What mindfulness is... and isn't.

Mindfulness means "to be awake - or aware - non-judgementally". It helps us become more attuned to our thoughts - and our subsequent emotions and actions or behaviours caused by these thoughts - which can be life-changing for us, and for those around us!

The cognitive mind likes patterns and repetitiveness. You will recognise this from recalling how you can brush your teeth, eat, drive and dress (although not usually at the same time!) without consciously thinking about it. This is us on autopilot!

And that's fine except for that other thing that happens all on its own - the uninvited thoughts and ruminations about the past or the future. Now, if those thoughts and ruminations are positive and help bring emotions of joy, contentedness or gratitude - then all is well.

A cornerstone of much of my personal and professional practice - mindfulness, is a form of mind-training (rather than brainwashing).

Where agreed and appropriate (and helpful), my clients are shown (via gentle guidance) how to return to a daily way of living and thinking – via the medium of mindfulness.

Being present is a reminder of how we all once did think and behave as young children - mindfully living in the moment, seeing things just as they are (with clarity), allowing us to provide appropriate responses - rather than the common reactionary behaviours to cognition's which can lead us to busy minds (mind-chatter), stress, anxiety and depression, among a whole host of other unhealthy psychological conditions.

For example, think of when you were a young child and when you were at play. That was when you were thinking only of that moment of play - of creativity and fun - rather than worrying about yesterday or tomorrow.

What will you lose by practising being more mindful?

You remain an adult; you keep all the skills and knowledge gained over your lifetime. However, instead of allowing your subconscious to control your behaviour to external stimuli (i.e. another person or environment), or internal emotions resulting from your thoughts (i.e. distress, anger or anxiety), you observe each moment for what it really is.
Therefore, you can make new decisions based on that moment, rather than a past long since gone. We can 'lose' much of the anxiety, stress and rumination that otherwise invades our thoughts.

Mindfulness can help you:

- to quieten the mind (but not empty it, we don’t want that!)
- reduce unhealthy reactions to stressors
- allow access to appropriate responses to 'life'
- reduce the impact of past trauma
- sleep and relax with greater quality
- to perform better, at home, and at work
- enjoy enhanced relationships with partners, the family, and colleagues
- recognise with acceptance the impermanence of life, the good and the less enjoyable aspects
- improve overall mental health and wellbeing
- improve physical aspects - diet, digestion, immune system, blood pressure
- allow much greater access to creativity
- reduce desire to be elsewhere - wanting things to be different
- lessen greatly, the 'need' for material things to make us happier and more fulfilled

The list could go on for some time...

Mindfulness Explained in 46 Seconds
Mindfulness is one of the easiest models, of behaviour to adopt, being useful both inside therapy sessions and helpfully, in your life generally. When you are living life (as we often do) on autopilot - moving from one task to the next, without any great thought (mindlessly) - we start to pre-empt our next task, meeting, meal or whatever.

Living our life like a machine, that starts automatically, means we fail to be ‘here’ with the current job in hand; this can mean we fail to give our full attention to our kids, our partners, our colleagues, our food, our work, or play.

The Result

It is widely reported that our ‘mind-chatter’ or ‘monkey mind’ is the result of anything between 60-80 thousand thoughts passing through our minds, every single day!

It is also reported that we only use 1% of our available brain! By living life in the ‘here and now’ mindfully, we can rapidly increase this percentage of brain power to 2% - a 100% improvement!
Living Mindfully

By living mindfully, you will ‘see’ opportunities in all aspects of your life. Whereas before, you will have missed so much. You will be more creative, you will enjoy food more and enjoy play more. Relationships will be ‘real’ and understood; performance at work is open up for improvement.

Imagine… there you are in the meeting room, recalling how the last meeting went, worrying about what you have just left at the desk and the work that’s not being done while you are at another bloody meeting, and very likely thinking about domestic matters too! So, does that leave you ready to embrace this meeting and really try to get some value out of it?

An Improved Life

One step at a time, being mindful can help guide you to a more relaxed way of living that makes you more productive, more pleasant to be around and more appreciative of life - with less effort, greater creativity, better sleep... the list is huge of that which can be improved with even a little more mindfulness in your life.

Physical and emotional illnesses are increasingly being addressed (and symptoms reduced) utilising mindful techniques.

Mindfulness is easy to learn and easy to retain - leading to a sustainable strategy for improvements to the way you feel, and the way you live.
Why Learning (Unguided) Mindfulness Can Hurt Us

Despite being thousands of years in existence, and previously thought of as only accessible to those in Eastern cultures (i.e. for those with an interest in Buddhism) mindfulness has been successfully utilised in the West for decades. No religious affiliation is required and the benefits associated with practising mindfulness are now scientifically measured (evidence of its efficacy freely available) with people benefiting the world over.

I am just one recipient of the profound effects learning mindfulness has had on my own life, so it was a no-brainer to offer it as a complement to my clients counselling sessions, where appropriate and via the online course I offer.

So, if I'm such an advocate of mindfulness, why am I writing about it causing harm?

Well, the harm is usually more of an unpleasantness, rather than anything more, and here's why:

- Once we are enjoying the initial benefits of being more mindful, we create greater awareness and space for considering matters we may have repressed. (How many people, perhaps yourself, do you observe 'staying busy' - or risk being opened up to difficult memories?)
- Creating space for reflection is necessary if we are to fully process the experiences that have left us with unpleasant cognitions.
- 'Seeing' those experiences with greater clarity, in sharper focus, may create significant anxiety - or other emotional states.
- Practising mindfulness, whilst processing these less healthy cognitions, is something where the guidance and reassurance of a therapist can be invaluable to take us through to a new and sustainable strategy and change for life.
- If this transition from the reactionary, unthinking - or 'mindless' way - is created without guidance, we may give up and be left with unresolved psychological challenges.
- Finally, although the above could be written about in much greater depth, learning to live mindfully in a mindless world will test you. Having learned to be kind to yourself and to see things as they are, rather than accepting incorrect cognitions, the learning continues. We now need learn how to operate in this frantic world - with 'fresh eyes' and new perspectives.

Mindfulness - seeing the world as it really is; right here, right now, without judgement!
Why You Might Like a Reality Check

In today’s uncertain world we often find ourselves off-kilter, emotionally. We may recognise these times by way of our increased judgemental (negative) thoughts, our feelings (anger, anxiety), and our behaviours, (rage, intolerance, substance abuse, other addictions - and more). So, what can we do?

If we can bring ourselves (and our perspectives) to a more realistic level of awareness, we can find a more philosophical world view and response to life - along with its dynamic state of impermanence. But to do this requires us to slow-down, react less, and observe, consider, and respond more because then we serve ourselves and others in more optimal ways. Our mental and physical health will improve, along with potential gains in our performance at work, at play, and in our relationships.

So just HOW do we establish such a skilful way of ‘being’ without relying on controlling our environments, the people around us, or denying ourselves what we truly deserve?

Wake up!

You might say “I am awake enough already, thank you very much!” You work long hours and have a frenetic, stressful lifestyle - of course you’re awake! BUT how many of your waking hours are you operating on autopilot or burning through the day? Ask yourself:

- How many times do I walk into a room only to forget why I went there?
- How often do I catch a nagging sense that something isn’t quite right, but I let it slide anyway?
- When I eat a meal, do I appreciate each, and every, mouthful?
- When do I let another finish their sentence and consider my response?
Can you recall driving somewhere and realise you missed most of the journey?

To be truly awake, is to be conscious AND aware that you are where you are and doing what you are doing - in that precise and exact moment! Now add a non-judgemental and purely observational take on what is in that moment and then you can say, “I am awake!”

Bringing Focus to the Reality: A Sense Check

Being mindful and practising meditation are much the same thing. If it helps, you can call it anything you like! How about “mind-training”? Does that help?

In bringing ourselves back to the present, the “here and now”, we can have a sharper insight into our experiences. Now to be fair (and to give a note of caution here) this also means what is pleasurable, neutral, and if we judge OR perceive it so, unpleasant!

To live life in the 'here and now' is to live life in the only place that truly exists – Here and Now = Reality.

Now, if I’m anxious, it’s likely to be about a future event, be that about a moment or in a year. By being present I can become ‘aware’ of, and ‘acknowledge’ my anxiety. Even better, I can decide if my emotion is warranted by asking myself “Is there an action to take right now?” Yes, always! Choose from the two below:

1. Find and choose acceptance for what is now, and perhaps only for now.
2. Take an appropriate action. If I’m hungry, I eat. If I’m in danger, I move away from the source. If I’m having fun, the action might simply be to appreciate and have gratitude that this is fun.

This too shall pass!

Regardless of the emotion (event or concern) you become aware of, it will always pass! But, it may also re-present, frequently!

If you are finding your less positive emotions being triggered regularly to the degree that it interferes with your quality of life, then being more mindful (and learning to ‘sit-with’ difficult emotions) creates space for exploring why you often feel the way you do.
It could be (and most commonly is) because of training and experiences in our early years, that taught us:

- that what we would think (and feel) wasn’t important for whatever reason to those we relied on for our most basic needs. (So now, as an adult, it’s also become unsafe to communicate appropriately and effectively.)
- to internalise our big emotions and thoughts. (This inability to express ourselves leads us to a path of alternative behaviours to compensate; self-harm, addiction, infidelity, anger issues, anxiety, and depression.)

Therefore, for the icing on the emotional, beliefs and values cake - we arrive at a position of not feeling as important as others; we have low self-esteem and we:

- become ‘givers’, not only to feel better about ourselves, but also to avoid criticism.
- can’t ‘receive’ either, which breeds resentment.
- compare ourselves with others and mind-read what they might be thinking.

When clients, I work with around the world, are open (and accepting) of guidance of a more mindful way of being - healthier perspectives, values, beliefs, and worldviews become so much more accessible over time.

**All we need to do is to re-learn how to slow down and to react less.**

Ultimately, we can learn healthy acceptance for what is outside our sphere of influence, a less-judgemental attitude and a healthier mind and body; emotionally regulated so that rage (and addictions, monkey-mind, unnecessary stress, anxiety or depression) can become a thing of the past and will matter no more because… as we’ve discovered, that place, the past, doesn’t exist anymore!
Ruminate to Ruination

One of our greatest national pastimes (reported to me by clients when booking an appointment, or in the therapy room) is 'mind-chatter' - also known as 'monkey-mind'.

When a busy mind consists of ruminations that have little basis on reality, and are left unchecked, we miss out on life here and now - the only place we can ever really be!

Are you mindlessly following a path to emotional ruination? Imagination is more readily accessible than the reality. This is easy to understand, isn't it?

If I choose to consider something requiring no action, in this moment, then am I where I 'should' be? Or, am I accessing a convenient and imagined place in the future, or the past, where it can be toyed with - most often negatively? Consider:

- I hope the weather will be good for our camping trip in the summer, because if it's not...
- I wonder what I'll get for Christmas this year? (and it's the month of May!)
- I wish I knew if I will still be in business next year.
- It'll be alright when/if... new car, house, relationship, job, holiday... (It rarely is!)
Alternative possibilities, if these thoughts did pop in, before returning to the present:

- If the weather doesn’t hold for the camping trip, we’ve researched Plan-B (an action done) and we’ll act on that then if we need to. (Now - let go!)
- What the hell am I doing thinking about Christmas - in spring? (Let go!)
- If business continues this way, I'll need to take action now. (Take action, or let go until you do have an action!)
- That's a nice car, I'd like that. (Appreciation, nice, now let go!)

These are maybe a little silly as examples, but the premise is true. If we 'allow' (or choose) to include (and encourage) within our daily 60-80 thousand thought impressions, the ruminations of a time passed (or a time to come) we are busy elsewhere... we are elsewhere... we are mindless and unavailable to the present moment which really does need your attention - for a whole host of reasons!

**When you practice being present, you are alive to opportunities, and you can see with greater clarity that which may require your attention NOW!**

This allows the mind to be calmer, more efficient, less threatened, ergo, less anxious and stressed. The future is created by what you do in THIS moment...
If we allow ourselves to cease 'mind reading' those around us - for what they might have thought, what they might think or how they might react - we can respond compassionately to ourselves and others with a truth about that moment; rather than react, we can respond... appropriately. When we do this, we have less to ruminate about... clever!

Research has shown that rumination is associated with a variety of negative consequences, including depression, anxiety, addictive behaviours, binge-drinking and binge-eating.

Why does rumination lead to such harmful results?

"Not surprisingly, ruminating usually conjures up negative thoughts. It becomes a cycle."

In low moods, and depressive states, we are even more prone to ruminate. One of the tools, to combat this, is to return to the moment. With a little mindfulness, and skilled acceptance of challenged thoughts and ruminations, we can reduce the incidence and impact of anxiety and low-mood states. This makes way for aspirational thinking; hope for the future without dwelling on it.

**My number one tip for reducing unnecessary mind-chatter is... learn the very simple art of 'mindfulness'.**

When you have this 'on board', you have created the space to cognitively and behaviourally adjust; to think about your thoughts and come home to the truth of each moment.

Learning positive thinking; re-framing events, and your reactions to them, are also useful along with gratitude. More on these and other aspects for your healthier, more peaceful mind on request.

How Creating Space is Our Choice

I haven’t time for ****s sake, there’s only so many hours in the day, just give me a break, will you? Feeling overwhelmed, stressed, tired all the time and 'snappy'? Why are we all under such duress - and who is accountable?

If we stop and consider some of the possibilities about why we are doing more and achieving less - why we are experiencing stress and resentment becomes apparent. A sense of injustice maybe? Why am I tired all the time? Why is it I get to keep giving so much out, not feeling better - and feeling this sense of overwhelm?
And so, the hamster wheel of life keeps turning…

**Inner peace doesn’t occur because the world has quietened. It occurs when we become still - and it’s an inside job.**

If we do nothing else whilst chasing our tails, stop and ask the purpose. Because when we give time for consideration of our actions - our very many actions - then we can begin to unpick the conditioning that drives us towards oblivion and regret.

Are you a human ‘doing’?

I often ask clients, engaging in therapy with me, “What would it be like to come home, sit down quietly – and just be, even for a few minutes?” The response is typically one of abject horror! “Oh God no, I couldn’t do that”, they often candidly admit, “I’d go mad.”

So, if we choose to continue to avoid time for self-reflection, self-compassion and general introspection, what other options are available to make sense of our daily challenges in this life?

- It’ll be alright when the new job is found, the promotion… perhaps?
- It’ll be better when we get the new house, car, or get that holiday?
- …the new partner, (the divorce!) …when the illness is overcome, or when I make enough money?

Take a moment now, and ask if that’s been true for you!

How long, after each of these instant-gratification desires (or aspirations) in your life had been attained, did the joy last? Minutes, hours, days or weeks? Perhaps, as is common, you reached each point where it would be alright - and immediately began to look for the next it’ll be alright when…?

**How about a commitment to the ‘self’?**

If I can learn to take some me time, I can release much of the desire for things to always be different from my experience in this moment. While I want something more (as long as I want something more) and to be somewhere else - simply put, for things to be different… I’m not experiencing now. And now, is the only reality!
There is no point always seeking somewhere else (or possessions and positions) only to reach the end of life and think, ‘Wow, I forgot to enjoy and appreciate the journey, so busy was I trying to get to a destination!’ Consider the following:

- **Space Saver** - Let say you are up for the concept of ‘you’ time; creating some space. *How could you go about it*, and most importantly, *how do you give yourself permission*, if it feels you need it?

- **Permission** - “*I can do what I like!*” Yes, you can but is this your reality? A partner, family, work commitments – all vying for your attention, based on expectations and experience.

- **We Get to Decide** - You, yes – YOU… have first to come to terms with the idea of creating some space where you can begin to re-learn how to ‘be’ again (even briefly) to regain that *human-being* status, rather than the paradigm of today which is the *human-doing*. And when you’ve decided this sounds like an attractive proposition, you project it to and with others.

*How about those Space Invaders?* It’s become so alien to inform those around us that we are going to be taking a little more care of ourselves. To enable us to do that, we’ll need to do what?

We’ll come to the ‘what’ in a moment, but first, when sharing the desire and choices we elect with others, effectively seeking their permission, we can let them appreciate what’s in it for them! And that is...

*If I’m more relaxed (at peace and reflective) I can be less reactive to the demands of life, of the family and work – thus I become more ‘responsive’ and with considered actions.*
This is a more efficient, creative and playful version of us that can become available; this must be good for all our relationships - domestic, work and social. To begin this, we will need to:

1. Begin gently and incrementally as it's going to be a shock to the system, being 'positively selfish'. *(Positive selfishness is serving yourself for the purpose of self-worth without intentionally harming another.)*

2. Be aware that making time is going to create space for hitherto unprocessed thoughts and experiences leading to emotions that may be uncomfortable. As a result, we need to have something in place to manage what may be disruptive, such as a counsellor, for guidance about how to let go, or to work through something emotionally unpleasant that crowds our sleep, relationships and diet, for example.

3. Block time out every day. If you have a diary of appointments, make an appointment with yourself. This really works but you must honour it!

4. In that time, do something different so you can be more mindful. When we are in routine mode, we act mindlessly. Going for a walk, if that's unusual for you, for the sake of going for a walk. Not because I want to get from A-B!

5. Learn to meditate mindfully! *No tree-hugging or humming necessary, promise!*

6. Develop a new interest that requires *you time* - for personal growth and pleasure.

7. Build up to a day a week/month that is devoted to positive selfishness.

8. When you are more comfortable in your own space, consider a retreat which involves little talking. In this we can become even more enquiring and interested in our sense of self, and what affects us - and why.

9. Consciously do something each week that is different. When we take risks and watch, eat, read something we wouldn’t ordinarily do, we become more open to change and psychological growth.

10. Take a mental inventory of what is working for you each week, and make the needed adjustments.
Creating My Space: It Was a Long Time Arriving

When I shared with others (online and in private) that I was going “on a retreat” some years ago, there was a mixed response:

“Are you mad?”
“Ah, I’ve been on one of those – it was amazing!”
“Oh, I so wish I could do that, I’ve wanted to forever!”
“Please do tell us all about it!”

How I Came to Go on Retreat and What It Was Like

It had taken me about four years to come to a point where it felt appropriate for me to even consider such a thing as a retreat at a Buddhist monastery. In those earlier years of my developing interest in Buddhist philosophy, I had been investing in ‘me’ – and as a result had become more open to the ever-widening array of possibilities.

‘Shrine room’

It’s not always easy - far from it, and at times I/we all ‘fall off’ despite our best intentions to be the very best expression of ourselves, but with the retreat I would be able to focus 100% on my internal investigation because from a Friday afternoon to the Sunday afternoon there would be no words spoken by myself and the other retreatants! (I have since attended more 😊)

Not for Everyone

As I alluded earlier in this post, when I ask clients how it might feel to come home and simply sit and be, they were horrified. Imagine then, if you will, those individuals being ‘subjected’ to such a relatively long period of meditation when sitting, walking, working mindfully and without reading or speaking! I couldn’t have imagined how that would have been for me either.
Outside of Religion

I personally found my new way of being – in my mid-40’s, thanks to my practice of mindfulness and meditation; something that had derived from Buddhist philosophy in the East, and in more recent decades here in the West.

The most refreshing aspect for me is that nothing is preached. If I wish to learn, I can. If I wish to follow the philosophy, tradition, values - it is for me to decide. There will be no judgement …and it’s all about living our very best existence, right here, right now! (Rather than waiting to die!)

Fresh Perspectives

I liked that within Buddhist philosophy the choices offered are always my own to consider - and that these decisions were available with more clarity than ever before.

Slowing the mind, so we can see what is, creates a whole new opportunity to return to our less conditioned self, as when we were children; caring less about the future or past – simply and without judgement, appreciating the moment as it is.

Fit for Purpose

The best part of Buddhist philosophy and mindfulness practice is that it so easily and appropriately integrates with our ‘being’ today. Even, and perhaps especially, given the age and pace, we now live in. There must also be something in this tradition because it’s been working for more than 2500 years!

So, when I investigated the possibility of this retreat, thanks to a client who had been there on a number of occasions I was a little apprehensive, but still open to whatever the experience might be.

The Escape Hatch is Open - Come Relax and Grow

Having arrived, and registered, we were all requested to hand over our smartphones and any other ‘entertainment’ devices. In the event of a family emergency, we could be contacted via the Retreat Centre so we could relax into the event knowing this support was available.
All Sorts

Around 40 of us, a fair mix of men and women of all ages above 18, were given an orientation presentation and after that - there would be **no further talking**. A state of “**Noble Silence**” would be observed until the close of the retreat at 5:00 pm on the Sunday.

**How to Communicate Expectations**

Working Rotas and Agendas were posted throughout the buildings so we could always check *what was what* without breaking the silence! A bell would be hand-rung 10 minutes before each activity to remind us to attend to whatever we were assigned to and for that which needed our attention.

We were to wake at 5:30 am on the first morning and 5:00 am on the Sunday morning, with ‘lights-out’ at 10:00 pm. No food would be consumed (unless medically required) after 12 noon, as with Buddhist tradition. The day consisted of breakfast at 7:30 am, after an early drink, and meditation and some chanting (think Psalm type thing!) led by, on this occasion, a 66-year-old Buddhist Nun. She would be outside of *Noble Silence*, which was useful! :)

**Walk the Walk, Without the 'Talk'**

A part of each meditation session would often involve **walking mindfully** in the beautiful grounds of the monastery. It's quite a sight to see dozens of people in silence walking very, very slowly (“feet kissing the ground”) in quiet contemplation; moving in this way is extraordinarily strenuous and unusual!

Shhh…

When we were in the “Shrine Room” for contemplative meditation, chanting and talks by the Buddhist nun, we were sat on chairs or the floor on mats and cushions. (See image above.)

Whatever was used, it was a challenge to the body for many of us (I think) to remain comfortable and if we weren't, we could choose to skilfully accept discomfort without judgement and adjust our position if necessary.

Stunning, that forty or more individuals in the same room could willingly maintain complete silence for around 45 minutes at a time. If I hadn’t experienced it myself I’m not sure I would have believed it possible!
Order

The two morning mealtimes were a revelation. That so many individuals could prepare, serve, eat, congregate, wash-up and clean the kitchen in complete cooperation in ‘noble silence' was astonishing! It just worked!

There was no gossip, no disagreements, no judgements and no confusion; it simply worked because we were all present and aware. Our thoughts were without the hubbub of daily interactions and so everything moved along seamlessly. Quite astonishing to watch just how civilised we can be when we stop ‘yacking’ and forming opinions and making judgements!

**When talking I'm just saying what I already know!**

The Result

I didn’t ‘cure’ anything because of the retreat but I could certainly see, with much greater clarity, the choices I could elect to make on returning to the mindlessness that is so often - ‘society’. I got off the hamster wheel, just briefly – and it was a taste of wonderful, simple peace.

You don’t necessarily have to take such a big step of attending a retreat, and if you do, it's really not something you do lightly - but you can begin to regain some sense of perspective once again with just a few simple steps, like some of those listed above, or attending my [online course](#) to learn some core fundamentals in order to help bring about your own mindful journey – with “8 weeks to greater emotional stability”

*Have you been on retreat?*
*Was it a positive experience for you?*
*Perhaps you're putting it off?*
*What's in the way?*

Like to Know More?

If you’d like to know more about any of the aspects not covered here, do [drop me a line](#).

*It’s okay... I can talk again now!*