

Mindfulness Summary

By Mark Williams

How do you manage the stresses and strains of daily life? What if we could tap into a deep sense of enduring calm, even when we feel troubled or anxious?

Mindfulness is a practical eight-week guide to incorporate mindful meditation into daily life. Pain and suffering are inevitable, but mindfulness can help us cope. It's a misconception that mindfulness is just a feel-good antidote, but it's actually a set of practices, that help access a deep and enduring sense of happiness and peace.

Professor Mark Williams is a world-renowned expert on mindfulness. He is the co-founder of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) and heads up the Oxford Mindfulness Centre. Williams has studied stress, anxiety, and depression for over thirty years. He believes that mindful practice is a successful way to tackle certain health issues. He also maintains that it's the secret to sustained happiness. Dr. Danny Penman, the co-writer, is a meditation teacher and award-winning journalist.

In this brief summary, we'll look at the simple yet powerful eight-week process, that guides us through meditation practices. Furthermore, we'll see how these practices can easily be incorporated into our daily lives to break the cycle of stress, anxiety, and exhaustion.

Using Science to Pave the Way Towards Greater Mental Well-Being

We all strive towards greater mental well-being, but it may seem like mindfulness is just another buzzword. It's more than that, though. Essentially mindfulness is about taking a break from the practice of **doing** and learning how simply to **be**.

The so-called "doing mode" is the mode of mind that never lets us take a break. It's the act of continually needing to do things, which traps us in relentless and frantic "busyness." And, it's not only detrimental to our physical well-being, but it also drives us to judge, compare, and strive. It makes us critical of how things are, and reminds us of what we wish we could change. The doing mode, pulls us into the past, or pushes us towards the future. In turn, this short-circuits the full sensory experience of what's happening around us right now.

The practice of mindfulness, strengthens our capacity to focus on the present moment, while encouraging an attitude of kindness and compassion. One of the critical aspects, is to focus on our intentions. Especially, regarding how we pay attention to the world around us. Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy teaches us to notice how our thoughts can turn into patterns of thinking. These patterns of thinking are vital. They influence productivity, our mood, and our relationships with those around us.

The meditation practices taught in this book are scientifically based. They help us to observe our thoughts without getting entangled in them. According to Harvard researchers, people spend 47% of their waking hours thinking about something other than what they're doing at a

particular moment. This process is called "mind-wandering," and we all tend to do it. The problem is that a wandering mind isn't often a happy and fulfilled mind. Our thoughts tend to move towards what's wrong, and what's worrying us.

One of the most simple mindfulness practices, teaches us to concentrate on our breathing. This practice helps us notice how thoughts arise, and in turn, we learn to stop fighting those thoughts. We also start to realize that thoughts are transient. The more we practice, the more we understand that thoughts and feelings, whether positive or negative, are impermanent. While some thoughts and feelings may appear stronger than others, they're nonetheless fleeting. So, by focusing on the breath and being compassionate towards ourselves, we can learn to feel more grounded in the present. The more grounded we're, the less likely it is that we'll get caught up in the spirals of thoughts and emotions. This grounding will, in turn, lower your overall stress levels.

From a scientific perspective, one of the most significant findings of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, is that it's proven to be just as effective as pharmaceuticals when treating clinical depression, anxiety, and other mood disorders. So, sustained mindfulness practices dramatically improve mental balance, emotional regulation, and quality of life.

Some Common Misconceptions About Meditation

Many of us may be dubious about meditation and mindfulness practices. We may view it as nothing more than just a fad. Others may feel that to take part, you have to adopt new or different religious beliefs.

Mindfulness and meditation involve some practices that stem from eastern traditions like Buddhism. However, meditation itself isn't a religion. Meditation is simply a method of mental training. It's a technique that's compatible with many beliefs.

Some people may also be put off doing meditation, because they view it as time-consuming. Practicing meditation doesn't have to take up a lot of time. It can start with a one-minute practice. It also doesn't have to be complicated. We don't have to sit cross-legged and chant. And, it's most definitely not about success or failure. Even when our meditation practice feels difficult, we will learn something valuable about the mind's workings and benefit psychologically.

The attitude we bring to the practice, should be one of kindness and acceptance. But this doesn't mean accepting the unacceptable. This attitude is about seeing the world with greater clarity, so that we can take wiser and more considered action to change what needs to be changed. Essentially, mindfulness is about cultivating a compassionate awareness. This awareness allows us to find the optimum path towards realizing our goals, and living by our deepest values.

This book offers an 8-week program, based on MBCT. The practice is practical and easy to follow. It provides various ways to incorporate mindfulness into our daily lives.

Week One: Move Out of Autopilot and Into the Present Moment

Week one of the program, is all about transitioning into a more present

and aware state of being. The authors suggest that a great way to separate from our frantic modes of doing, is to practice an 8-minute meditation. They call this "awareness of the body and breath."

How often is it that you think about your breathing? We usually take breathing for granted. While we can live without food and water for a few days, we can't survive for more than a few minutes without breathing. Breath is life. We need to be more attuned to it.

Attending to our breathing patterns reminds us that, at the core of our being, something is happening that depends very little on who we are, or what we want to achieve. Breath also gives us a way to ground our attention in the here and now, while being fully present.

Week Two: Reconnect With Your Body

To truly cultivate mindfulness, we need our minds to integrate with our bodies. There are many ways to achieve this. But, one such method is the 14-minute body scan meditation. Practicing the body scan can help us shift gears from thinking, to sensing things in the present moment. The body scan also invites us to experience our internal weather patterns. A fun habit-releaser could involve going for short walks and being mindful of all five senses.

The next time you go for a walk, smell all the scents around you. Feel the fresh breeze on your face, and the crunch of leaves below your feet. Just listen to the world around you. Every moment, of every season, has a whole host of delights, regardless of where we live. According to the authors, this is what true happiness is about; looking at the same things with different eyes.

Week Three: Develop Awareness and Curiosity, and Weave It Into Daily Life

We're all told to think outside the box, but here's a story that may resonate with you. A traveler to a small Greek island watched as a young boy tried to persuade a donkey to move. The boy had vegetables to deliver, and he'd carefully loaded up the animals' panniers. But, the donkey would not budge. The boy became more and more agitated and raised his voice at the donkey and pulled harder on the rope. The donkey dug its hooves in firmly.

This stalemate might have gone on for a long time, if it hadn't been for the boy's grandfather. Hearing the commotion, he came out of his house and surveyed the situation. Gently, the old man took the rope from the boy and presented a more gentle alternative. The boy's grandfather suggested loosening his grip on the rope, standing very close beside the donkey, and looking down the track in the direction that he wanted to go. And then, wait.

The boy patiently did as his grandfather said, and after a few moments, the donkey started to walk forward. The boy giggled with delight, and the traveler watched as the boy and the animal moved on happily together.

How often in life do we behave like the boy in the story? Often, when things don't work out as we want them, it's tempting to keep pushing or pulling in the direction we want to go. Usually, it's better to pause, allow things to unfold, and spot the opportunities as they arise. For many of us, this attitude may sound counter-intuitive. It suggests a certain level of passivity. Yet, on occasion, this might be the best course of action, because pushing too hard at a problem, might make things worse. Furthermore, behaving stubbornly and assertively, can close down the mind and prevent us from thinking creatively. Ultimately, clear and creative awareness thrives in a playfully open mind.

This book introduces us to yoga stretches and a 3-minute breathing space meditation that we can use throughout the day to encourage a greater sense of awareness. These practices help us to reorientate ourselves. They enable us to adopt a more mindful, compassionate stance to whatever comes our way. It reminds us that the spirit in which we do something, is as important as the action itself. When we're exhausted or anxious, we can fall into a closed negative mindset. This mindset hinders our ability to be creative, and open to new possibilities.

Week Four: Take a Step Back From Your Thoughts

Stepping back from your thoughts may sound impossible, but you can train yourself to step back from your thoughts and internal behaviors. Our minds are designed to fill in the blanks, and try to make sense of the chaos around us. Often, when we hear stories, our minds are hard at

work, trying to imagine the scene and interpret the outcomes.

The way that we interpret our lives, makes a massive difference in how we react to things. Williams says that our thoughts are like rumors in the mind; yes, they might be true, but quite often, they're actually not. So when we feel stressed, we often blame ourselves and imagine something is wrong with us. These negative thoughts can feel like absolute truths, but they're more likely symptoms of stress.

Week four takes us through learning to enhance our ability, to sense when our minds and bodies are signaling that things are turning negative and self-attacking. The sound and thought meditation, for example, helps us to become aware that the continually changing soundscape is just like our thought-stream. It's never still, and never silent. Often, we have no control over how they arrive. But, we can learn to relate to our thoughts in the same way that we relate to sounds. This allows for some control. Furthermore, we can simply listen, and observe thoughts and sounds without getting caught up in them.

Weeks Five and Six: Explore Difficulties With Kindness and Acceptance

We often have difficulty being gentle with ourselves and with others. Whenever we face hardship, like an illness or work stress, our natural reaction is usually to try and push it away. However, sooner or later, our avoidant strategies no longer work. We're faced with a choice. Either we can go on pretending that nothing's wrong, or we can adopt a different approach.

In this section of the book, the authors suggest accepting what we may not like - the things that scare us. Acceptance isn't about giving up, and it's not about being passive. It's also not about being detached or in denial.

Acceptance is a brief pause. It's a period of allowing, and letting things be. It's a period of clarity. Acceptance takes us off the hair-trigger, so that we're more likely to be responsive, as opposed to reactive. It also enables us to become fully aware of our difficulties. We become aware of their painful nuances, and respond to them in the most skillful way possible. It gives us more time and space to respond to these difficulties. In short, mindful acceptance gives us choice.

The meditations in week five, invite us to explore difficulties and develop a compassionate awareness of what's troubling us. A suggestion here, is to take some time to cultivate plants. The idea is that nurturing a plant, teaches us that simple things can have a surprisingly significant benefit.

A study in the late 1970s, by Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer, involved a group of adults, responsible for taking care of a plant. At the same time, another group was also given plants but told not to worry, because someone else would tend to their plant. The researchers then measured happiness levels between the two groups. Interestingly, those who had a plant to look after were noticeably happier and healthier. This result indicates that just the act of caring for another living thing, can markedly improve our lives.

In week six, we're invited to focus on kindness and compassion. We're asked about self-nourishment, how to make better choices, and ultimately, how to slow down amid all the chaos. The key message here,

is that kindness arises through empathy. Which is a deep understanding of another's predicament. The challenge is to do more good deeds for those you care about, and more random acts of kindness for those you've never met before. Importantly, it's not about receiving praise from others. These silent acts of kindness will help us notice how these actions can profoundly affect our bodies. So, bring back compassion into all aspects of your life.

Week Seven: Evaluate the Balance Between Things That Nourish You, and Things That Deplete You

This chapter opens, by asking us when it was, that we stopped dancing. This question leads us to ask ourselves if there are activities that once brought us joy, but we don't do anymore.

We're usually so busy filling our lives with work, endless schedules, and small tasks, that we don't nourish the body and the soul. It's generally challenging to reflect on our needs when we're stressed or anxious. However, it's at these points in time when we should ask ourselves, 'what are my needs at this particular moment?'

Perhaps, this means doing something pleasurable like taking a hot bath, or drinking a cup of tea. Maybe, it's doing something that gives you a sense of mastery, like cleaning your desk, or reading a few pages of a book.

The science behind motivation is essential, and it dictates that when your

mood is low, motivation follows action, rather than the other way around. Therefore, when you put the action first, motivation will soon follow. So, the tiniest steps can help us re-energize and improve our relationship with the present moment.

Week Eight: Remind Yourself That We Only Have One Wild and Precious Life

It sounds cliched, but life is short, and you should enjoy it as much as possible. The program's final task, is to weave all of the practices into a single, sustainable, long-term routine. We can call upon mindful practices, to start our day and feel more attuned to our bodies and minds. We can punctuate the day with breathing spaces, befriend our feelings when things are overwhelming, and take time to do what nourishes us.

The key is to remember to set clear intentions, as we continue with our practices. We also need to be honest with ourselves when we ask questions about what's most important. Through finding this out, we'll be able to find a practice to align ourselves with, so that we can lead the most fulfilling life possible.

In Conclusion

Mindfulness can start today. The authors present a simple process toward becoming happier and less anxious.

The step by step program brings together the practice and theory of mindfulness, and offers enormous insights into the human mind. The key theme of this book, is to be more aware and present in your own life. You should not take anything for granted. Remember, we can make the best,

of even the worst days.