

THE WELLNESS HUB

MINDFULNESS

Mental wellness every day



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Human beings are born with a set of pre-determined responses. This includes a response to stress- it's our natural way of letting us know there are potential threats in the environment that are difficult to overcome. These are called stressors.

When faced with stressors, the limbic system triggers the production of a cocktail of neurochemicals to help fight, run or freeze until the danger passes. Each of these responses requires energy and focus on the perceived danger. These neurochemicals include adrenaline and cortisol- helping to release stored energy, preparing our muscles for action and heightening our senses to the predicament to prevent loss of life and limb.

However, no two individuals will perceive an event in the same manner (refer to the ABC model). The interpretation will be dependent on the individual beliefs. Believing that we are helpless when facing challenging events can activate the stress response and hinders the ability to overcome it.

Modern living can be full of stressors -work, family, financial/social commitments. When left unchecked, the stress response can become the default reaction leading to physical and mental illness. This is owing to the body responding to the immediacy of the perceived threat. The brain shuts down any physiological or mental activity that is not contributing to the urgency of the event.

These processes include the formation of memories, planning, creating sperm/ovulation and healthy digestion. If these activities are temporarily stopped, there are no long-term implications. However, if a stressor persists, suspension of such activities can lead to exhaustion, agitation, depression, fatigue, worry and anxiety unless the stressor is removed.

If we are not able to change a stressor, it is time to change the reaction to it.

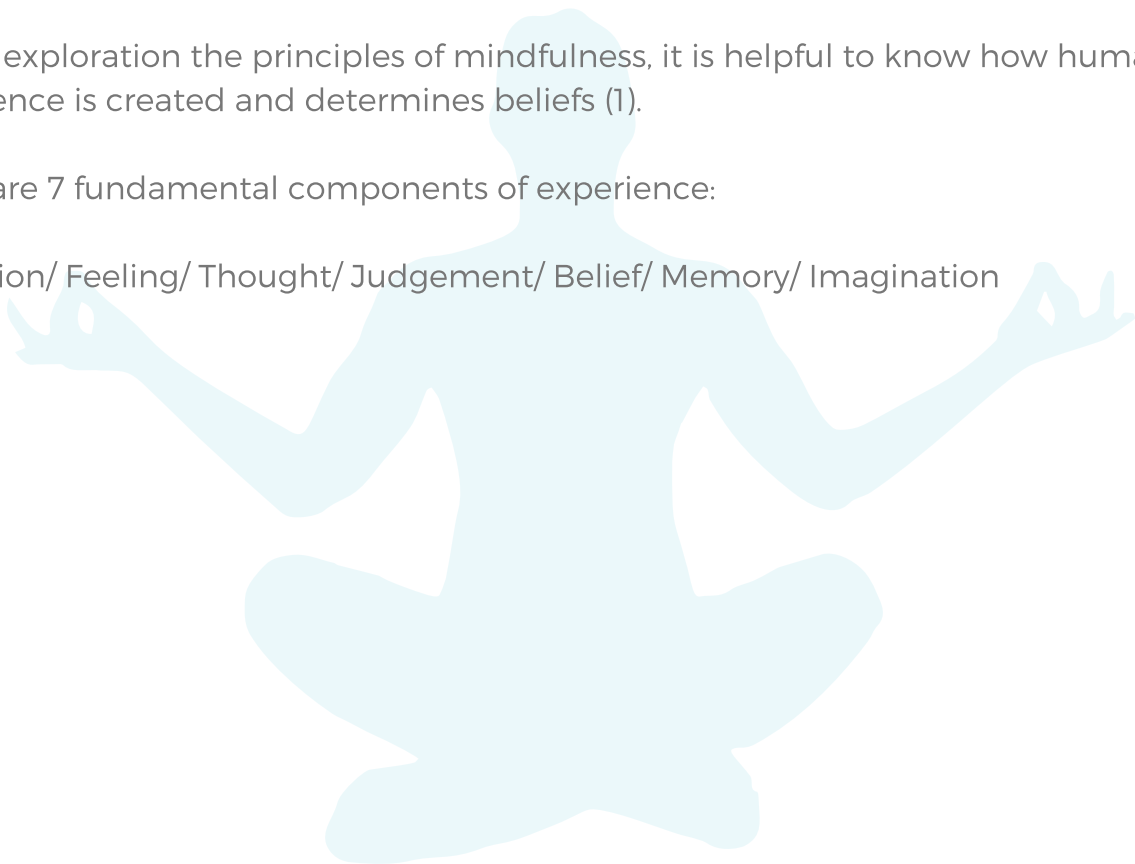
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We have another set of innate response, the relaxation response and it is the exact opposite of the stress response. It reduces the production of cortisol and adrenaline, our muscles relax and the body does not suspend long-term activity. On the contrary, it can help improve it and our mental concentration. The fundamental objective of mindfulness is to improve the activation of the relaxation response to help reduce the frequency and severity of the reaction to stressors.

Before exploration the principles of mindfulness, it is helpful to know how human experience is created and determines beliefs (1).

There are 7 fundamental components of experience:

Sensation/ Feeling/ Thought/ Judgement/ Belief/ Memory/ Imagination



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Components of Experience

On a daily basis, our senses provide us with information from our environment. The senses are:

Taste/ Touch/ Sight/ Hearing/ Smell

In addition to external monitoring, we also have internal mechanisms that assist with internal cues such as hunger and thirst. In order for the information to make sense, the data is shared with both our pre-frontal cortex for assessment (our intellectual, rational mind) and the limbic system to elicit an emotional reaction. This creates emotions and thoughts.

These thoughts and feelings can be exacerbated by existing beliefs about the event. For example, you're leaving home to go out for dinner and as you walk out, you see the grey clouds and the rain begins to fall. Your sense's registering this- you see the rain and grey clouds, feel the rain on your skin- this may elicit a feeling of disappointment.

Our imagination creates a visualisation of getting drenched before dinner. This creates additional feelings of dismay and thoughts such as 'I will look awful'. This may lead to another action such as getting a raincoat or deciding not to. As you begin to walk, the rain falls harder and leads to further thoughts such as 'not going to get my coat was a bad idea', creating self-judgement, 'I take too many risks, as you access your memory where you previously got soaked and creating a belief that "I am irresponsible". These combined create sensations such as fear and panic.

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This can also happen with other negative emotions becoming a cycle when presented with a similar situation. The combination of these elements can result in a generalised state of distress. The amalgamation of the elements is called conflation. It is an intensely heightened version of the experience and can affect other areas of our life.

By helping to differentiate between the elements of experience we can bring about change in our response to stress. At the core of mindfulness is a belief that we may not be able to change external variables (ie the rain) but we can certainly change our response to them.

To commence change, the easiest place to begin is with thoughts. We can bring our thoughts to our consciousness and determine how to feel and what we believe. We may access our memory and recall the last occasion we got soaked and nothing detrimental occurred. Another time, when we did get a raincoat, and the sun began to shine shortly after. We can engage in visualisation and instead of focusing on the warm bath and hot drink, that might soothe us instead.

This is the purpose of mindfulness - to help create a space that is free from preoccupation with challenges/ stressors to help reduce the intensity and relieve discomfort. When we are preoccupied with trying to improve things, this mental focus increases our feelings of stress, thus increasing our feelings of conflation. When we allow our mind to let go of all endeavours, we can reduce stress (2).

This series of mindfulness has its roots in Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), which advocates meditation and journaling as key techniques.

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Meditation

By practising daily meditation (20-30 minutes), we are able to use our senses to engage in the components associated with the experience. This can help the extent to which we automatically respond to each aspect.

This pause enables us to contemplate and consider our reactions. This pause enables us to become calm and build confidence when we are able to face the challenge effectively.

Meditation allows our minds to focus our attention without disruption or distraction. This can be different for each person- watching the clouds pass, focusing on breathing, listening to a sound or walking. The short meditation recording provided encourages you to focus on a candle. By doing so, you can notice the sensations and impact stressors on our thoughts, emotions and where they may present in our body. This can also prevent negative thoughts from spiralling and feeling beyond our capacity to manage (3).

In this focused state, we can acknowledge our self-talk. This is fairly is self-explanatory- it's that internal dialogue we possess, and this can be uplifting and motivating or increase our despair. This voice can also add to our conflation as it contributes to our thoughts as it often reprimands us, "I should do better next time". Not only does this add to our stress but, also prevents us from hearing our other internal dialogue of self-compassion i.e. " I did the best I could" (4).

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Journaling

The purpose of journaling is to create a pause in order to create distance between us and the experience. When we do so, we are able to objectively reflect on the components. This observation enables us to take another perspective. By journaling, we are no longer the subject of the topic but rather than we are witness to the experience. Reading the journal further creates distance, encouraging us to see the strength we possess.

Research indicates that journaling can support the reduction of negative thoughts, boost resilience and improve your memory and cognitive functioning (5). Expressive writing can help reduce symptoms of depression when dealing with the aftermath of an abusive relationship (6).

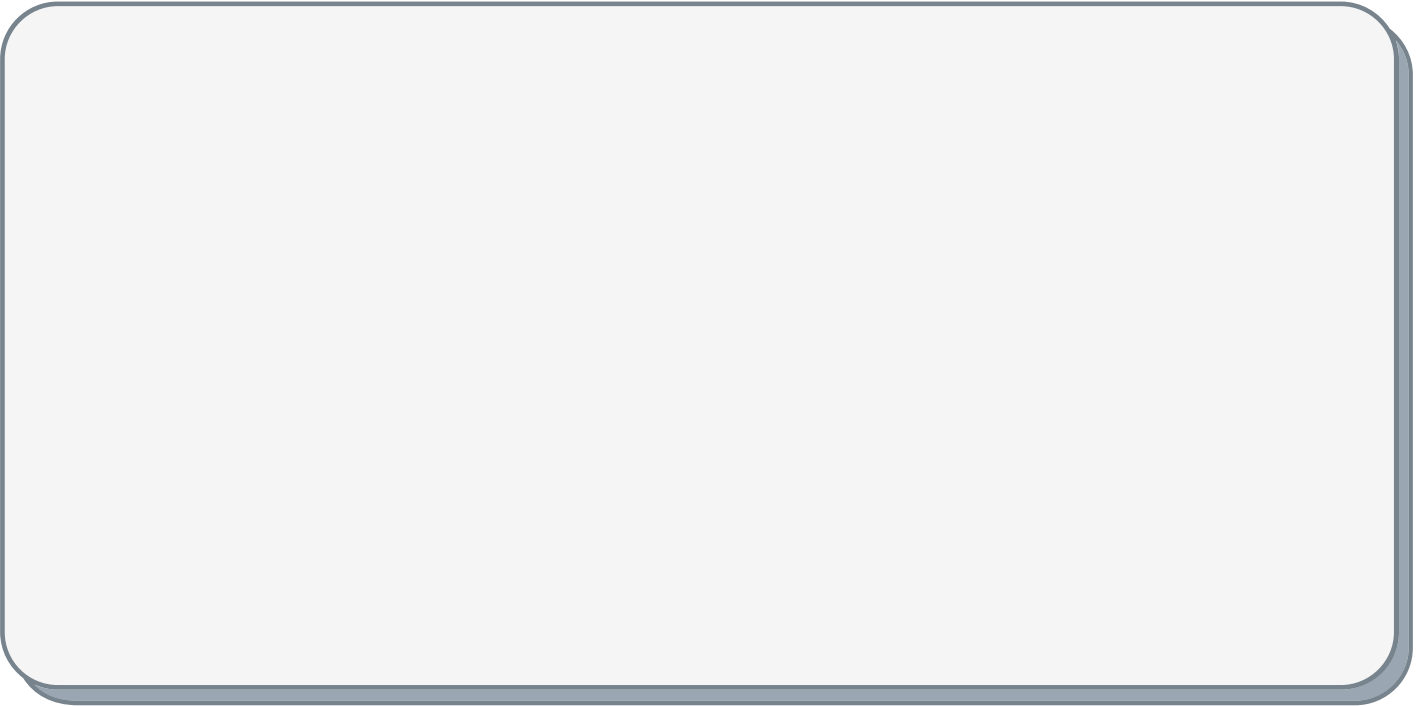
Regularly practising meditation and journaling as a combined activity can be a helpful tool to reduce feelings of stress (there is a mindfulness video provided on the hub). A Mindful Journal has also been provided as part of this pack, which can be printed and used after meditation. However, you can also purchase a notebook, make a note of the headings and keep this with you.



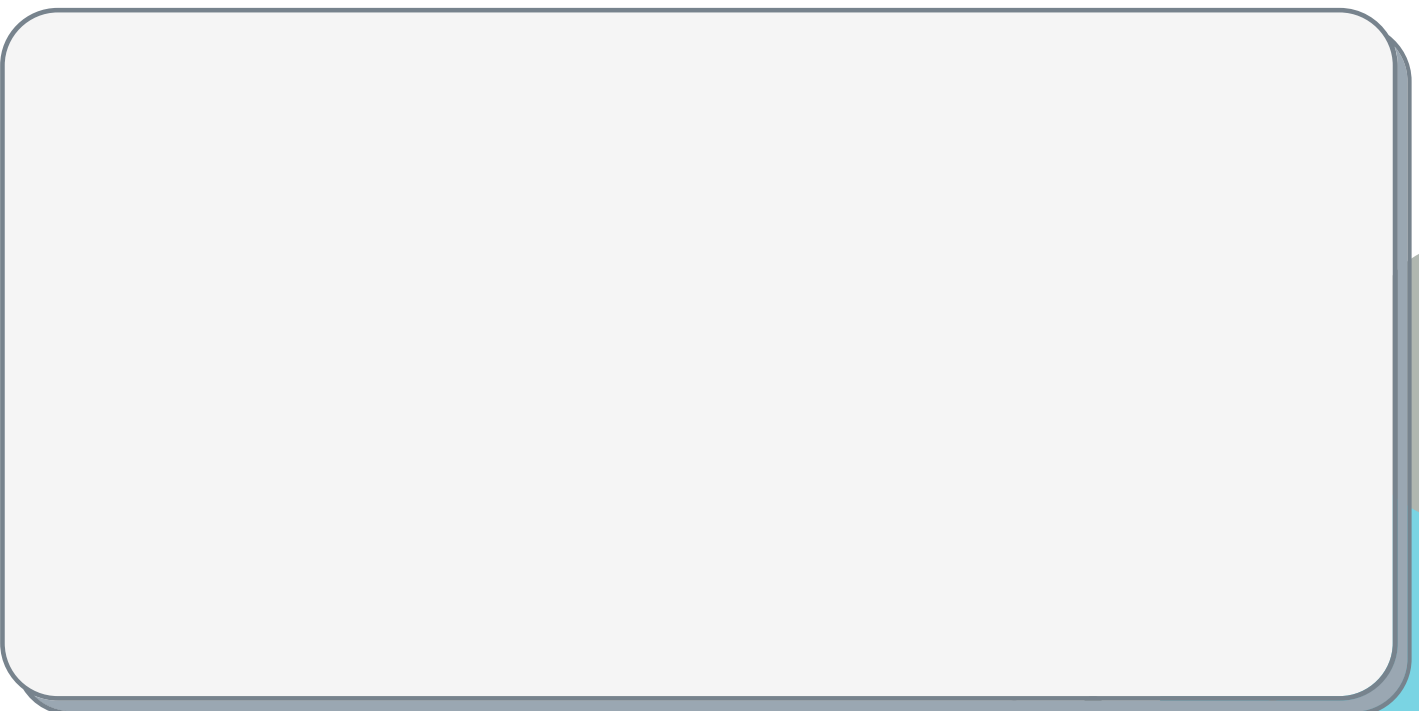
MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

Date/ time of meditation

What SENSATIONS did you
experience during the meditation?



What FEELINGS did you experience
during the meditation?

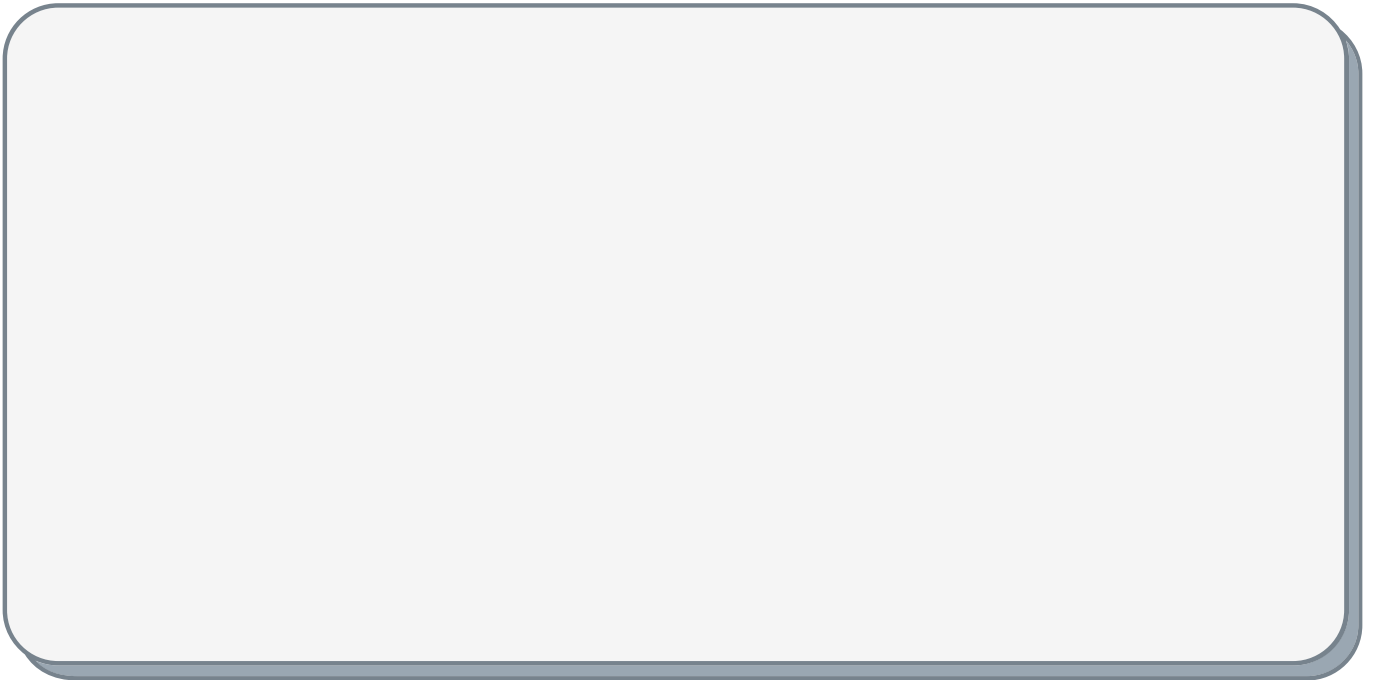




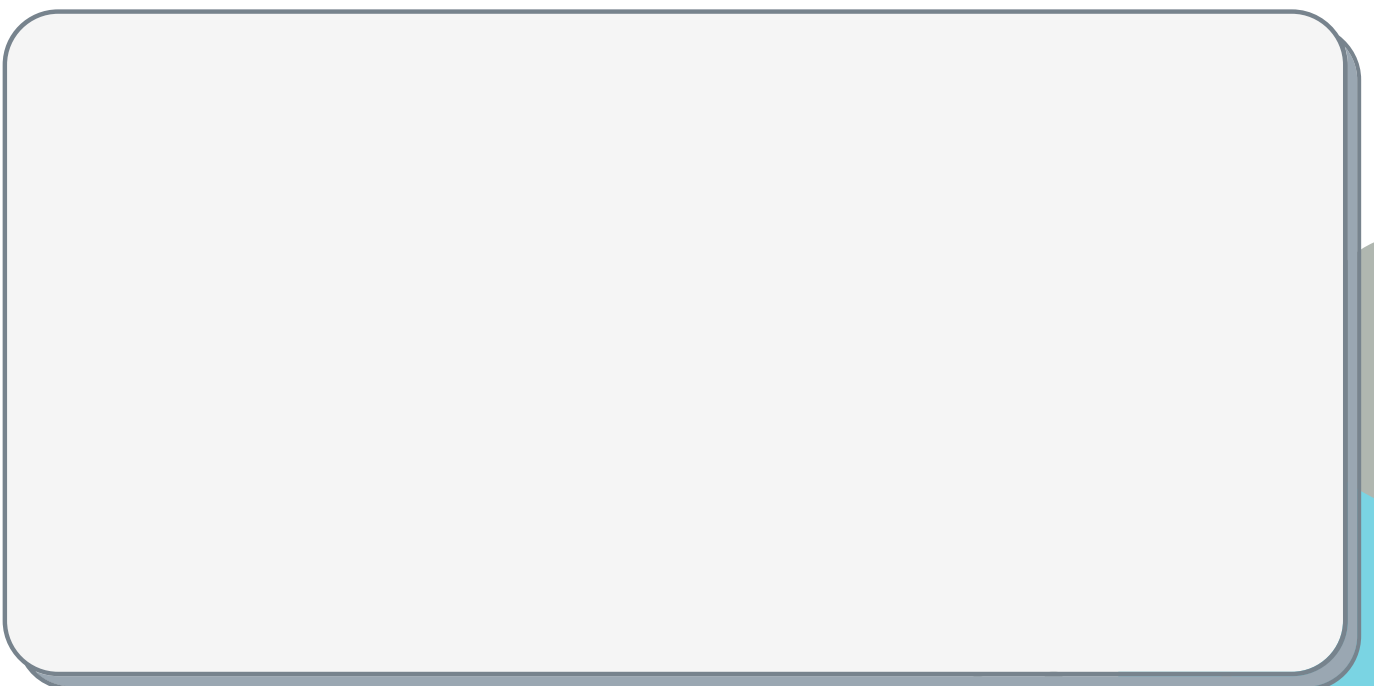
MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

Date/ time of meditation

What THOUGHTS did you have
during the meditation?



What WORDS OF KINDNESS did
you say to yourself?

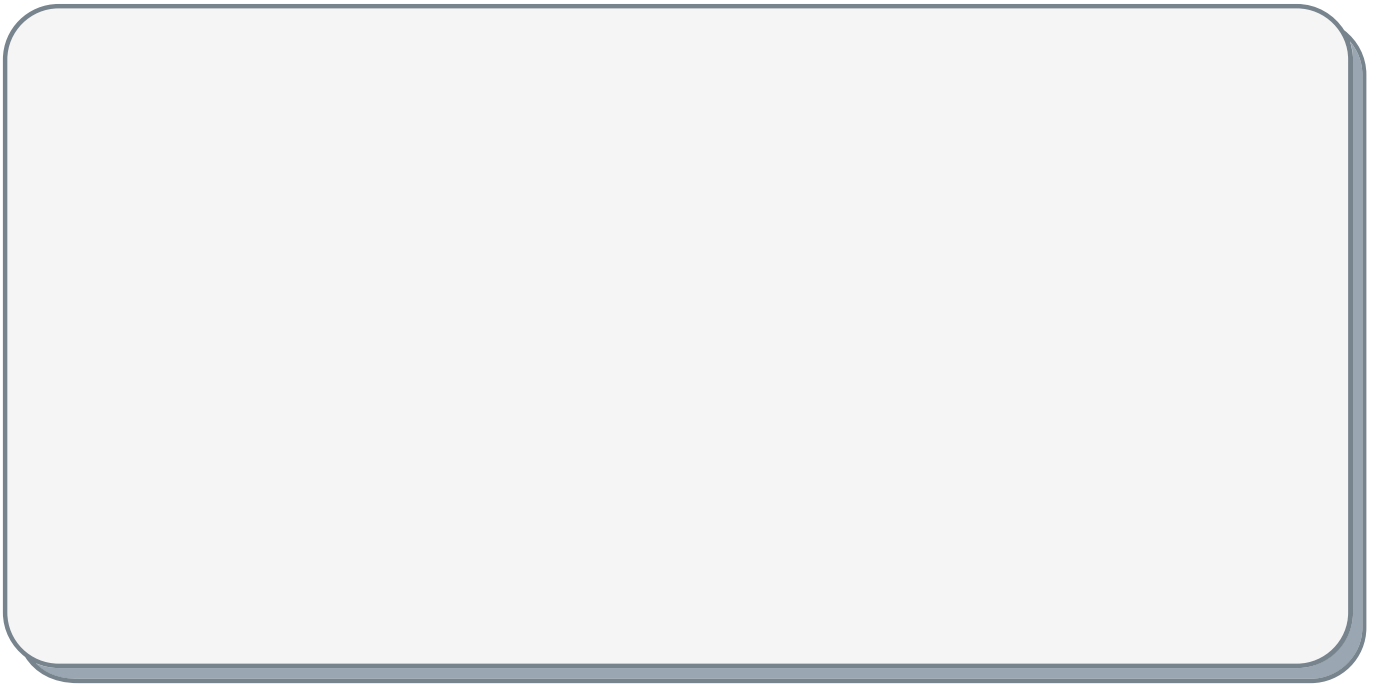




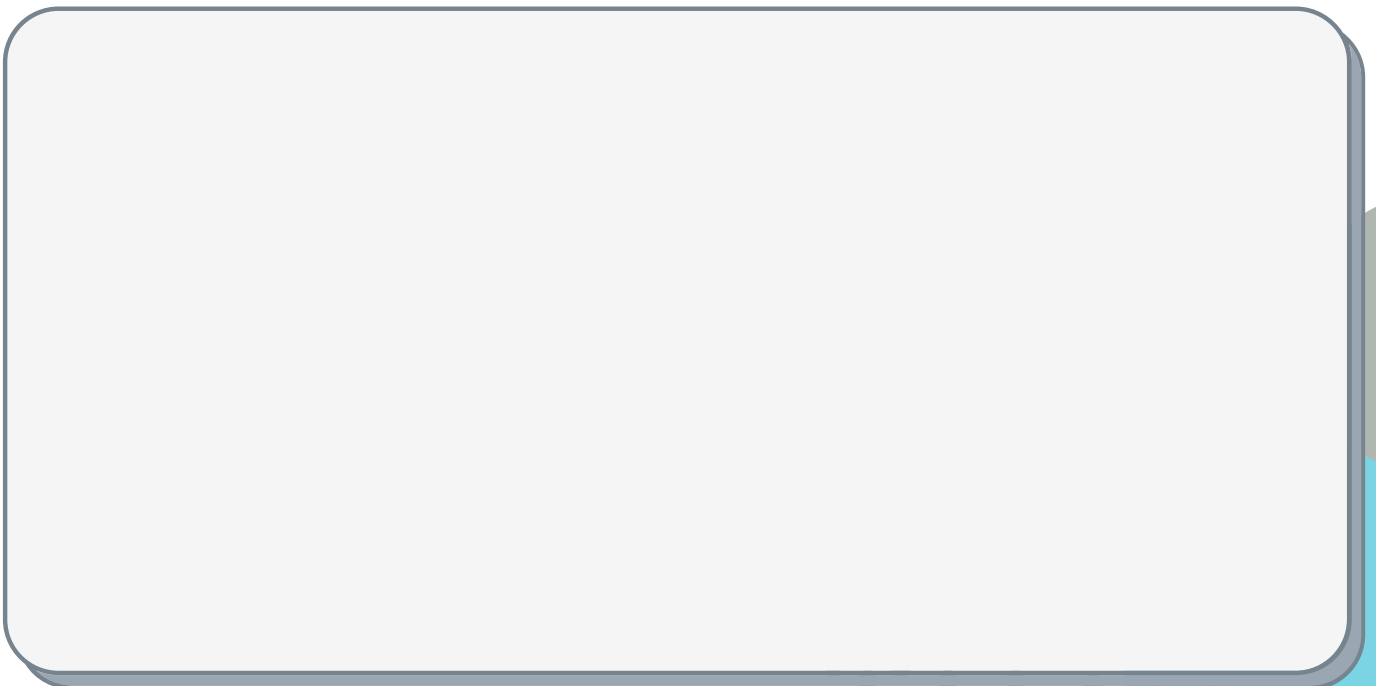
MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

Date/ time of meditation

What difference in nature/ intensity
of stress did you notice before/
after meditation?



Draw any shapes/forms expressing
your experience of meditation



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How can mindfulness help?

Mindfulness like meditation and practising self-hypnosis, it helps to activate the parasympathetic 'rest and digest' nervous system. This influences breathing, digestive function and heart rate, all of which can have a huge impact on mental health. The better we can activate the parasympathetic system, the better we are at responding to stressors and recovering from them (7).

A review found that mindfulness helped to improve outcomes with cohorts with depression, chronic pain and substance abuse (8).

Furthermore, a study in 2004 was conducted of healthcare professionals who completed a course of MBSR programmes. Stress, depression and psychological distress is known to be high among these professionals. The study found after completing an 8- week course of mindfulness, self-compassion and quality of life increased and stress decreased (9).

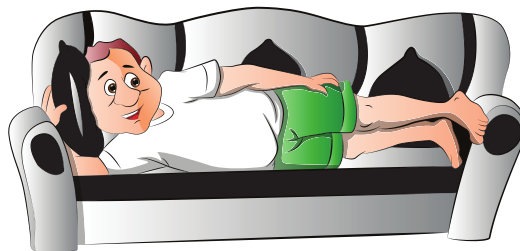
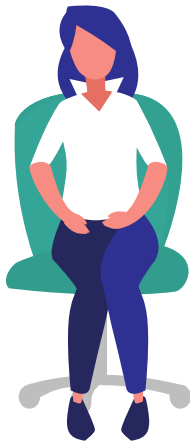
Mindfulness is a state of mind which need not be a single activity or action; it can be anything. The goal of mindfulness is to ground you in the present moment. Your entire attention is on it and you are not distracted. Use all your senses to help make any activity mindful. The more you practice, the easier it will become to achieve. The following are some easy-to-follow examples and can be used at any opportunity - even when you are sat on a bus!

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Body Scan

The aim of this exercise is to pay close attention to sensations in your body. There is no need to focus on relaxing or making a change but rather noticing the sensations of your muscles. Starting with your feet, pay attention to any sensations, the feeling of your shoes, temperature, pain, movement, breeze etc. Slowly observe and begin to move up your body - ankles, calves, thighs, pelvis, stomach, chest, back, shoulders, arms, hands, fingers, neck and finally your head.

Do this slowly and just observe. Once you have reached the top, work your way back down again until you reach your feet. This exercise can be completed seated or lying down. This technique can be practised many times during the day or as you prepare for bed (10).



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Mindful Eating

A simple exercise to focus your mind on the food you are consuming (11). It is preferable to choose a food that can be picked and handled (i.e. fruit or bread). Again, take each step slowly, before picking it up notice as many things as you can about the food - its colour, texture, size, how the light reflects on it etc.

As you pick it up, notice the texture against your hands and its weight. Pay attention to any aroma it may have. As you place the item in your mouth, don't chew it immediately. Notice how it feels; how does it differ from holding it in your hand? As you begin to roll it around your mouth, what else do you notice?

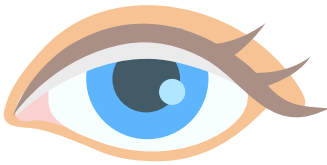
As you begin to chew it, notice the sensation of your teeth - what tastes are you experiencing now? How does it feel on your tongue? Continue to eat your meal and take the time to notice these things.



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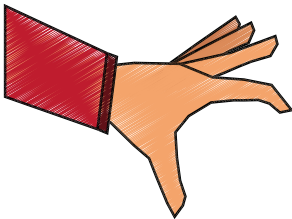
5 senses

This is a simple exercise that is great for adults and children alike to help ground you immediately no matter where you are. The aim is to notice your environment and engage all of your senses.



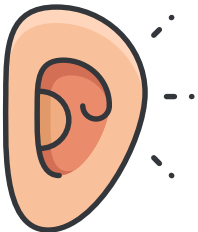
Notice 5 things you can see

that you may not have noticed before. It can be the wallpaper, the texture of the table or reflection of light



Notice 4 things you can touch

Consider your feet on the floor, texture of clothing, the keyboard, your mug



Notice 3 things you hear

We are good at filtering out noise enabling us to concentrate, but on this occasion, what 'hums' /tapping or buzzing is there?



Notice 2 things you can smell

The smell can be pleasant or not- coffee, flowers, rubbish.



Notice 1 thing you can taste

Similar to mindful eating, take your time to observe what you are eating. It's taste, temperature and texture.

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4-7-8 Breathing for Calmness Technique

A simple technique that can help alleviate anxiety. This type of deep rhythmic breathing is relaxing and can aid sleep by focusing on long, deep breaths.

The technique can be used anywhere and can be done seated or lying down. Before commencing, find a comfortable position and place the tip of your tongue on the soft tissue behind your front teeth.

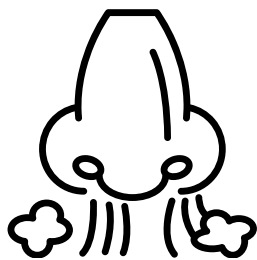
Begin by breathing in through the nose for 4 seconds.

Hold your breath for 7 seconds.

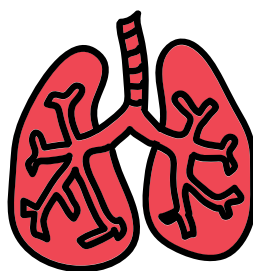
Exhale slowly through the mouth for 8 seconds making a 'woosh' sound.

Be focused on your breath to ground yourself in the present moment.

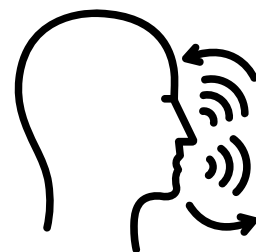
This can be repeated up to 4 times. You may feel dizzy owing to the rush of oxygen, therefore it is advised that you are either seated or lying down. Using this technique frequently can improve its impact on your overall response to stressors (12).



in through the
nose for 4 seconds



Hold for
7 seconds



out through the
mouth for 8 seconds

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References

- 1) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5434297/>
- 2) Chang, V.Y., Palesh, O., Caldwell, R., Glasgow, N., Abramson, M., Luskin, F., et al. (2004). The effects of a mindfulness-based stress reduction program on stress, mindfulness self-efficacy, and positive states of mind. *Stress and Health*, 20, 141-147.
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- 4) <https://www.nccih.nih.gov/health/meditation-in-depth>
- 5) <https://www.healingheartshealingminds.org/wpcontent/uploads/2013/06/Advances-In-Psychiatric-Treatment.pdf>
- 6) <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15723891/>
- 7) <https://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-psych-042716-051139>
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