you have a lot of stress in your life. If this is the case for you, you might find it more helpful to access other types of support before trying mindfulness.

Chapter 1: What is Mindfulness?

In this first chapter we will explore what the term mindfulness means, and the potential benefits of bringing mindfulness based meditation into our daily lives. We'll explain some of the key attitudes of mindfulness practice and challenge mindfulness myths. At the end of this chapter we provide guidance on meditation practices that will help to get you started on your mindfulness journey.

Definition of mindfulness:

Mindfulness is the act of choosing to pay attention to the present moment.

The above definition reflects that mindfulness is, on a basic level, simply about 'connecting' to the present moment. It sounds easy, but perhaps there is more to this than we might at first think. To help us understand the definition, we will consider what we mean by the 'present moment' and how we might 'pay attention' to it.

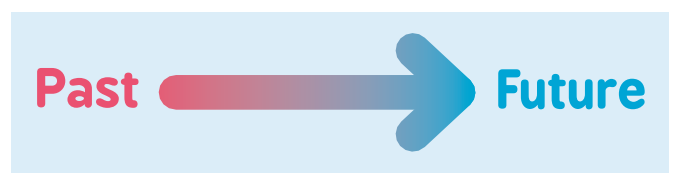
The Present Moment

**The present is RIGHT NOW: this very moment!
And this very moment!
And this very moment!
And so on...**

As you read this sentence and your attention moves along the text, your awareness is continuously refocusing on each new word. With each new word comes a new moment. The words you've already read are no longer in your 'present', they have instead become a record of the recent past. The un-read words in the rest of this chapter are in your future, unknowable to you right now.

Although it seems as though time stretches back behind us into the far distant past, and forwards into an infinite future, as humans our lives take place in a sequence of present moments. In that sense, we only have moments to live!

Physicists talk about the 'arrow of time' – a term that describes how time travels in only one direction: from the past to the future.



We could think of the present as being like a series of moments continuously popping into existence as the arrow of time moves forever towards the future and away from the past. What we think of as 'now' is the point at which the future is about to become the past, a set of fleeting instances that continuously offer themselves up to our conscious awareness.

Although we are always experiencing moments, we cannot pin them down. As soon as we notice them, they become our past; impossible to get back again. For example, if we think of these words as marking where you are in time, you may wonder if re-reading the last sentence would be a way to go back to that moment. Indeed if you do this, you may well recognise it as a similar experience and we could imagine it was like going back in time.

However, we would also know it was not the past; there would be many signs that it was different this time round. Although you might try to make the conditions exactly the same (that is, by reading the same words, sitting in the same seat, wearing the same clothes) it would still be different. Your mind would remember the words in a way it didn't the first time and your body would experience different sensations. You would be slightly older than the first time you read the sentence. There would be different sounds in your environment. In the wider world many different events would have taken place.

We cannot re-live the past; every moment is a new one. Yet sometimes repetitive experiences leave us thinking we've 'done this before' and perhaps feeling bored or dissatisfied. Whilst it may be true that we've performed a certain task many times before, have we ever done it in this THIS moment? Often if we pay attention to the present moment, we notice there are many different aspects to our experience and they don't stay the same for very long; everything is always shifting and changing. For example, you may have washed the dishes a 1000 times before, but your body sensations, thoughts and feelings will be different every time you do it.

If you find this hard to believe, take a moment right now to observe a part of your body on the level of physical sensations and see what happens. Sooner or later you will notice the sensations have changed; maybe they get more or less intense or they move around, or your mind starts to wander and you lose connection with them altogether. Each moment brings a subtly different experience of the sensations. In this way, our personal experience somewhat reflects the wider nature of reality; in that everything is made up of an endless succession of present moments arising and fading away.

Paying attention

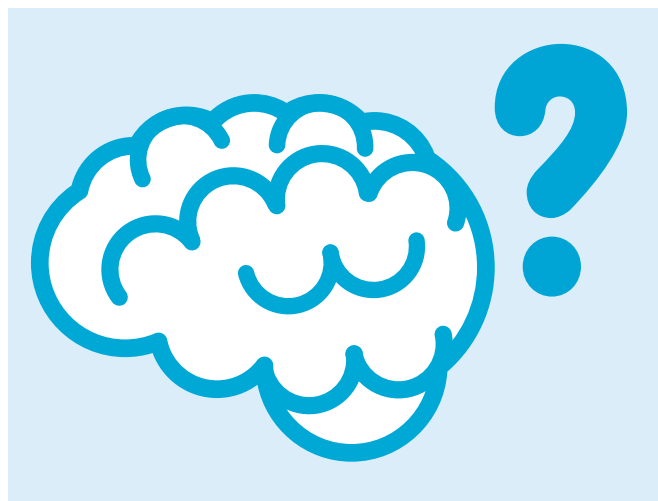
Mindfulness involves the intention to be aware in a very deliberate way; we choose to pay attention. The good news is you can do this already. For example, think about the first bite of a delicious meal, how natural it is to pay full attention to the flavour, texture and smells of your food. In this moment you are very much rooted in the 'here and now' and enjoying that awareness.

Yet of course, it is not quite that simple because before we know it our attention drifts away. It is as if we only taste the first few bites, and the rest of our eating is done whilst thinking about something completely different. Distracted by our minds, we forget to experience our senses as if the food no longer has any interest to us. So even with activities that have a great potential to be enjoyable, we might struggle to fully connect with them. It can leave us rather distracted or 'cut off' from the precious moments of our lives.

What stops us connecting to the present moment?

As with so many things, perhaps it is the case that our greatest strength is also our greatest weakness. Humans, as an exceptionally clever species on this planet, have benefited from the evolution of large brains that can think. We are able to remember past events and learn from them. Our ability to learn helps us to make predictions about the future, a trait which over the millennia has helped us become an incredibly resourceful and successful species. From an evolutionary perspective, it makes sense to recall the past and to plan for (and try to predict) the future.

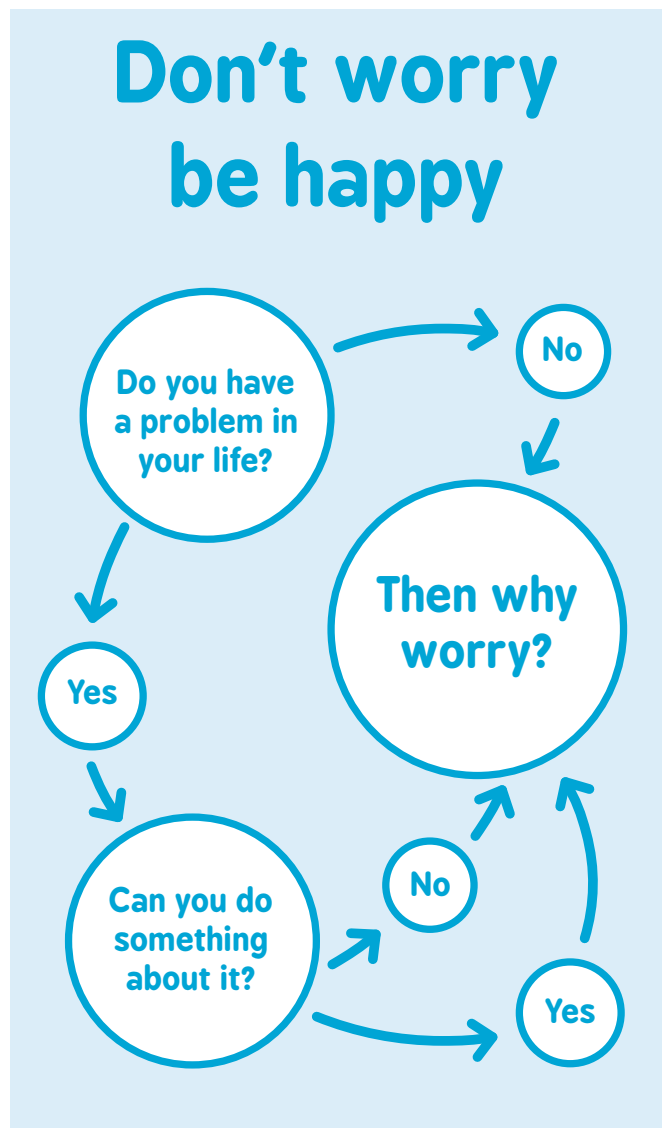
However, our thinking brain is so good at this that we often get completely 'swept up' in our thoughts. Not all problems have an immediate solution and if we let our brains overthink every issue that comes our way, we tend to expend a lot of energy worrying and obsessing about things we ultimately have little or no control over. This can become an exhausting mental strain and is likely to deplete our sense of coping. In this way, the very 'habits of the mind' designed to help us can actually trap us in a downward spiral of thoughts.



Meditation gives us the chance to have a different experience. Firstly we accept that not all problems need to be fixed immediately and that it may even be counterproductive to try to do so. We also recognise that we can experience mental relief even when problems persist by developing a new attitude to the situation. Often it is not so much the problem itself that causes us to suffer but our reaction to it; the weight we give to our thoughts may have more impact on how we cope than the actual event.



The following 'worry chart' is a light-hearted way to view this.



Mindfulness equips us with skills to help step back from the habits of the mind, such as worry and overthinking. Meditation approaches work on the basis that all types of thinking, (even rational problem solving) can be unhelpful at times. When we meditate we intentionally 'turn down' the volume of any and all thoughts that arise. We are not trying to replace unpleasant thoughts with positive ones, we are instead just noticing thoughts as 'mental events'.

To help us 'step back' from thinking in this way, we deliberately start to pay more attention to other parts of our experience such as our surroundings, sounds, tastes, the breath or sensations in the body. This gives us an alternative experience to thoughts, making us more aware of our actual present moments.

Often we find that, freed from the repeated wanderings of the mind, the present moment is quite bearable. Even in the midst of problems, we might notice pleasant experiences unfolding around us if we pay attention. With time, the practice of meditation makes us more familiar with our own minds and more able to respond wisely when thoughts have got the better of us. We will explore these ideas in more detail as we progress through this course.

Despite the rewards, meditation is not always easy to do. The mind does not willingly give up its dominance over us! As with all skills, the ability to observe and step back from our thoughts takes time to learn and requires considerable patience and commitment. Perhaps this is why we refer to meditation as a 'practice'; we need to do it over and over again.



Key Mindfulness Attitudes

The following attitudes are based upon thousands of years of wisdom passed down from generations of meditators. They are the core values from which all mindfulness approaches are based.

To begin with, we'll explore 'curiosity', 'non-judging' and 'non-striving' and build upon these with other values as the course continues. We encourage you to spend some time mulling them over, especially if any of them are new ideas. Be interested in where they take you!

Curiosity

Our first value is that of curiosity.

In order to connect to the present mindfully, we must on some level be curious about it. This is about recognising that each new moment is a new experience. If we are curious in an open minded way, we will likely have a richer experience as we will notice more. For example, think of a child experiencing a trip to the seaside for the first time; all the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and sensations they notice!

Sometimes as adults we think we've done it all before and we forget to pay attention and experience the fullness of the moment. As such, a good mindfulness challenge is to bring curiosity to what you notice, as if you were a child experiencing it for the first time.

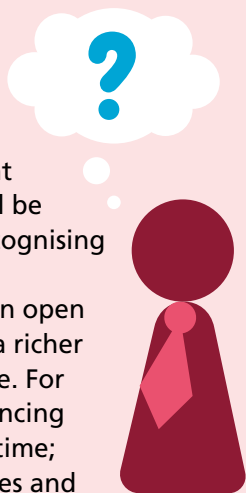
By being curious we are practicing an idea known as 'beginners mind' in which we let go of our preconceptions (i.e. what we 'think' we already know about the experience) and instead remain open to all possibilities, eager to observe what is actually unfolding for us in any given moment.

Non-judging (acceptance)

It is a 'natural' reaction to judge our experiences and to try to make them 'better'. As such, when we encounter something unpleasant, we tend to put energy into thinking about it – first comes the judgement, for example, "I don't like this" followed by our efforts to think of a solution.

This makes sense when there is something we can do to change it, but as we discussed earlier in this chapter, not all difficulty can be resolved. We can therefore get trapped in the thinking stage; expending increasing amounts of energy on thoughts that do not help, leaving us feeling dissatisfied, frustrated and stuck.

The antidote to this trap is to practice non-judging. This means noticing our experience for what it is and then as best we can, aiming to simply accept this regardless of whether it is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. This immediately takes much of the struggle out of the experience and may reduce the emotional distress that otherwise occurs.



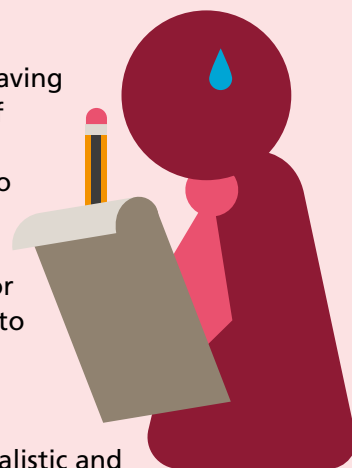
Non-striving

Striving is a way of behaving in which we put a lot of effort into our actions. Perhaps we are trying to achieve or obtain something, or we want to feel a certain way. For example, if we wanted to pass an exam we would put energy and effort into revising for this. So long as our goals are realistic and obtainable, some striving is quite helpful as it keeps us motivated and able to progress in life.

However, sometimes this gets out of balance and we spend all our time working and pushing for goals at the expense of our wellbeing. If you are prone to 'perfectionism' (that is wanting things to be a certain way) you may recognise this tendency to work too hard. This can leave us feeling worn out, taken advantage of or feeling like we never quite reach our expectations.

The quality of non-striving has a couple of meanings in meditation. The first relates to not striving to create any particular experience in your practice. So we don't need to try to feel relaxed or happy or any other feeling. In meditation we simply observe what is present, rather than try to dictate what our experience should be.

The second meaning is about the amount of 'effort' you put into your meditation practice. While meditation does require a certain commitment and level of concentration, it is not something we need to strive at and it needn't feel like 'hard work'. Meditation is not something that you can 'succeed' or 'fail' in. In fact, we encourage you to let go of any desire to 'get it right'. Instead, could you let your experience be just as it is?



Challenging Mindfulness Myths:

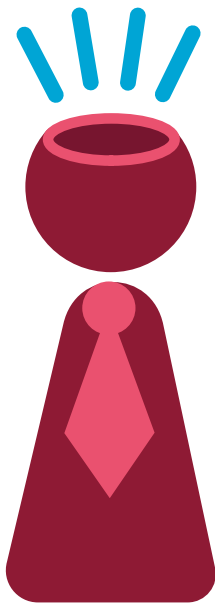
Now we've defined mindfulness and understood some of its core values, let's build on this by challenging common mindfulness myths. The following are all myths / ideas that can easily lead us down the wrong track if we mistake them for truths!

Myth 1: Mindfulness is about feeling 'blissed out' or 'relaxed'

We do not need to create any particular state of mind when we meditate. It's true that some meditations tend to leave us feeling relaxed, but this is not always the case and it is not a failure when it doesn't happen. The goal if there is one, is simply to be aware of the present moment without judging what we find within ourselves. Although it is of course okay to enjoy any feelings of relaxation that arise in your meditation, the challenge is to not get too attached to them. In mindfulness, all feelings, regardless of whether they are pleasant or unpleasant, are considered temporary in their nature and something to simply observe, rather than cling on to or try to push away.

Myth 2: Mindfulness is about having a 'blank mind'

The only way to achieve a blank mind would be to remove the brain!



Thoughts by their nature are constantly popping into awareness and we have little control of this. It is normal for minds to wander and to pull our attention in different directions. This happens regardless of how firmly we are committed to the

meditation, and even experienced meditators notice their minds providing background chatter. It is perfectly normal and okay to notice a busy mind during your meditations. Remember, we are not trying to stop thoughts from arising, just to be less distracted by them.

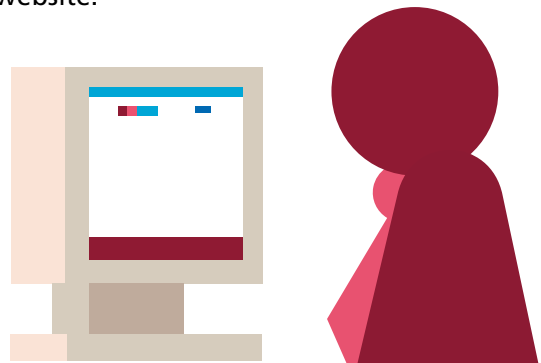
The 'Gift' of the present moment

To conclude this chapter, we list some potential benefits you might start to notice from your meditation practice in the coming weeks. The more you practice the meditations, the more likely you will be to recognise these experiences.

Mindful awareness helps us in the following ways:

- To notice and enjoy the present moment! By being aware of the little moments that make up our lives, we feel more connected to the richness of life. We will be more likely to notice our senses and to take pleasure from them, such as admiring a beautiful sunset or tasting delicious food.
- To step back from endless thinking. Although we may be aware of thoughts coming and going, they don't have to dominate our whole experience. In this way we get closer to how things really are. We get to experience the reality of the moment rather than being lost in our thoughts all the time.
- Meditation is a form of brain training. The more that we practice something, the stronger and more competent we get. Similarly, the more you practice meditation and mindfulness values, the stronger and more natural they will become for you.

In the next section we present three mindfulness practices designed to help you get started. We suggest you work through the practices in your own time, perhaps trying them out every day for the next week or so. Then when you are ready, move on to the next chapter. Further guidance can also be found in the accompanying video, accessible via our website.



Meditation Guidance

Humans have practiced different forms of meditation for thousands of years. Although the terms mindfulness and meditation tend to be used interchangeably, they are not quite the same thing. You could think of meditation as the tool we use to become mindful; it trains us to pay attention to the present moment. As such, people who want to be mindful tend to practice meditation regularly to help them with this.

There are many different types of meditation, but this course is concerned with the types of practice known as mindfulness meditation. Some of the meditations have been adapted from ancient Buddhist traditions. However, it's important to note that meditating does not need to be done in a religious way. You can learn meditation if you follow other faiths or have no religious beliefs at all. As such, we will not be providing any spiritual teaching in this course.

The following practices are designed to help you connect to your senses in the present moment. We hope they will encourage you to adopt a sense of 'beginner's mind' to the moments of your life, recognising that even if you are undertaking a task that seems very familiar, you have never done it in **this** moment. In this way, we get to experience mindfulness without having to do anything that is not already part of our daily lives.

Meditation is a skill that takes time to learn so please do remember to be patient with yourself. Approach the practices as 'experiments' rather than something you can succeed or fail in. Remember, meditation is not about striving for relaxation or a blank mind. The key note attitude is simply to be curious and friendly towards your experience regardless of what you notice.

Suggestions for Home Practice

We recommend you become familiar with the mindfulness practices for this chapter before moving on to the next one. Using the following guidance, see if you can practice some form of mindfulness every day over the coming week. You might also find it helpful to keep a journal in which to write down your meditation experiences and to reflect on what you are learning.

Mindful Eating

This practice involves bringing greater awareness to the act of eating. We can often rush our food or eat it whilst working, watching television or other media. Deliberately eating in a more mindful way can be a rewarding experience. Remember to do it as slowly as you can manage, pausing between mouthfuls and really paying attention to what is unfolding.

Sit down to eat, and make sure you are comfortable and in calm surroundings.

Spend a moment observing what your food looks like on your plate.

Notice any smells arising from your dish.

How does your body respond to the thought of eating? For example, perhaps there is increased saliva in the mouth or sensations arising in the stomach.

Notice the impulse to eat the food and at what point your arms and hands move; how do you know when this is going to happen? Feel the sensations in your arm muscles as you lift the food up to your mouth.

As your mouth opens, perhaps be curious about what this feels like; in the lips, the jaw and the cheeks.

Slowly start to eat your food and pay particular attention to taste and texture. Do you have any sense of where in your mouth, and on your tongue, you can notice these qualities?

What happens inside your mouth as you chew? Are you aware of how the tongue and jaw are moving? Or do you notice physical sensations; perhaps in the gums, teeth or palate?

When you are ready to swallow, notice the movement and sensations that come with this.

Continue the practice at your own pace and stay curious as you mindfully consume your meal. How does being mindful affect your awareness and enjoyment of eating?

Mindfulness of Routine Activities

Most of us are repeatedly undertaking routine tasks, either at home or at work. These tasks are a great way to develop our mindfulness skills as we do them so often. The task you choose is up to you. Ideas include; brushing your teeth, combing your hair, showering, making a cup of tea or taking washing out of the machine etc.

Choose an activity to do mindfully.

Become aware of your posture and the nature of the movement required to undertake the task. Be curious about any physical sensations arising in the body.

Pay attention to your senses and notice any smells, sights, tastes or sounds that accompany your activity.

You may find it helpful to undertake your task more carefully and slowly than normal. Bring full awareness to everything you are doing moment by moment.

As you apply this level of mindful awareness, it is possible that this will change your experience of the task: can you be curious about this?

At times, thoughts may arise and distract your concentration. When this happens, try to remember this is normal and to be expected. When you are ready, just return your awareness back to the task.

As you come to the end of your activity, notice if there is a tendency to want to rush on to the next thing. If so, see if you can let the activity's conclusion be as mindful as the earlier moments. You might like to congratulate yourself on what you have achieved. Do you notice any sense of satisfaction from this?



Sky Meditation

This practice involves the noble state of 'non-doing' in which we deliberately do very little other than let our eyes drink in what they will. It should feel effortless, as if we were completely at liberty to simply gaze up at the sky. We probably all did this at some point in our childhoods and it can be lovely to reconnect to this experience again as adults. This type of practice is a good antidote to the desire to be constantly busy or striving and can bring greater balance to our lives. Simply allow yourself to relax into the practice with the knowledge that it is most likely doing you some good.

Sit or lay comfortably so you can see some sky. Making sure the sun is not in your eyes, look and study what you see.

It might be helpful to focus on just one small part of the sky, perhaps allow the eyes to be fairly still rather than roving across the whole expanse. (This is not an exercise in trying to see everything it is possible to see; it is more about the experience of observing).

Notice what comes into your field of vision in terms of colours, shapes, movement, brightness or shadow. Try not to analyse what you see, there is no need to add a commentary. Let the act of looking be your focus.

Depending on your surroundings, your vision might include the tops of trees or buildings. Just let their colours and shapes become part of what the eyes are drinking in.

If the sky is clear, perhaps note the colour of the sky. Is it uniform or varied, does it change or stay the same as you observe?

If clouds are present, allow yourself to really see them in this moment. We don't typically take much notice of this common weather phenomenon, yet each cloud is a unique entity constantly evolving as it moves across the sky.

So, see if you can bring a sense of 'beginners mind' to viewing clouds, remember you have never seen them as they are in this moment:

- Notice colours, textures, shapes and how these qualities tend to shift and change as you observe them

- Become aware of how they move. Are they rushing across the sky or floating more slowly?
- Do they merge together at times?
- Are they few in number or crowding the sky?
- Even if the sky is completely covered in cloud without any breaks, there may be variations in the shading, layering, movement or distance

Simply allow the eyes to see what they will as best you can without the need to judge the experience.

As you continue your observation of the sky, do any birds, insects or aeroplanes cross your line of vision?

Do you get any sense of the wider atmosphere or even the endlessness of space beyond the sky?

Continue the practice for as long as you wish.

Finally: Some Top Tips

Meditation is not about trying to achieve any particular state of mind; it's not something you can succeed or fail in!

It's perfectly normal for minds to wander during the practice. If you notice this, instead of getting frustrated, remember to congratulate yourself for noticing it has happened. It is a moment of great awareness to see the mind's thought patterns, something we don't often notice in the rush of daily life. If your mind wanders off a 1,000 times, simply bring it back a 1,000 times with patience and kindness towards yourself.

Try not to judge your experience too much. We often strive to make our experience as perfect as possible, however, this tendency can leave us feeling as if we've failed when we don't achieve perfection. Aim for 'good enough' and as best you can, allow any difficulty that arises to just be part of your practice.

It may seem strange, but not expecting your meditation to be perfect can make it much easier to do.



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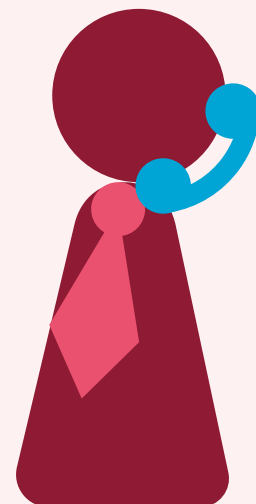
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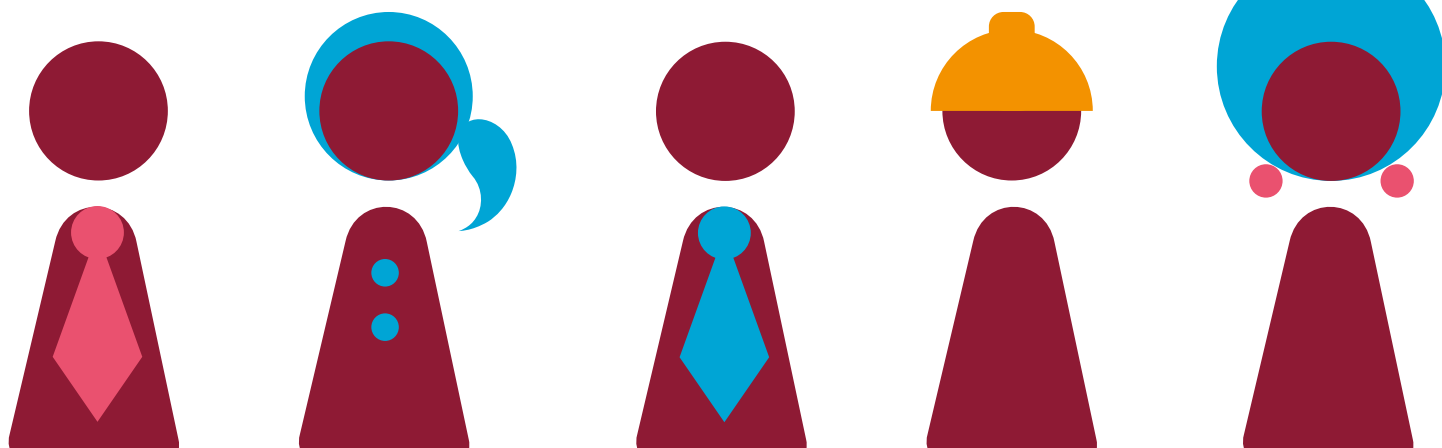


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Wellbeing Norfolk and Waveney and Wellbeing Suffolk are partnerships of NHS and voluntary organisations working together to offer a wide range of support for low mood, anxiety and depression.

• Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust • VoiceAbility • Suffolk Young People's Health Project (4YP) • Relate • Shaw Trust
• Suffolk Family Carers • MTCIC • Norfolk and Waveney Mind

We work together to deliver a range of support interventions for people of all ages with low mood, anxiety and depression. For more information about who we are see: www.wellbeingnands.co.uk/about

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