

It's amazing the sense of peace and well-being that I can generate by something as simple as paying attention to my breathing. I try to catch myself now when I feel my mood spiralling out of control, and I take five minutes to follow my breath.

I found mindfulness really easy to incorporate into my life. I started practicing after reading one book and using the guided meditation CD that came with it. My mood has improved and I feel less anxious.

INTRODUCTION

As a psychological well-being practice, mindfulness draws on South and East Asian meditation traditions, specifically those associated with Buddhism. Mindfulness meditation can be an effective means of reducing distress and improving quality of life. In addition to healthcare settings, mindfulness practice has produced positive outcomes in businesses, schools, and the legal system.

Individuals who practice mindfulness aim to maintain focus on their experience of the present moment, rather than imagining themselves in or worrying over the past or future. Participants are encouraged to simply acknowledge internal and external stimuli - be they thoughts, images, or sounds - rather than evaluating or judging them. This can, amongst other benefits, help participants to become aware of certain thought patterns. While it may not be possible to change the thought patterns themselves, mindfulness has the power to change how those thoughts make us feel.

Mindfulness is normally practiced via meditation, visualising, breathing, yoga and other mind-body exercises. There are two primary currents of practice, known as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). The benefits of practicing mindfulness are improvements in concentration and problem solving, consistent reduction in anxiety and stress over time, better sleep, improved mood overall and an increase in disease fighting antibodies. Three quarters of GPs believe that mindfulness meditation would benefit their patients. With specific regard to MBCT, in addition to reducing the recurrence of depression, mindfulness has produced good clinical outcomes when used to treat anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, and chronic fatigue syndrome.

SUMMARY

- ▶ Based on meditation principles, mindfulness has been shown to be an effective technique for alleviating the symptoms of anxiety, stress and depression, as well as a number of other conditions.
- ▶ Mindfulness encourages practitioners to be present in the moment, and to become aware of their immediate environment and internal state of being.
- ▶ Mindfulness is potentially useful to a very broad range of people including members of the LGBT community. Challenges that disproportionately affect the LGBT community, such as depression and anxiety, have been effectively addressed through mindfulness meditation practice.

Features of Mindfulness

Mindfulness has been shown to be useful in coping with and treating a range of conditions. It makes sense that it would therefore be useful to members of LGBT community as well.

LGBT people experience depression, anxiety, and other forms of poor mental health as much as anyone else, and are indeed more likely than others to experience particular conditions. For LGBT people the triggers for these conditions can be related to negative attitudes and discrimination in society. Coming out at any age can cause anxiety, but experiencing a negative reaction from friends, family or neighbours can make this much worse. This can damage self-acceptance, self-esteem (how we view or respect ourselves), and contribute to depression (see 'Depression,' 'Anxiety' and 'Coming Out' factsheets).

Sometimes we deal with anxiety and depression in ways that can be unhelpful or even dangerous; by taking drugs or drinking too much, or engaging in risky sexual behaviour.

Indeed, research suggests that LGBT people are 2 to 3 times more likely than heterosexuals to consume harmful amounts of alcohol or develop alcohol dependency. For lesbians and bisexual women the risk is 4 times greater than their heterosexual counterparts. Probably because of its usefulness in addressing anxiety and depression, mindfulness has been shown to reduce people's dependence on drugs and alcohol. Research suggests that mindfulness may be useful in treating other conditions that disproportionately affect the LGBT community. Gay and bisexual men, for example, are statistically at greater risk of developing eating disorders. This is yet another area to which mindfulness techniques have been usefully applied.

WHAT CAN I DO?

There are many resources available online and in print that allow you to teach yourself mindfulness, so that you can start practicing right away. Participation in a formal course can be a powerful long term complement, whether you want to deepen your own practice or train to teach others mindfulness.

Short-term

Focus on your breathing – Paying attention to your breath is often the first recommended step when beginning to practice mindfulness. Taking five minutes from your day to focus on your breathing can have positive results. It is a simple task which allows you to maintain focus on the present moment and help improve your wellbeing.

Be non-judgemental – Mindfulness works best when an individual is able to recognise they may have strong emotions attached to some stimuli (e.g. a person, an event that happened during their day) but are able to take a step back from these emotions, reflect on them and take a non-judgemental attitude towards them. This does not mean suppressing or ignoring the emotions - the individual recognises their feelings but stays in control of them, not the other way around.

RESOURCES

▶ Mindfulnet

Comprehensive introduction to mindfulness, including book recommendations and teacher listings.

mindfulnet.org

▶ Oxford Mindfulness Centre

Research and training centre for Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy.

oxfordmindfulness.org

▶ Bangor Mindfulness Centre

Research and training centre for Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy and Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.

bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness

▶ Be Mindful Online

Online course teaching how to practise mindfulness in daily life.

bemindfulonline.com

▶ Online Lecture

Jon Kabat-Zinn discusses mindfulness at Google.

[Click here](#) to access the lecture video

(Linked checked 28/01/2013)

Awareness – Although lots of people have busy and hectic schedules, taking things a little slower to pay attention to what is happening around you can have a beneficial impact on well-being. Whether it's noticing that the flowers have grown in the park you walk past on your way to work or seeing someone familiar on your train journey, giving space to small experiences like these may increase well-being.

Websites – There is a great deal of information on the internet regarding mindfulness principles and practice. This can be a great place to begin to learn about mindfulness and how to incorporate it into your life. Mindfulnet (see *resources*) has a great deal of information as well as links to many other mindfulness websites.

Books and Guided Meditation – Many books have been published on how to incorporate mindfulness into your life, from both psychological and Buddhist perspectives. Some local NHS Mental Health Trusts have schemes which make mindfulness books available at local libraries. Ask your GP if such a scheme exists in your area. Even if it does not, your local library may have some mindfulness titles in its collection. In addition, many of the titles are available for sale online. Sometimes these titles include audio recordings of guided meditation on CD or for download. Many of these recordings are also available separately.

Long-term

Online courses – The Mental Health Foundation has set up an online mindfulness course (£60 fee), which includes 10 sessions that you can complete at your own pace (see '*Be Mindful Online*' link above). Thousands of people have participated in this course, which incorporates elements of both Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy.

Training course – The Mental Health Foundation provides a listing of mindfulness courses throughout the UK via their 'Be Mindful' website (see *resources*). Full length courses tend to run for eight weeks, though there are shorter courses and introductory sessions available as well. The Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice at Bangor University and the Oxford Mindfulness Centre at Oxford University provide training for those who would like to teach Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy or Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction.

REFERENCES

i Oxford Mindfulness Centre, oxfordmindfulness.org

ii "Be Mindful," Mental Health Foundation, <http://www.bemindful.co.uk/>

iii "Be Mindful," Mental Health Foundation, <http://www.bemindful.co.uk/>

iv Bishop, S.R., Lau, M., Shapiro, S., Carlson, L., et al. (2004). "Mindfulness: A Proposed Operational Definition", *Clin Psychol Sci Prac* 11:230–241.



34 HARTHAM ROAD
LONDON, ENGLAND N7 9LJ
p: 020 7700 1323
e: info@pacehealth.org.uk
w: <http://pacehealth.org.uk>

PACE is London's leading charity promoting the mental health and emotional well-being of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.



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