

MINDFULNESS



A QUICK

INTRODUCTION

BY RITA RICCOLA

About the Author

Rita Riccola is the director of Mindfulness Education and Mindful New Zealand Schools. She has been practising mindfulness for over 25 years and has attended a number of mindfulness retreats and seminars. She has also completed the Certificate Course with Mindful Schools (USA) based on MBSR.

Rita is also a registered NZ Teacher with many years classroom experience in a number of Auckland schools. She has been teaching Mindfulness in schools and community centres since 2013.

MINDFULNESS

Exactly what is Mindfulness? Mindfulness is noticing where our attention is, without judging it good or bad while being aware of the present moment with full awareness of what is happening. It's noticing when we are lost in rumination (over- thinking) or dreaming off into an imagined future where ...'things will be better', it's noticing the sensation in our bodies and gently bringing our attention back to the present moment.

Practicing mindfulness helps us develop mental resilience and provides us with a self- managing technique that helps us develop many well documented positive attributes; better self-care through self- control, improved attention span, being aware of our thoughts- especially negative thoughts and negative self-talk, increased and lasting calmness, more energy to name a few.

Mindfulness is quite simple. By doing the practices (breathing, listening, body scanning, walking, eating) you train your attention to have total engagement in the moment which increases your focus and presence and deepens your level of reality -more than when you are only identifying with the thinking mind.

Practicing Mindfulness helps us break old patterns and have a rest from the constant inner 'commenter'. Mindfulness helps us to remember that life is being lived right here right now- not in some distant past or an imagined future. It helps us become more present by being aware of what is happening in the present moment and by engaging in the present more fully, with more attention.

GET STARTED

In mindfulness we use the breath as an anchor, to stabilise us, make us feel steady inside and outside- not unlike the roots of a tree anchoring the tree deep in the ground. The simple breathing exercises helps calm the busy mind, allows us to take a pause from the constant inner chatter and creates some space to simply be present in the here and now instead of always reliving anxious events or thoughts or dreaming off into an imagined future where everything will be fine!

With the technology at our disposal, social networks, iphones, ipads, we hardly have a moment to just be with ourselves, be still, enjoy the sunshine, the breeze, the birds singing, a simple state of just being.

Some of the **BENEFITS** of practicing Mindfulness:-

- increased mental resilience when the pressure is on.
- decreased anxiety, worry and over –concern
- develop self-awareness
- improved self- management and impulse control
- increased emotional intelligence
- making better choices
- understanding the difference between reacting and responding
- improved wellbeing; mental, spiritual, physical and emotional
- better memory
- increased attention and focus
- more tolerance and kindness towards others, increased gratitude
- less anger and reactivity
- sleep easier/better

Before we begin the breathing exercises, let's get into your 'mindful body' so we are alert and attentive to the process;

Sit up straight but not stiff, shoulders back but relaxed. Feel your back against the chair. When your spine is straight and upright it opens your chest and the breathing is deeper and easier- oxygen can reach deeper inside your lungs. Place your feet firmly on the floor and really feel the soles of your feet making contact with the ground. So now you are sitting in your mindful body; alert and noticing your posture.

BREATHING EXERCISE 1:

Now sitting relaxed but alert gently close the eyes, place your right hand on your belly. All you are doing is putting your full attention on the breath going in and out of the body. Your stomach will rise and fall, rise and fall. That's all. It's very simple. The difficult part is your mind usually skips along from one thought to the next and the next. This exercise helps to focus your attention on one thing- your breath and by doing this you naturally become calmer and stiller. Your mind will wander off- that's normal, especially at the beginning of practicing Mindfulness. The more focused you can stay on the task, attention on your breath and the rise and fall of your stomach,, noticing the quality of your breath; is it hard or soft, cool or warm- the calmer you begin to feel, your mind becomes calmer and clearer.

Start by trying to stay focused on breathing this way for 1 minute. After a while, increase to 3 minutes. When you experience the calmness and stillness that comes with this exercise you will happily increase the time as it suits you and as you realise this is a great way to step back when your mind is overwhelmed, especially if it is experiencing a strong emotional reaction and just re-centre yourself through using this great, simple breathing technique.

BREATHING EXERCISE 2:

In this second exercise, sit in your Mindful body, back straight but not stiff, relaxed but alert, feet planted firmly on the floor... you are aware of your feet making contact with the ground. Now we are going to focus on the small area beneath the nose. Take a deep breath in and as you let it out, feel the breath (air) touch the skin below the nostrils. Again, this is a simple exercise but to stay focused on the feeling of the breath on the area below the nose, even for a couple of minutes, means you have to ignore the distracting thoughts that will come up.

Over-thinking is what our minds do but when our thoughts threaten to overwhelm us and we can't turn them off, 9 or there is an external stressful event) it's great to have a simple technique such as these breathing exercises to help to re balance and not be swept along by a tide of strong emotions and unhelpful over thinking.

Practice this breathing technique again for 2 minutes to start with and again, as you experience the benefits from this simple exercise you can increase the time as needed to this great Mindfulness practice.

Remember we are doing these exercises to break the habit of the mind to dart from one thought to another (aimless thinking) that can become quite draining and distracting.

When we cultivate mindfulness, noticing what's happening in the present moment without judging it good or bad, we become more alert and aware of ourselves and our environment, we become naturally calmer and more peaceful inside. We are better focused and more present to the people around us. Being mindful helps us 'read' situations and reactions more clearly and helps us make better choices and react impulsively less.

MINDFUL LISTENING

1. In this simple exercise we put our full attention on listening. When you focus your attention on one thing, the mind automatically becomes still and calm. That doesn't mean it's easy because the mind will quickly throw up thoughts to distract you. Your job is to keep as focused as possible for as long as possible. At first it might only be 20 seconds but the more you do this practice the longer you will be able to hold your attention on sound. It's very relaxing and calming. Sitting up straight but relaxed, gently shut the eyes and put your full attention on any sounds you can hear inside or outside of the room. Try not to judge them good or bad just listen intently to the sound and identify it. When thoughts rise up and try to distract you just gently bring your attention back to the sounds.

BODY SCANNING

In this exercise we shut the eyes gently and put our attention on different part of the body, noticing if there is any tension, holding on and then we mentally release the tension.

Starting at the feet, put your full attention on the sensation on the toes. You might feel a slight tingling. If you don't feel anything, that's fine- after practicing this technique for a while, you become more aware of the sensations of the body. It doesn't usually happen immediately. Now put your attention on the soles of your feet, the tops of your feet, the ankles all the while being aware of the feeling of each part of the body.

Put your attention on your lower legs. These muscles work hard all day and it's not uncommon to feel a bit tense. Allow these muscles to fully relax. Now the thighs- they usually feel quite heavy- let go

of any tension and relax. Now follow the same instructions for;

Your hips, stomach, chest, (stomach and the chest is a target area for emotion and often becomes tense immediately when anger, hurt, sadness rise up in you) lower back, upper back, shoulder muscles, the tips of your fingers. the palms of your hands. You may even feel warmth in the palms.

Now put your full attention on your fingertips. Now feel the lower arm, the upper arm and the shoulder muscles . Put your attention on your chin, cheeks, nose, lips, eyes, forehead, sides of your head the top of your head. Put your full attention on the top of your head and feel your whole body sitting on the chair relaxed but alert. Take a deep breath in and out letting go of any 'holding on' energy.

Now repeat going all the way down the body, part by part putting your full attention on each part as you name quietly to yourself down to your toes. Again hold the sensation of the whole body as relaxed and aware.

Your whole body is now relaxed, alert and aware. Let any remaining tension drain down your body and out of your feet. You are the only one in charge of how you feel at any one time. By 'checking in' with yourself and mentally checking for tension allows you to stay aware of shifting moods and feelings and you learn to observe rather than react and be drawn into living out the feelings and emotions rather watch them, acknowledge them and let them pass away, as they will, if you do not put attention on them and 'engage' in a story about them.

Just let everything pass through you without over-thinking situations, feelings and emotions that can and do trap you in unhappiness. It's the same for positive feelings too. Just enjoy them when they come along. Don't try and hold onto them and relive them (though it's common we want the good feelings and not the bad feelings.)

MINDFUL THINKING

We can become aware of our thoughts in the same way we do our breath and sensations. While we do our practices; breathing, listening, body scanning just notice when the first thoughts come in and say to yourself ‘thinking, thinking,’ then bring your attention back to your awareness of breath.

Being aware of our thinking helps us to not go over the past or dream off into the future or to focus on thoughts and situations where you ‘over-think’. It helps us be firmly present in the here and now and connect fully with each moment.

BODY AWARENESS AND PHYSICAL SENSATIONS

Let’s get into our mindful bodies and start the lesson with some mindful breathing. Sitting in your chair, feel your back sitting straight (not stiff) and feel your backbone against the chair. Be aware of your feet planted on the floor, anchoring you steadily to the earth.

OK now, place your right hand gently on your belly and breathe normally. Breath in, breath out. The belly rises and falls, rises and falls.

Your job is to keep your awareness on the breath and belly rising and falling. When your mind wanders to something else; what’s for dinner, talking to a friend later, whatever, gently bring your attention back to the task; awareness of the breath.

Now we will do the second part of the breathing; put your attention in the small area beneath the nose and become

aware of the breath as it leaves the nose. Ask yourself is it warm, cold, smooth, rough. Notice the quality of the breath. Again do this exercise for 1-2 minutes and when your mind wanders bring it gently back. You are training your mind to be attentive to one thing. When you do this the mind becomes naturally calmer and quieter plus you are breaking habitual thinking, aimless thinking by focusing one thing.

When you get caught up in thinking we forget that there is a quiet space beneath all the thinking. Mindfulness practices (breathing, listening , body scanning) all help us to recognise that quiet and to pay attention to it and have a break from endless thinking. It's relaxing and refreshing!

When we put our attention on the physical feelings of the body the mind becomes still. It cannot think of two things at once. This is why we do the practices of awareness on sensations; it helps quieten our minds and gives us a rest from constant thinking, often aimless and unproductive.

Feelings are the language of the body. By being aware of how we feel, really noticing, it can help us become aware of feelings as they rise inside the body and we can 'listen' to our bodies so the feeling doesn't totally take us over. Feelings, like thoughts have a natural cycle and will rise up and eventually pass on. It's only when we start thinking and then over-thinking about our feelings we can make them last longer inside our bodies. We give the feeling more fuel and they get stronger and can take over. If we learn to watch our feelings and step back and let them pass through us without grabbing hold of them with our minds and prolonging the pain they often cause- this helps us restore balance quicker. Recurring feelings can also be an indicator of a deeper problem or anxiety and may need to be addressed through counselling or psychotherapy if the feeling persists.

When you become aware of a strong feeling rising up in

you, you can take some deep breaths and just let it be. It will pass away quicker this way.

One additional exercise is- if you notice your lips are downturned like when you feel sad or...well, down just gently bring a smile to the lips. It may seem odd but when you turn the sides of the lips up into a small smile, the whole energy of your face lifts up as well as the feeling inside you. Try it- it actually works!

INTERCONNECTEDNESS

Developing a connection to nature has been shown to help with depression and reduce the symptoms of anxiety and stress while increasing a positive frame of mind and joyfulness. Walking in nature, a forest, by a river, near the sea, looking up into the endless sky either day or night, listening to the soothing birdsong reminds us we are part of a diverse world of living things; animal and plants and all the natural world around us.

By cultivating an increased awareness of our bodies we become more aware of how we co-exist in the natural world with all other life. We become humbled to realise we are part of an interconnected world of life itself in all its many forms.

Our world is filled with plants and animals and humans that all depend on each other for survival. We all depend on the life-giving sun to warm and nourish us and the earth so that food is made for us to survive. Trees breathe in a gas called carbon dioxide and breathe out oxygen which we breathe in and then we breathe out carbon dioxide for the trees so we need each other! Trees need people and people need trees. That's a good reason to not cut down all the world's forests!

Next time you breathe in just send out a thought of gratitude to all the natural world we live in—we are all interconnected.

It's the same with people; no matter what our circumstances, some have more than others, better luck whatever, really we are all human, we all suffer physically, emotionally, we lose people in relationships and death. In a sense we are living the same life and we will all one day die alone as we were born. Realising everyone suffers in a similar way helps us feel compassion and caring towards others. We are all connected and living this human life

How do you feel when you are in nature? Walking in a forest, walking along a beach, watching a sunset, gazing up at the dazzling, star studded night?

Liking and Disliking;

In this lesson, apart from doing the regular Mindfulness practices of Breathing, Listening and Body Scanning we are going to look closer at how holding onto negative emotions, in the body and in the mind, causes more unnecessary suffering.

Let's start by observing where we experience emotions; either in the body as a sensation or in the mind as thought.

Below are some words that describe feelings and emotions and I want you to notice where you experience them; in the mind or in the body and where in the body;

JEALOUSY
LONELY

ANTICIPATION

JOY

ANNOYED

PEACE

HURT
CALMNESS

LONELINESS

SADNESS
DISTRACTED

HAPPINESS

EXCITEMENT
ACCEPTANCE

CONFUSED

Eventually we come to realise that life is a series of events that come and go like the tide. When we learn to acknowledge without giving them the power to overwhelm us we see they have a natural time span.... They rise up and then they eventually disappear. If we just acknowledge these feelings and let them just be they pass on more quickly but if we start investing thoughts into them, stories, they are harder to leave behind.

5 Steps to Wellbeing

1. Giving/ Gratitude
2. Keep learning
3. Noticing/ paying attention
4. Engage with people
5. Physical activity

Practicing Mindfulness regularly puts you in direct contact with an inner resource that is naturally present when intentionally and regularly exercised and can cultivate the ability to stay calm under pressure- to take a pause and respond rather than react to life events and pressures. A typical benefit from regular practice is the increased ability to pay attention and to stay focused for longer periods of time- a pre-requisite for all learning.

With Mindfulness training you are not adding to your knowledge in the traditional sense- you are in fact removing some of the mental clutter that is holding you back from being naturally mindful and in a state of equilibrium. We experience a wide range of states that in fact are part of being human- including stress. However, it is when the balance is tipped to far and we find ourselves mentally, emotionally and physically overwhelmed and in a constant state of anxiety that we need to remember there are things we can do to restore balance.

Breathing is fundamental to our lives and to Mindfulness practice and has been shown again and again in research to be an effective means to lower stress and anxiety. Practicing Mindfulness (paying attention and aware of the present) is establishing a new, refreshing state of mind that energizes, restores and refreshes our energy periodically throughout the day and when the pressure is on provides a pause and a space from the effects of being overwhelmed, stressed and anxious.



Learn How to Teach Mindfulness to Children and Students

There is a growing interest in Mindfulness and increased request to get mindfulness programmes in place in New Zealand schools

Workshop in Wellington 27 June 2015

A half day Introductory Training teachers and anyone who wants to establish an ongoing mindfulness practice for themselves, their students and children.

The Workshop Covers:

- **What is Mindfulness?**
- **Why Teach Mindfulness in Schools**
- **Evident based reseach and background**
- **Mindfulness Exercises**
- **Training Session - Teaching Mindfulness**

The workshop includes, lesson plans, practices and scripts to assist on all levels to introduce mindfulness into the classrooms and the home.

In this half day intensive workshop you will also familiarise yourself with the simple but powerful Mindfulness techniques that are helping individuals from all walks of life to have a direct experience of the 'mindful state' and learning how to 'be in the present moment'.

The workshop is held by Rita Riccola, who has been practising mindfulness for over 25 years and has completed the Certificate Course with Mindful Schools (USA) based on MBSR. Rita is also a NZ Reg. Teacher.

TIME & PLACE

27th June 2015, 1-5pm
Central Library, 65 Victoria St, Wellington

Cost: \$130 pp (including printed material and afternoon tea)

Register online: mindfulnesseducation.co.nz or call Rita on 021 238 7799

email: rita@mindfulnesseducation.co.nz

