

ChTC Mindfulness for GPs

There's increasing evidence that mindfulness can help alleviate stress, anxiety and depression, and generally enhance well-being. Some of your patients may have an understanding of mindfulness, especially as there's been a lot of publicity about it recently, and it could be useful to see whether they think it might help them.

Mindfulness doesn't have to involve spending hours staring at a wall in the lotus position – there are simple, brief, effective practices that we can all choose to adopt every day. Mindfulness simply means paying attention to our five senses – really listening to a piece of music, tasting the breakfast cereal, feeling our lungs fill and empty as we breathe. It means not being lost in thought, walking about on automatic pilot, worrying about the future or dwelling on the past, but focussing on the here and now, really living in the moment. Realistically we're not going to manage to be mindful all the time, but we're looking to increase the amount of time we're in the present, noticing everything around us and absorbing it.

Below you will find some simple exercises that you can talk through with your patients, followed by relevant websites and reading matter.

Three-minute Breathing Space

Awareness

- Sit upright, with your eyes closed if possible
- Ask yourself what you're feeling and thinking right now. What's going on in your body?
- You might put your experiences into words – 'A feeling of sadness', 'Anger is here'. Try to acknowledge your experience, even if it's unpleasant or unwanted

Gather Attention

- Pay attention to your breath wherever you feel it most: your abdomen/chest/shoulders/nostrils
- Follow it all the way in and all the way out
- Say silently to yourself 'Breathing in ... Breathing out ...'
- Use your breath as an anchor to bring you into the present and help you tune into a state of awareness and stillness

Expand Attention

- Expand your awareness from the breath to the whole body. See if there are any areas of tension or resistance and, if so, breathe into these areas on the in breath. Then breathe out from those areas, softening and opening on the out breath. Try to let yourself be open to whatever is there

Mindful daily task

Choose a task you have to do every day – taking a shower, walking the dog, cooking a meal, driving to work – and try to remember to do it mindfully for a week. Focus on all your senses. Feel the pressure of the water as it lands on your shoulders. Notice the trees and birds and sky and the feel of the breeze on your face as you walk the dog. Observe your hands on the steering-wheel, feel your weight on the seat, hear the sound of the car's engine.

Pleasure, mastery and mindfulness

If you're finding life a bit of a challenge, ask yourself what you can do to help yourself. Think about a single day in your life and list all the tasks that you do, from taking a shower in the morning to cleaning your teeth at night. Then mark each one with an up arrow if the activity nourishes you, a down arrow if it depletes you, and a sideways arrow if you're not sure, or it varies. See how much you can take control of your day. Can you make the time to do something pleasurable (being kind to your body, or engaging in an activity you enjoy), to do something that gives you a sense of mastery or achievement (paying a bill, taking some exercise, doing something you've been putting off, practising the piano), and to act mindfully?

Noticing thoughts

Take a few minutes to focus on your breath. You'll notice that your mind is constantly popping up with thoughts – what you need to do next, the film you saw last night, the annoying barking dog, that itch on your foot, the dentist's appointment tomorrow. See if you can notice these thoughts, let them come, and then go, and take your attention back to the breath. Time and again they'll appear, but they can simply flow on through without you getting caught up in them if you focus back on the breath as soon as you notice you've been hooked. Thinking is what minds do, and it's not a problem, as long as we can see our thoughts as 'mental events' rather than the truth, or reality, or hard fact. Getting some distance and perspective on our thoughts in this way can allow us to see that we have choices about how we behave – we can notice our thoughts in a kind, curious way, and take a moment to respond rather than react.

On-line resources and reading material

<http://www.mindfulness-west.com> offer individual sessions, and eight-week group courses in Stroud and Cheltenham.

These organisations explain more about mindfulness, and some offer downloadable resources for you to develop a mindful practice of your own:

<http://www.everyday-mindfulness.org>

<https://www.headspace.com>

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

<http://www.mindfulnet.org>

<http://bemindful.co.uk>

<http://www.mindful.org>

Useful and accessible books on mindfulness:

The Happiness Trap, Dr Russ Harris

Sane New World, Ruby Wax

Mindfulness – Finding Peace in a Frantic World, Mark Williams & Danny Penman

Full Catastrophe Living, Jon Kabat-Zinn

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