

'Accessible, pragmatic and helpful'

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MINDFULNESS

BE MINDFUL.
LIVE IN THE MOMENT.

GILL HASSON

Mindfulness

Be mindful. Live in the moment.

Gill Hasson



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*For my Dad who died while I was writing this book.
He always knew that the present moment is life itself.*

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Introduction

Recently, I listened to a palliative care nurse talking about her work with terminally ill patients. She explained that a key aspect of her work was to help provide a sense of “now” for the dying; to enable people to make the most of their time; to live their life with purpose, dignity and support; to make the most of the present, rather than getting too caught up in regrets for the past or fears for the future.

Her work is clearly meaningful and valuable. But listening to this nurse, it made me wonder why so many people might wait till they’re dying to learn how to make “now” such an important part of their life.

From the moment we’re born, now is *always* what we have. There is never a time when our lives are not now, in this moment. The present moment is, in fact, life itself!

Life unfolds in the present.

As George Harrison once said: “It’s being here now that’s important. There’s no past and there’s no future . . . all there is ever, is the now. We can gain experience from the past, but we can’t relive it; and we can hope for the future, but we don’t know if there is one.”

How can *you* make the most of “now”? By learning to be mindful.

You may think that being mindful requires an ability to completely clear your mind and go off into an altered state in an attempt to get to a better place. Not so; mindfulness does not involve complex meditation routines. Mindfulness is *not* about having an empty mind or suppressing thoughts and feelings. Nor does it require years of practice, sitting in the lotus position in a flowing white robe on a beautiful beach.

There are two ways of practising mindfulness; the formal way and the informal way.

Formal mindfulness is probably better known as meditation; it involves following established practices; taking time out of your day to be still and silent, to focus on your breath, to be aware of sounds, senses, thoughts and feelings.

Informal mindfulness requires no conventions. It simply means bringing mindful awareness to everyday life; to daily activities such as eating, walking, driving and housework. Informal mindfulness is also part of your interactions with other people; at work, at home and in your social life.

This book is concerned with *informal* mindfulness – it is about mindfulness outside of meditation.

Your mind is able to think back and reflect on past events and experiences. Your mind can also think about the future; it can plan ahead.

Of course, your mind can wander to good things; you can remember good times and anticipate forthcoming events. But this ability to think back to the past and forward to the future is not always an unmitigated blessing.

Too often, life is racing by. There's no time to experience what's happening now, because you're busy thinking about what needs doing tomorrow or you're distracted by thoughts about what did or didn't happen yesterday. And all the time your mind is chattering with commentary or judgement.

Other times you can get stuck in the past, going back over and over events or becoming paralyzed by worries about the future.

Why mindfulness is so relevant to our lives now

At its most extreme, worrying about the future can lead to anxiety disorders. Dwelling on the past can lead to depression.

Research¹ shows that the number of people in England who experience depression and anxiety has slowly but steadily risen in the last 20 years.

In 1993, depression with anxiety was experienced by 7.5% of the population, rising to 9.7% in 2007. Generalized anxiety disorder was experienced by 4.45% of the population in 1993 rising to 4.7% in 2007.

Feeling overwhelmed by the past or the future takes us away from living in the now, in the present. Too often, we let the present slip away. It's easy to waste "now" time, missing what is happening in the only moment that really exists.

When you're at work, for example, you're thinking about being on holiday; on holiday, you're worrying about the work piling up on your desk.

Nowadays, to make matters worse, you can take your phone and computer on holiday with you so that wherever you go, you are never actually there! Computers, smart phones, MP3 players; there are plenty of ways that modern technology can make you lose touch with what is happening and where you are right now.

Mindfulness enables you to experience and appreciate your life instead of rushing through it, constantly trying to be somewhere else.

“Mindfulness is the ultimate mobile device; you can use it anywhere, anytime, unobtrusively.”

Sharon Salzberg

Mindfulness is a way of living your life so that you are in the present moment more often. It involves bringing your awareness back from the future or the past and into the present moment. You are not trying to get to a better place or to become a better person – you are already there.

Mindfulness is living *in* the moment, not living *for* the moment.

When you are living *for* the moment, there are no potential consequences. You do something that makes you feel good right now, in this moment. But often, it's a surprise to find out that there are consequences to pay!

When you are living *in* the moment, you know that this moment leads to the next one; that life is a series of connected moments. You make conscious decisions – based on your beliefs and values – and you take responsibility for your choices.

About this book

This book is in two parts: Part One helps you to understand mindfulness; what it involves and how you can learn to be more mindful.

We start by asking “How Mindful Are You?” to get you thinking about where your mind is at in a variety of situations.

In Chapter 1 you will discover the benefits of mindfulness – how mindfulness can have a positive effect in different areas of your life. Chapter 2 will help you to understand how and why you might slip into being *mindless* instead of *mindful*. You will learn ways to change how you think and you’ll discover that simply being aware of how you use your mind is being mindful.

You’ll be encouraged to open yourself to new ideas and ways of doing things; to let go of unhelpful ways of thinking and establish more helpful, mindful ways of thinking.

You will find out that you *can* change the way you think.

But whatever it is that you think, your thoughts come with emotions and feelings attached to them. In fact, thoughts and feelings are inextricably linked. Chapter 3 focuses on being more aware of your emotions in order to break free from unhelpful thoughts and thinking patterns.

So far, we have focused on thoughts and feelings.

So in Chapter 4 we turn to being mindful of what you *do*. You will see that mindfulness is most easily practised by

turning everyday activities into opportunities for mindfulness. There are plenty of ideas, tips and techniques to help you apply mindfulness to the everyday activities of your life.

You'll be encouraged to bring your attention to a new level by slowing down whatever you're doing. You will see that you only have to spend a few minutes each day doing mindfully those activities that you usually hurry through. Everyday activities like washing up or brushing your teeth.

Each of these everyday activities gives you an opportunity to be mindful. These opportunities raise your awareness. Then, from practising these little awarenesses, you can develop a more whole experience of mindfulness itself.

It's all very optimistic and encouraging and that theme continues as we end Part 1 on a high note; you are urged to actively seek out the good things in life.

How is that mindful?

Because making an effort to notice the good things in life – the small pleasures and the people and things that make a positive difference to you – is, in itself, being mindful. You bring your awareness to how good you feel right now, in the present moment. Noticing what is good right now *is* living in the moment.

Having developed a clear understanding of what mindfulness is and how to be mindful, in Part 2, we turn to specific situations where being mindful can really help you.

You will learn how being mindful can help you to be less swept away by thoughts and behaviour that lead to stress,

Introduction

self-doubt, depression and anxiety. You will see how to apply mindfulness in your relationships with other people and you will learn how mindfulness techniques can help with your own personal development.

You'll notice that the same principles arise throughout – acknowledge and accept, focus and engage, let go and begin again etc. Each time you apply these principles, each time you approach a situation with mindfulness, you are learning how to relate more directly to your life.

“Yesterday is gone. Tomorrow has not yet come. We have only today. Let us begin.”

Mother Teresa

How Mindful Are You?

How often do you live mindfully, meeting each moment of life as it presents itself, with full awareness, without judging it? If you're like most people, often you are trying to do two or three things at once. And you probably do most things automatically, without noticing what you're doing.

Perhaps, for example, you've decided to make yourself some tea; as you wait for the kettle to boil you either start doing something else – reading the paper, washing up, making a phone call – or maybe you start thinking about a conversation you had yesterday or look in the fridge planning what to have for dinner tonight. Your mind is not on the tea – it's not on what's happening right now.

It's easy to get so caught up in your thoughts and feelings about the past or future that, without realizing it, you've disconnected from what is happening right now in front of you.

Ok, so missing the full tea experience is not that big a deal! There are, of course, times when being able to think of more than two things at once allows you to get a lot done quickly and efficiently.

The real difficulties arise, however, when your mind gets lost in stressful thoughts about the past and the future: replaying painful experiences from the past and imagining worst-case scenarios about the future. At its most extreme, being stuck in the past leads to depression and being trapped in the future leads to anxiety.

Or, it may be that what's happening right now is painful. In those circumstances, you may live in denial; avoiding painful feelings and situations that you can't accept or bear to live with.

All this rewinding back to the past and fast forwarding to the future is exhausting and rarely productive.

Which of these situations are familiar to you?

1. Often, I experience an emotion – guilt, jealousy, resentment – but I'm not aware until sometime later.
2. When I'm doing routine things such as supermarket shopping, waiting for a bus, washing up or making dinner I'm usually thinking of something else.
3. I often find it difficult to motivate myself or summon up enough willpower to do what I told myself I would.
4. I tend to walk quickly to get where I'm going and don't notice my surroundings as I pass by.
5. I'm not usually aware of how physically tense I am at times.
6. I often feel that I'm just spinning from one situation to another. "Stop the world I want to get off" is a feeling I have.
7. I'm often thinking about what else needs doing next week or what I failed to do yesterday.

How Mindful Are You?

8. My mind is usually chattering with commentary or judgement about events or other people.
9. I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I'm doing.
10. I sometimes find myself listening to someone with one ear and doing something else at the same time.
11. I drive places on "automatic pilot" and just focus on getting there.
12. I sometimes wish time away – impatient for a future event to occur.
13. I sometimes find myself going back over past hurts. I find it difficult to forgive.
14. I often interrupt or am thinking about something else when someone is talking to me.
15. Quite often, I feel bogged down with routine.
16. My work is either boring or stressful.
17. I rarely find a hobby, sport or pastime that absorbs me and that I enjoy fully.
18. I sometimes feel detached and disconnected from other people. It makes me unhappy.
19. I often feel guilty. If I screw up I give myself a hard time. I keep going back over what I should or shouldn't have done.
20. I lack confidence and self-esteem.

The more often you answer yes, the more areas of your life can benefit from mindfulness. Read on!

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