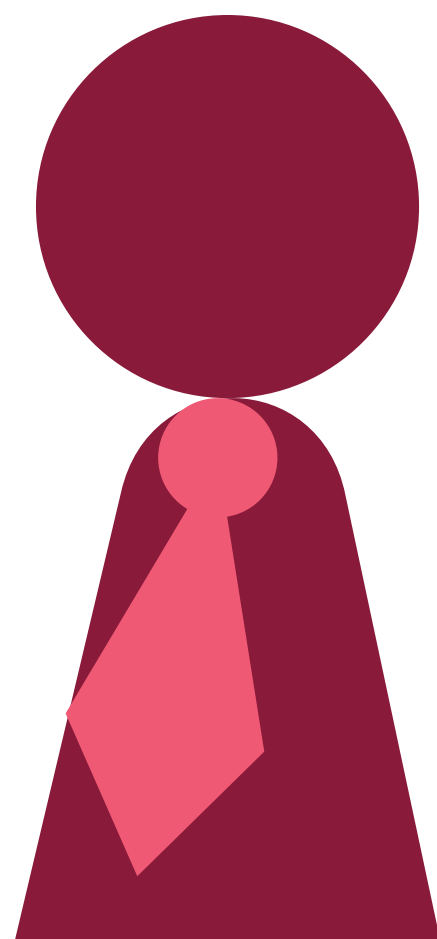




Mindfulness Self-Help Series: 3 Steps to Working with Thoughts

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for anxiety and depression

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 a guide to 'working with' our thoughts using mindfulness ideas and practices. It is designed to help those starting out with mindfulness, especially anyone who might be wondering how to begin to 'tame' a busy mind. Mindfulness is not about trying to banish or suppress our thoughts; rather it is a way of relating differently to them. We will describe three steps to help get you started with this below.

1. Understand the Mindful Approach to Thoughts

Until you stop to observe yourself in meditation you may never realise just what a busy mind you have. This is common to everyone; all minds are wired up to think, think, and think some more! Our thoughts really can seem endless and even when we deliberately try not to think, it typically isn't long before thoughts come along. Have a go for yourself: just sit without a task for a few moments and see how long it takes for your mind to generate a thought or image!

Much of the time in life we are not even aware that we are thinking; thoughts just arise continuously, like the background chatter of our lives, and at times we can get rather lost in thinking. We could imagine this process as like riding on a train. We have an initial thought, perhaps something quite benign like, "I must get more fuel on the way home" and without realising it we have boarded the 'thought train'. Then along comes the second thought "oh what if I don't have enough time to stop off" which leads to another thought "I'm always too busy!" and another "what is wrong with my life?" and so on. Like a train speeding up, the thoughts just keep coming at us, seemingly beyond our control. Before we know it, we have travelled far from where we first boarded. Sometimes, this just results in us being somewhat distracted in our lives. However, if we are at all prone to negative or anxious thinking, we might also find ourselves getting drawn into spirals of despair, obsession or worry, unsure of how to break free.

Yet, it may surprise you to know that meditation is **not** about trying to have a blank mind. As any person who attempts meditation will quickly discover, it is impossible to simply 'turn off' the mental chatter of the mind. So rather than trying to stamp out thoughts when we meditate, we instead accept their presence but aim to relate differently to them. As such, the mindfulness approach is to notice when thoughts arise, but to choose not to follow them (i.e. not to get caught up in their content).

Often, when we are absorbed by our thinking, it is about the **future** (planning, worrying, looking forward to something, fantasising, predicting etc) or the **past** (reminiscing, remembering, regretting etc). Although there is nothing wrong with this in day-to-day life, when we practice meditation our goal is to keep our attention very much on the **present** (i.e. what we are experiencing right now).

Yet as you start to become more aware of the present moment in your meditation, you will also likely become more aware of how many thoughts you are having, and how easy it is to get distracted by them. Although this can feel frustrating, it is important to recognise this is the first step to awareness, and ultimately greater control of your mind.

Meditation is about noticing thoughts as they arise, so we don't have to board the 'thought train'. Or if we have already boarded it (as often happens), meditation helps us to step off onto the platform with awareness. A useful attitude for this process, is to see our thoughts as simply 'mental events of the mind' rather than truths that we need to react to. So, regardless of what the content of the thought is, we just lightly note its presence, and then return our full focus to the present moment. With this approach, we don't need to argue or fight with our thoughts, nor try to turn them into 'positive' ones. We simply let them be.

This may seem a new and even counter-intuitive concept: but it can also be a great relief. To recognise how much of what goes on in our minds is not that important, and that we can let it go, even if just for a moment or two. Although our minds like to convince us otherwise, thoughts are not facts and not always helpful; especially those that leave us fretting about a future we cannot control or dwelling on a past we cannot change. Sometimes we can spend long periods feeling low, worried or upset simply due to believing all the thoughts that came our way. Yet often the things that bother us, and seem so important when we are caught up in the moment, are completely forgotten by the next day.

These kinds of insights help us to recognise that we are more than our thoughts: that although we have a thinking mind, we also have the capacity to observe it in action, rather than get caught up in it. We sometimes call this ability the 'silent observer'. It is the part that can quietly watch rather than react to our mental chatter. In this way, we start to view the mind as a tool we can use, but not the entirety of who we are.

This takes a lot of practice and it is true that working with thoughts can be challenging and frustrating. It might help to think of this process as being a form of 'brain training'; like lifting weights to make our muscles stronger. Whenever we return our awareness back to the present moment, we are training the muscle of our attention. With effort over time, this muscle becomes more developed so that returning to the present moment becomes easier.

2. Practice Meditation

Meditation is a process of deliberately directing our attention, over and over, to the present moment. As such, you will find that most mindfulness practices will focus on some element of your present moment experience such as the breath or the body. This gives you something to return to every time you notice your mind has wandered. For example, in 'breath-based' meditation the focus is upon the sensations of the breath in the body. Whenever we notice our mind has wandered away from this direct experience, we bring our attention back to following the breath, doing so many times throughout a typical practice session.

It is normal for thoughts to occur during meditation, and to get lost in them at times; this even happens to very experienced meditators. Whenever you notice this happening, rather than getting frustrated, try to see it as a moment of awareness, something to congratulate yourself for. You might also find it helpful to gently note where your mind went (i.e. "worrying", "planning", "obsessing") before returning your focus back to the sensations of the present moment.



We have a range of guided audio meditations on our website which you can listen to and download for free. We also provide some written meditation guidance below. As you start to practice this type of meditation, remember to be patient with yourself. Meditation is a journey that cannot be rushed; it takes time and commitment to learn and is not a quick fix. So, if you are new to this, remember not to put undue pressure on yourself to do it 'perfectly'.

Ensuring you are in a comfortable posture. Bringing awareness to your whole body, and as best you can letting go of any tension.

Following your breath for a few moments, paying attention to the sensations that arise from the in and out breaths as they flow naturally through the body.

When you are ready, starting to pay attention to your mind and any thoughts or imagines coming into your awareness. Being curious: what is present for you right now? Noticing if thoughts are many or few, calm or stressed? Can you describe your state of mind in this moment?

Ensuring not to judge yourself in any way – there's no right or wrong way to be thinking or feeling. So even if your mind is whizzing away as they sometimes do, just note this, without needing to react in any particular way.

Seeing if you can view any thoughts as 'mental events' that you do not need to engage with. It doesn't matter what the content of your thinking is: just notice each thought as it pops into awareness and then, as best you can, allow it to fade away again.

You might find it helpful to imagine your thoughts as if they were like leaves falling off a tree into a stream. You can observe them as they enter the stream, floating past you in the water for a moment, before they continue onwards downstream and out of your awareness. It doesn't matter how many leaves fall, just let the stream carry them all away.

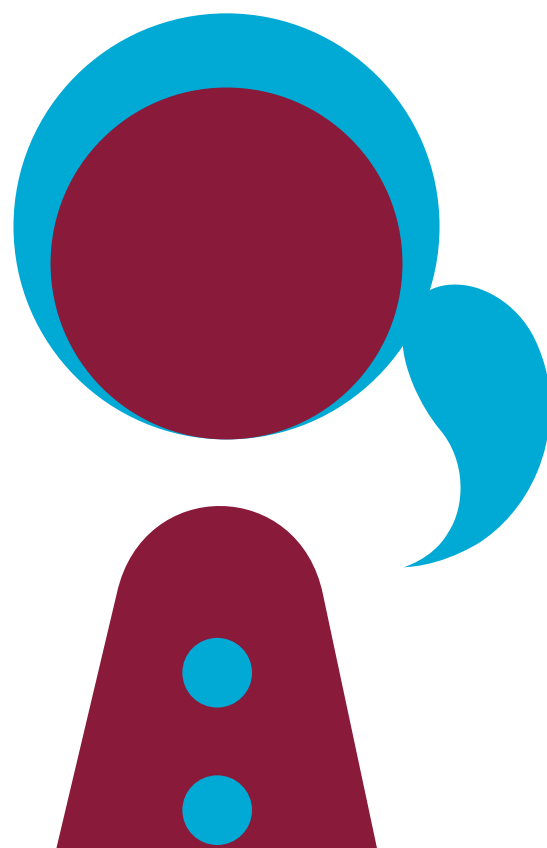
If you get a little lost in thinking at any point in the practice, congratulate yourself for noticing this has occurred, and then return your focus to the meditation when you are ready. If your mind is busy, it can be helpful to stay with the sensations of breathing for a period of time before trying to observe any thoughts again.

Bringing the practice to a close when you are ready.

3. Find out More

This leaflet is a very brief introduction to a big topic. In terms of mindfulness, working skilfully with thoughts is considered a lifetime's work and not something anyone can master overnight. It is also important not to expect too much of yourself. Meditation is not a cure for distress, and if you currently have a lot of difficulty to cope with, we would suggest you also seek additional support to help you manage this (please see our website for more details).

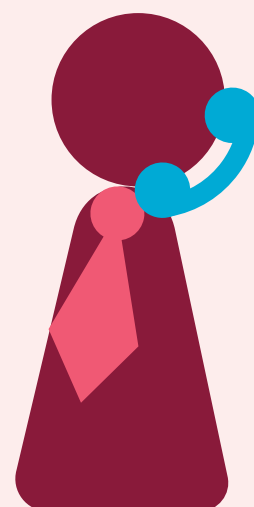
If you want to try one of our courses, a good starting place for beginners is the online **Introduction to Mindfulness** webinar. Or if you would like to go a little deeper into meditation, try our online **Mindful Living** course. In addition to this, various guided meditations and mindfulness self-help 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).



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Wellbeing Norfolk and Waveney is provided by Norfolk and Suffolk NHS FT working with Mind and Relate.

We work together to deliver a range of support interventions for people ages 16 and over with low mood, anxiety and depression. For more information about who we are see: wellbeingnands.co.uk

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