

Mindfulness Self Help Series: Mindfulness of Emotions



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Mindfulness is the practice of paying deliberate attention to the present moment. This can help us be more 'aware' of our moments, less distracted by our minds and more accepting of our experience.

This leaflet is designed to provide some guidance on the mindful observation of feelings and the physical sensations and thoughts that accompany them, which collectively we will call emotions.

It is not uncommon to find certain emotions challenging to manage. Unpleasant thoughts, images and body sensations can leave us feeling numb, overwhelmed or reacting in ways we sometimes later regret. Mindfulness can help with this, not by making our feelings 'different' or 'better', but by helping us to bring a non-judging, mindful awareness to our experience. By developing a compassionate commitment to this, we learn to simply observe and accept whatever is present, rather than struggling against it. Whilst this does not take away difficult feelings (as they are a natural part of everyone's experience) it can help us feel more in control of our responses to what we encounter.

Is this approach right for me?

It's important to note that the 'mindfulness of emotions' is **not** primarily a way of relieving distress. If you are experiencing a high degree of difficulty or upheaval at the moment, we would recommend seeking other types of support to help you during this time. Similarly, if you have unresolved feelings about past events, or currently suffer from depression or anxiety, it will probably be more helpful to seek treatment with a mental health professional before trying meditation.

This is because meditation makes us **more** aware of our emotional experience, including any unpleasant feelings that are present. The practice includes deliberately turning towards the physical sensations of emotions as they arise, even the ones we might normally try to distract ourselves from. As such, it's recommended that you only try this type of approach if you are feeling fairly settled and well supported in your life.

Please also note that the following guidance is designed for those who already have some basic meditation skills: i.e. are used to working with thoughts and experienced in 'being with' the sensations of the body. If you are not at this stage yet, then you might find it more helpful to first check out our other mindfulness resources, such as the introduction to mindfulness workshops and other courses available.

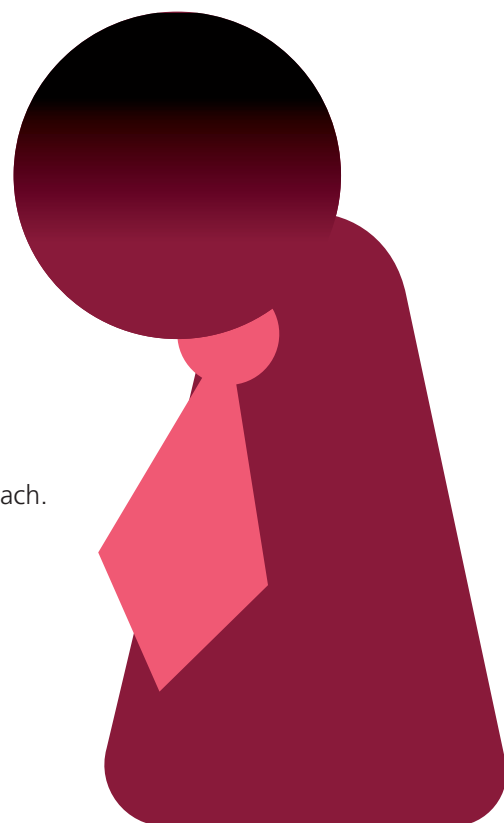
Working with Emotions

This leaflet will focus upon two common tendencies when it comes to emotions:

The first is not noticing our feelings, and the second is feeling them too much!

We will see how these tendencies are connected, and how mindfulness gives us a way of finding a 'middle ground' in which we can experience our emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them.

We will also describe some helpful mindfulness concepts to consider when working with emotions and provide meditation guidance regarding this approach. At the end of the leaflet you can find information regarding our range of mindfulness resources.



Mindfulness & Noticing

Do you ever feel as though you are 'cut off' from your feelings? Or perhaps you struggle to name or describe what you are feeling? If so, you might sometimes feel confused by the actions of others, or even yourself at times. It may be hard to make intuitive decisions, to know what you want, or what you don't want. An unwillingness to notice our feelings can also make us more prone to over-busyness as may use 'external' activity to distract us from our 'internal' experience.

Without a sense of what we are feeling we cannot easily listen to what is truly in our hearts. It can leave us feeling a bit hollow as if we are missing an important part of our experience. Yet even when we are 'out of the habit' of listening to our feelings, they are still there on some level. For example, a common pattern is to get an inkling of a feeling, but rather than pay attention to what is present, to instead dismiss it as unimportant. The feeling was there, but we pushed it away. This pattern can arise when we find it hard to admit to certain feelings or feel unsure of how to cope with them.

Although we might try to ignore certain feelings, perhaps in the hope that they will go away, this is not always an effective strategy. Our feelings, especially vulnerable or unpleasant ones, may need some support and attention. When we ignore or try to dismiss them, although this seems as though it works in the short term; we are just bottling them up for later, and they usually find a way out in the end.

Do you recognise any elements of the following pattern?

Unsure of how to respond to unpleasant feeling we try to 'sweep them under the carpet' of our awareness.



However, this doesn't get rid of them, instead they are left 'bubbling under the surface' adding to a background sense of stress.



Certain triggers threaten to bring all the feelings back up to the surface of our awareness again.



Not sure of what else to do, we try harder to push them back down again, even as this becomes less possible. We start to experience a state of chronic stress and dissatisfaction.



Eventually something (that is perhaps quite a small matter) pushes us over the edge, and suddenly everything comes bursting out. This can feel unpredictable and scary, and the intensity of our reactions can leave us guiltily regretting our behaviour in the heat of the moment.

The mindful approach is the opposite of this pattern: in that we are attempting to bring a sense of curiosity towards our feelings and emotions as they arise. Instead of suppressing them we try to attend to them in the present moment; so, they don't get the chance to build up over time and become unmanageable. This is not about 'fixing' or making our feelings better; it is more about learning to 'hold' whatever is present in our awareness without judgement. We are learning to 'allow' and 'value' feelings, even the unpleasant ones. To this end, we can deliberately make time in our regular meditation (and wider lives) to practice compassionately approaching the full range of our emotions, trusting that it is enough to just 'be with' and acknowledge whatever comes along.

How do we notice feelings mindfully?

All mindfulness practices have a fundamental aim of present moment awareness. So, as we start to explore the mindful approach to emotions, it is important to remember this context. In this way, mindfulness is different to 'thinking about' or 'analysing' our feelings. Instead, our first step is to be curious about them on the level of physical sensations in the body.

So, when we become aware of emotion, we aim to observe this through the unfolding sensations that accompany this. We pay attention to where feelings arise in the body and what happens to them as we continue to observe. In so doing, we are staying with the direct experience of the emotion within the body. This allows us to step back from the mind's interpretation of the feeling, giving us space to be with whatever is present.

Sometimes it feels helpful to make a mental note of any sensations, such as "there is a feeling of warmth in my tummy" or "noticing tingling in my arms". Or we might also have a sense of the emotion that is accompanying these sensations and want to name this too, e.g. "noticing frustration as a tension in my hands". When we make these kinds of mental notes, we try to name the experience of the body rather than the mind's interpretation of this. As best we can, we resist being drawn into thinking about or analysing our experience too much, as this takes us away from the direct moment. When we practice the mindfulness of emotions, we are developing the capacity to be gently curious about our felt experience in the body, aiming to 'stay with' sensations rather than make effortful interpretations or judgements about them. So, there is no need to make sense of everything you notice; in fact it might even be helpful to embrace a sense of 'not-knowing' at times.

One of our mindfulness course participants, Jenny, shared her experience using mindfulness with her emotions.

"I've used meditation to help me to deal with emotions that I have difficulty experiencing. For example, if I have been feeling frustrated or angry, taking the time to meditate and sit with that feeling, rather than using the meditation to make it go away, has helped me to take note of how these emotions make me feel. When an emotion crops up, I try not to push it down, and instead, try and sit with the feeling, lean into it and not judge it."

Learning to hold our feelings lightly

Sometimes we experience feelings that are very intense or seem out of control. We might find ourselves overwhelmed by the experience, feeling helpless to escape our distress, as if we feel too much. Mindfulness can help with such strong emotions by teaching us how to 'hold' them more lightly. This is not about suppressing or denying our feelings; rather, it is a way of observing and validating them without getting lost in the experience. This helps us to 'be with' our feelings whilst also holding on to a wider sense of our self, understanding that we are more than just this immediate experience.

Mindfulness does this by helping us to 'step back' from over-identifying with emotions. Even a strong feeling is viewed as part of our overall experience in the moment, rather than the entirety of it. We observe the feeling but with an intention to also be mindful of the rest of our experience. For example, perhaps we have an unwelcome emotion but as we meditate, we notice that other parts of our experience are not so difficult: maybe we can hear the birds singing outside or notice a sense of warmth in our hands. In any given moment there is always a range of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral experiences to observe. It can be grounding to remember we can have more than one experience at the same time.

We sometimes call this perspective the 'silent observer'. It is the part of our self that can remain calmly curious about any experience that arises. So, when we notice an unwelcome feeling, instead of pushing against it, we can try to just 'let it be'. This is a way of practicing the mindfulness attitudes of non-judging and acceptance. Acceptance helps to reduce the sense of inner struggle that tends to arise when we are experiencing something we've judged as unpleasant. Letting go of labelling our feelings as 'bad' or 'intolerable' helps us connect to them with less aversion and fear.

One way of doing this, is to try to greet everything that arises with the same attitude of gentle curiosity. As such, we might even seek out unpleasant sensations, following them in the body, noticing if and how they change, and what our reactions are to this process. This is a chance to practice accepting whatever comes your way, without needing to immediately fix or change it. We'll explore later why this is important in terms of developing the capacity to 'respond rather than react'. However, there is also another benefit: it is empowering to face that which we have previously fled from. Often, when we finally shine the spotlight of mindfulness on these types of experiences, we find they are not so bad as we feared. In this way, we can take some of the power out of them; and with practice, we might find we are more confident in our ability to cope.

Impermanence

It is often helpful to remember, especially in the midst of strong feelings, that they will ALWAYS pass. Sometimes we treat feelings as if they were a permanent fixture, but in reality, they are always transitory in nature. In mindfulness this concept is known as impermanence. By recognising impermanence in our practice, we might find we can more easily turn towards difficult feelings as we know they will end at some point. Instead of viewing them as something solid to resist, we see how feelings and sensations are part of a fluid and ever-changing process in the body. The only thing we know for certain is that nothing stays the same forever.

Observing rather than over-identifying

From the point of view of mindfulness, 'feelings' (regardless of whether they are pleasant or not) are part of our experience but not something to define ourselves by. Although the thoughts and sensations of emotion can feel personal, they are just part of an evolved reaction that is common to everyone who has ever lived. Although we might choose to make our own interpretations of a feeling, it is never unique to any one person. As such, we really don't need to judge ourselves for such biological processes, and it's important to remember there is no right or wrong way to be feeling in any moment.

In meditation we try not to 'over-identify' with our feelings. The language that we use to define our experience can help or hinder us in this regard. So, instead of saying to yourself "I am angry" or "I am feeling sad", which implies you are the emotion; you could try phrasing it like, "I am aware of angry sensations" or "I'm noticing a feeling of sadness". This phrasing helps us to acknowledge the feeling as it arises, but from the stance of an observer. This helps us to remember the emotion is a temporary and changeable phenomenon.

Similarly, you are not a 'sad person' if you experience sadness, nor an 'anxious person' because you experience anxiety. Although it might be helpful to label such feelings at times, remember not to also label yourself in the process! All emotions are universal, experienced by everyone to some degree. So, if you find yourself over-identifying with a particular feeling, it might help to imagine your body as a vessel or container for these passing sensations, letting them flow through you as they will, but not needing to 'own' them in a permanent way.

How thoughts affect emotions

As we have mentioned already, working with emotions involves holding body sensations in awareness. However, it's not quite that simple, as our emotions are a combination of body sensations and the thoughts that accompany them. Thoughts without feelings don't really impact us much, and feelings without thoughts to fuel them quickly ebb away. It is the combination of the two that can leave us with intense emotions.

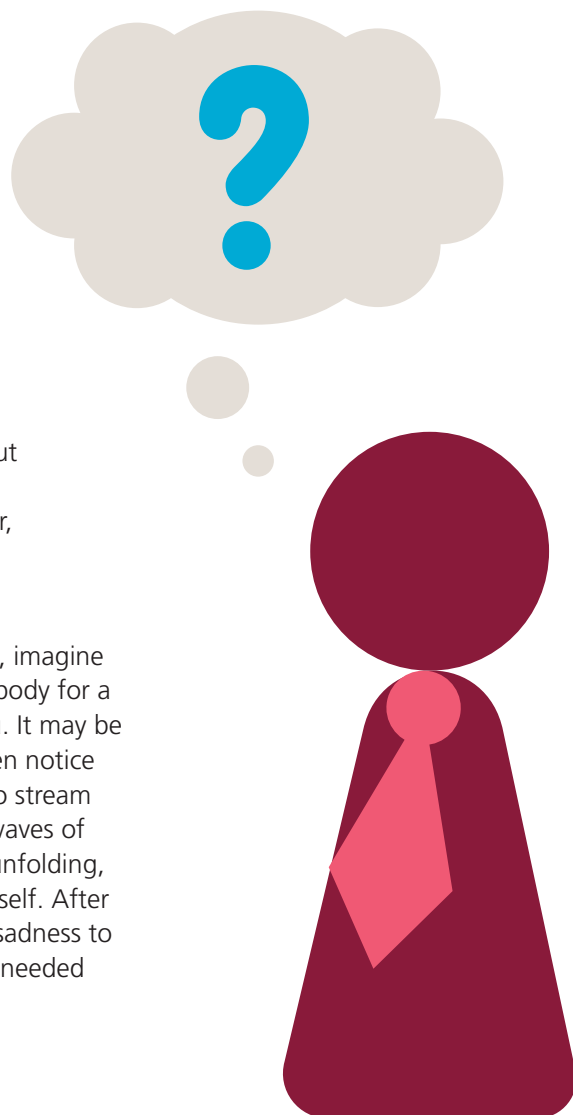
The nature of our thoughts in these moments can be the difference between a sense of 'coping' or 'not coping' with emotions. If, for example, we notice sensations that we don't like, and this leads to negative thoughts and judgements about the experience, it is likely to feel worse. Whilst it is normal to have difficult thoughts when we are feeling upset or distressed; in meditation we work on the basis that the nature of our thoughts and how much we believe them, will impact on the amount of suffering we experience. You can read more about mindfulness and 'thinking' in our 'Working with Thoughts' leaflet which you can find on our website.

We start by recognising that **thoughts are not facts**, even the ones that tell us otherwise. In addition to this, certain types of thoughts are almost guaranteed to increase our sense of distress. We can think of these as 'hot thoughts' as they tend to come with a stab of the emotion, examples include: "I can't cope any longer" or "I'm losing my mind!" or "I hate X". Hot thoughts are generally a product of high stress levels and reflect the heat of the moment rather than the full truth of the situation. We need to be particularly mindful of hot thoughts during meditation, as they can easily fuel the fire of our suffering. If you notice hot thoughts arising in your meditation practice, see if you can let them go in the same way you would with other types of thinking. You might find it helpful to name them as hot thoughts and to remember that regardless of their content, you can still choose how to respond to them.

If you meditate regularly, you are probably used to the concept of 'letting go' of thoughts. However, it can be more subtle when we work with our emotions. This is because we are working on improving our self-awareness, and this is a process that may require a degree of personal reflection at times. So, although our primary focus is upon our direct 'felt' experience, we might occasionally also choose to stay with a pertinent thought or image that arises. This is about connecting to our inner wisdom, rather than getting into an internal dialogue or argument with the mind.

It may be helpful to have a sense of how to distinguish moments of wisdom from hot thoughts or the background chatter of the mind. For example, does the thought or image make you feel distressed, tense, shut off or resistant towards your experience? If so, then regardless of what your mind tells you, this is not a wise or helpful line of thought. However, if your mind offers an insight that fosters a sense of allowing, softening, compassion etc, then perhaps it is worth listening to?

Such 'mindful wisdom' may not always be what we expect. For example, imagine that you are mid-meditation, and having followed the sensations in the body for a while, you become aware of your mind saying the word 'sadness' to you. It may be that instead of dismissing this, you chose to stay with it. Perhaps you then notice your jaw softening, your shoulders shaking a little and tears beginning to stream down from your eyes. You notice this comes with a sense of release as waves of sadness flow freely through your body. You simply observe this process unfolding, unsure of what it is about but with a deep sense of compassion for yourself. After a while, you notice the feeling fading away. By allowing the thought of sadness to linger, you helped your body to connect to and express an emotion that needed some attention.



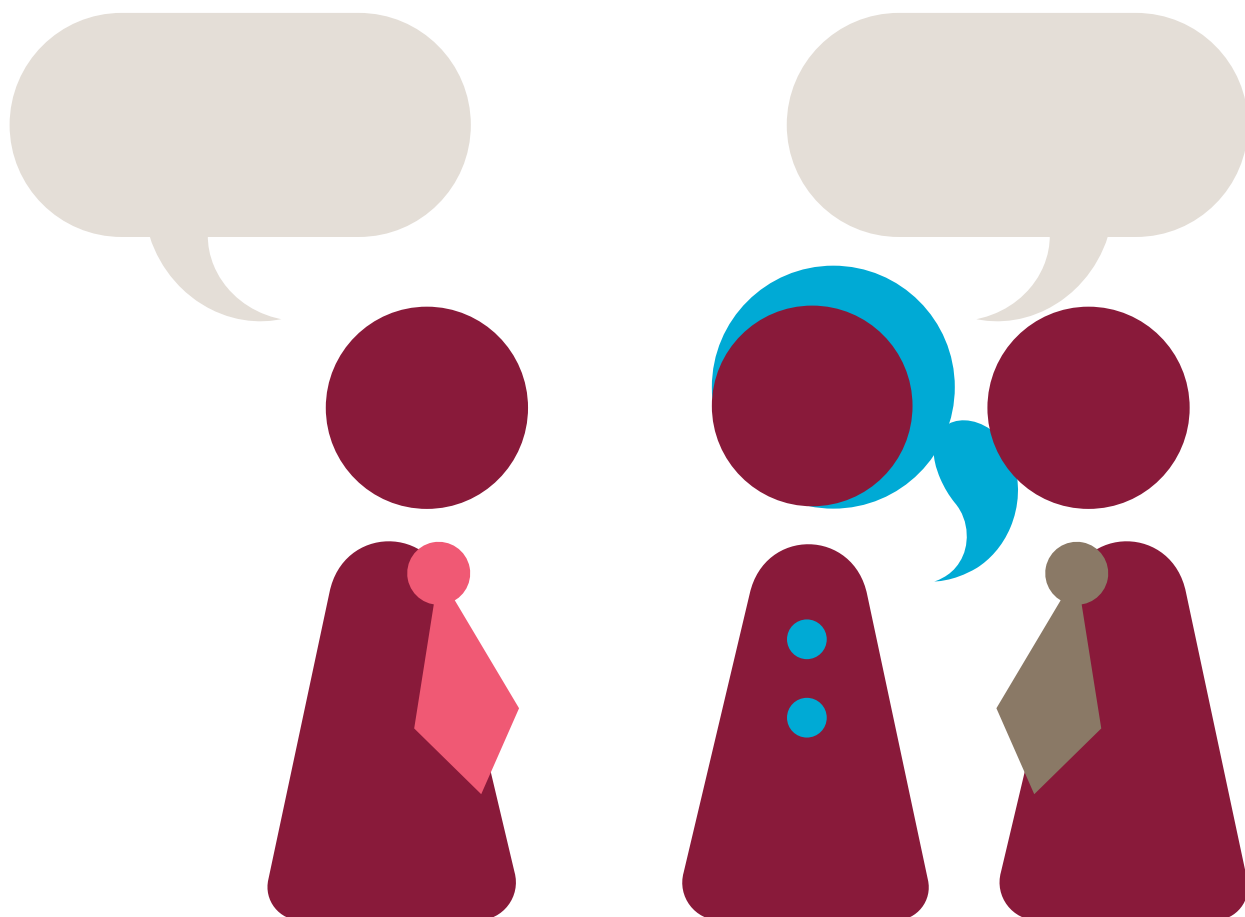
Choosing to respond (mindfully) rather than react (mindlessly)

When we meditate, we are in a sense creating some space from which to observe our experience. From this space we can notice not only what we are feeling but also how we are reacting to it. This type of insight can be very helpful if we are prone to impulsivity. Sometimes in our desperation not to feel discomfort we react to events in a knee-jerk manner, making unwise decisions that have negative impacts. Meditation is about learning to observe our discomfort without the need to react so quickly.

As such, intentionally 'sitting with' difficulty (rather than trying to immediately fix it) can be immensely helpful. Although it may seem counter-intuitive at first, 'holding' difficulty in awareness does not add to our suffering, as we are just attending to what is there anyway. The insight we gain from this practice is a better awareness of our habitual reactions (as we observe our thoughts and impulses). As we get familiar with our patterns, we might also develop a greater sense of how we would like to respond, and perhaps an increasing ability to choose to do so.

Let's hear from Jenny again:

"I've found the phrase 'respond, not react' helps me to be mindful about how I am feeling and to take some breathing space to observe the emotion and respond in a more measured way. Some days I am better at this than others!"



Meditation Guidance: Working with emotions as they arise

We provide some guidance on how to respond mindfully to emotions when they arise in meditation. As we said earlier in this leaflet, this guidance is designed for those who are already experienced with the practice of mindfulness meditation.

When you notice emotion in your meditation, see if you can locate this as a sensation or set of sensations in the body. Being curious about what is arising, changing, moving around or falling away. Noticing and naming sensations (i.e. hot, cold, warmth, tingling, tightness, a colour, a texture?)

Taking the stance of a 'curious observer', aiming to hold whatever is unfolding 'lightly' in your awareness. Remembering that all experience is temporary; we are just choosing to observe what is present in this moment. So, there is no need to judge your experience, or to compare it with what you have felt in the past, or to make predictions about how it will feel in the future.

If there are difficult sensations that feel intense, it may be helpful to observe for just a few seconds at a time to start with – remember you can absolutely choose where to rest your awareness (or when to end the practice) – so try to stay with what feels manageable for you. Try taking a couple of deliberate, slow, breaths in and out of the whole body. Having a sense of letting go on the outbreath: shoulders dropping, jaw softening, smoothing out the forehead. Letting go of resistance, inviting a sense of allowing and acceptance.

It might be helpful to have a sanctuary in the body (such as the breath in your belly, or your feet on the floor) that you can periodically return your awareness to. Remember to keep coming back to this area whenever you need to and to keep your observations rooted in your physical experience, rather than any accompanying thoughts. This is particularly important with the types of thoughts that tend to fuel difficulty.

Remember to stay compassionate and non-judging towards yourself as you explore your experience, perhaps reminding yourself of the courage this takes. The willingness to accept our physical and emotional experience can over time make us more confident in our body's ability to contain even strong feelings. We might come to view our physical selves as stable, solid and 'big enough' to hold the temporary sensations of the present moment. When you have finished exploring emotions, gently bring the practice to a close.

Find out More

This leaflet is a very brief introduction to a big topic. In terms of mindfulness, working skilfully with emotions is considered a lifetime's work and not something anyone can master overnight. It is also important not to expect this to be an easy process, nor to expect too much of yourself. Just take it one step at a time and try to remain open and curious about what you notice.


If you want to learn more, why not try one of our courses? A good starting place for beginners is the online **Introduction to Mindfulness** webinar. Or if you would like to go a little deeper into meditation, try our online **Mindful Living** course. In addition to this, various guided meditations and mindfulness self-help leaflets are available to download from our website. If you would like more information regarding mindfulness books and apps, please see our Mindfulness Resources leaflet (also available via our website).


We also have a meditation called the Soothing Space which focuses on viewing the body as a 'container' for feelings and letting go of the types of negative thoughts that can fuel difficulty. If you feel this would be helpful, please feel free to download it from the website.


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Email PALS@nsft.nhs.uk or call PALS Freephone **0800 279 7257**



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 • 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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