

Mindfulness handout: key concepts

A definition of mindfulness

“The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, with compassion and open-hearted curiosity.” *Oxford Mindfulness Centre*

“The awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.” *Jon Kabat-Zinn*

The autopilot mode

We all know the **experience of being on “automatic pilot”**: we’re doing things without really being aware of what we are doing. We can suddenly “wake up” after having driven to work and not remember how we got there or be in a room not remembering why we went there. In the same way, we may not be really “present” for much of our lives; we can often be “miles away” without knowing it.

It is not bad to have an automatic pilot; it allows us to do routine tasks without having to use all our mental resources. On automatic pilot however, we are **more likely to have our “buttons pressed”**: events around us and thoughts, feelings and sensations in the mind (of which we may be only dimly aware) can trigger old habits of thinking that are often unhelpful and may lead on to a generalized feeling of stress or a worsening mood.

By becoming more aware of this automatic pilot, and of what is really going on inside us, from moment to moment, we give ourselves the possibility of greater freedom and choice. We do not have to go down the same old “mental ruts” that may have caused problems in the past.

The aim of practicing mindfulness is to **increase awareness, so that we can respond wisely** to situations rather than react to them in an automatic way. We do that by practicing becoming more aware of where our attention is, and deliberately changing the focus of our attention, to what is happening here and now.

The beginner’s mind

Paying attention to something in a mindful way, using our senses, and imagining that it is the very first time we ever taste/smell/see/feel this, can be a very interesting experience.

When doing this kind of practice, we become aware of the automatic pilot. We notice how quickly our mind drifts away, how we get impatient and wander off to more “interesting” or pressing things. Our “thinking mind” is always jumping from one thing to the next. And it rarely stops.

However, we can notice other interesting things as well:

- The fact that **we can consciously decide to bring our attention back** to where we had intended it to be. The mind wandering is not necessarily a problem. We can learn to notice this more quickly and then bring our focus back.
- When we slow down, take some time to explore things as if it were the first time, and use our senses, we can discover lots of new things. This attitude is called the **beginner's mind**. We see familiar things with new eyes, with an open mind.

In daily life, we often label things, people or situations very quickly: “this is boring”, “he or she is annoying”. We also develop mental habits and routines. ^[1]_{SEPP} These labelling and mental habits are very useful because they save us a lot of time. We can have lunch and read emails at the same time. We don't have to discover familiar things such as a light switch all over again every time we use them.

But there are also downsides: we can get stuck in these labels, not seeing things as they really are. Maybe you think of a certain colleague as pushy. But if you hold on to that label, you might not notice how she or he maybe changes over time.

Developing the beginner's mind has some serious **benefits**:

- **Focus and appreciation increase**, which leads to more positive feelings.
- **Rumination and worrying decrease** because there is less mental “bandwidth” that we can use for negative thinking patterns.

The breath and the body as our anchor

The basic mindfulness practice is to use something physical (our breath, our body sensations) as an “anchor” for our attention.

Our mind tends to wander. This is what minds do; they are built to produce one thought after the other and there is no need to judge ourselves for this. Unfortunately, this mind wandering is a major source of unhappiness and stress.

By bringing our attention to the breath or the body and returning it there repeatedly, we can learn to step out of the busyness of thinking and doing for a few moments. The breath is always with us, for as long as we live. It can be a place to return to in any moment we feel that our mind has become scattered and dispersed by the events of our day.

A powerful influence taking us away from being “fully present” is our **automatic tendency to judge** our experience as being not quite right in some way – that it is not what should be happening, not good enough, or not what we expected or wanted.

These judgements can lead to sequences of thoughts about blame, what needs to be changed, or how things could or should be different. Often those thoughts will take us, quite automatically, down some well-worn paths in our minds. In this way, we may lose awareness of the moment and the freedom to *choose* what, if any, action needs to be taken.

We can **regain our freedom** if, as a first step, we simply acknowledge the actuality of our situation, without immediately being hooked into automatic tendencies to judge, fix, or want things to be other than they are.

The body scan exercise provides an opportunity to practice simply bringing an interested and friendly awareness to the way things are in each moment, without having to do anything to change this. There is no goal to be achieved other than to bring awareness to bear as the instructions suggest – specifically, achieving some special state of relaxation is *not* the goal of the exercise.

We might have the best chance to relax if we let it happen all by itself, if we give the process of relaxation the time and space it needs. Paradoxically, this means that it can be more useful to allow ourselves *not* to be relaxed than to want to relax on purpose. Very often, this will create more stress and tension.

“Doing” mode and “being” mode

Much of the time, we spend in the “doing” mode. In our busy lives there’s always something to do, a problem to solve, a goal to reach. The fact that we have this great capacity to solve problems has brought us very far as a species, we have even walked on the moon!

The “doing” mode, also called the “problem solving” mode, is very useful in certain situations. At least, if you want to reach a concrete and tangible goals such as physically getting from point A to point B, or if you want to figure out how much taxes you are supposed to pay.

The doing mode or problem-solving mode is **less useful when it involves our personal, inner life** – our feelings. Imagine that you are nervous about a certain presentation. If you approach that situation from the “problem solving” mode, you might set a goal such as “I should be calm”. You will then start monitoring the gap between how nervous you are now and how calm you want to be.

The net result of that might be that you get even more nervous! Or that you start judging and blaming yourself, so you end up not only being nervous, but also feeling like a failure.

What we’re learning when practicing mindfulness is to switch to another mode from time to time: the **being mode**. This is a mode in which we **simply observe**. There are no goals to be reached, the only thing we do is to notice what happens, without wanting to change anything. Everything that happens, has the right to exist. This is what we practise in the meditation exercises.

No mode is “better” than the other. The aim is to be capable of switching between the different modes whenever necessary.

One way to remember switching to the being mode is the acronym STOP that we have talked about:

S-switch off

T-take a breath

O-observe

P-proceed

Daily mindfulness: some tips

- ✓ When you first wake up in the morning, before you get out of bed, bring your attention to your breathing. Observe 5 mindful breaths.
- ✓ Notice changes in your posture. Be aware of how your body and mind feel when you move from lying down to sitting, standing, walking. Notice each time you make a transition from one posture to the next.
- ✓ Whenever you hear a phone ring, a bird sing, a train pass by, a car, the wind, the sound of a door closing, laughter - use any sound as the bell of mindfulness. Really listen and be present and awake.
- ✓ Throughout the day, take a few moments to bring your attention to your breathing. Observe 5 mindful breaths.
- ✓ Whenever you eat or drink something, take a minute and breathe. Look at your food and realise that the food was connected to something that nourishes its growth. Can you see the sunlight, the rain, the earth, the farmer, the trucker in your food? Pay attention as you eat, consciously consuming this food for your physical health. Bring awareness to seeing, smelling, tasting, chewing and swallowing your food.
- ✓ Feel your body while you walk or stand. Take a moment to notice your posture. Pay attention to the contact of the ground under your feet. Feel the air on your face, arms and legs as you walk. Are you rushing?
- ✓ Bring awareness to listening and talking. Can you listen without agreeing or disagreeing, liking or disliking, or planning what you will say without overstating or understating? Can you notice how your mind and body feel?
- ✓ Whenever you wait in line, use this time to notice standing and breathing. Feel the contact of your feet on the floor and how your body feels. Bring attention to the rise and fall of your abdomen. Are you feeling impatient?
- ✓ Be aware of any points of tightness in your body throughout the day. See if you can breathe into them and, as you exhale, let go of excess tension. Is there tension stored anywhere in your body?

For example, your neck, shoulders, stomach, jaw, or lower back? If possible, stretch or do yoga once a day.

- ✓ Focus attention on your daily activities such as brushing your teeth, washing up, brushing your hair, putting on your shoes, doing your job. Bring mindfulness to each activity.
- ✓ Before you go to sleep at night, take a few minutes and bring your attention to your breathing. Observe 5 mindful breaths.

Frequently encountered obstacles with meditation

- **“I can’t find the time to meditate.”**

We all have very busy lives with busy schedules. Adding something extra, such as the meditation practices, can increase the stress in the short term. This is very normal.

What happens when you think about the practice? What thoughts or feelings do you notice?

Perhaps you can bring some curiosity to the difficulty of finding time for the practice and find out what exactly is blocking you. It can be a real challenge to carve out even a few minutes to just be by and with ourselves. Perhaps you feel that you should first attend to the needs of others before you can take time for yourself? Or is the stress telling you that there is no time to “waste”?

The challenge will probably to make time, rather than to find some extra time. Can you allow yourself to make this a priority?

- **“Am I doing it right?”**

There is no “right” or “wrong” in this practice. You can let go of the ideas of “success” and “failure”. There is no need to try to do your best. This is not a competition; nor is it a skill for which you need to strive. Just do the practice with an attitude of openness and curiosity and allow the rest to take care of itself.

- **“This is so annoying, I feel worse than before!”**

See if perhaps you are starting this practice with the wish to relax. Relaxation can happen, and if it does, certainly enjoy it! But sometimes it doesn’t, and that does not mean that something is wrong. The aim of this practice is simply to be aware of things how they really are, from moment to moment. And sometimes there is irritation. You can just notice this, perhaps naming it very silently as “irritation”, or “boredom” and explore with gentle curiosity how this expresses itself in the body.

- **“My mind wouldn’t stay still.”**

If your mind is wandering a lot, you can try to see these thoughts as passing events: they arise in the field of awareness, stay around for a while and then maybe disappear again. There is no need to push any thoughts away. The mind is like a “thought producing machine”, and it is quite impossible to still it. This is not the aim of the practice. You can simply explore how it is for you to be with the many thoughts. Perhaps naming it as “busyness in the mind”.

- **“I kept falling asleep.”**

Perhaps you're simply very tired? When doing this practice and stepping out of the usual busyness, we can finally notice the signals of our body telling us how exhausted we are. Why not honour these signals and make it an early night...? At the same time, this practice is about being awake. See if you can find the right balance between being relaxed and alert at the same time.

Via [this link](#) you can find a **short guided body and breath meditation** by Beate Trück.

You can find **more free meditations** under the following link:

<https://www.brusselsmindfulness.be/meditations-by-our-teachers>. Enjoy!

A few misunderstandings about meditation.

- It is not a relaxation technique.
- It is not about being without thoughts.
- It does not need to be pleasant.

You can find more information about mindfulness and our courses at www.brusselsmindfulness.be.

If you would like to follow an 8-week mindfulness course you can register via [this link](#).

If you would like to register for **our newsletter** to receive more insights and information on our upcoming activities please click [here](#).