

Mindfulness

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Welcome to the University of Nottingham podcast.

In this podcast the Counselling Service's Val Watson looks at mindfulness, and explains how it works, and how it can help you.

Mindfulness is about paying attention and staying in the present moment. What is important is using all of the body's resources, rather than paying attention to other things. So it's paying attention in a very purposeful way to what's happening in the present moment, and staying in that moment. One of the things that happens with everyday life is we become distracted, we are multitasking. It's not that unusual to find people listening to the radio, working with their mobile phone and doing some other task. What mindfulness does is encourages us to stay possibly with one activity, and to stay in the moment with that one activity, and to be aware of all of our senses as we complete that activity, usually in quite a slow way. Fight and flight process.

One of the things that happens first of all is that we register that there is some kind of threat, and in response to that our body behaves in particular ways. So, for instance, our heart rate goes up, we start to sweat, our bodily organs start to function in quite a different way, some of them shut down because they are not necessary. And what we're doing is we're preparing for war or we're preparing to ward off attack of some kind. And in doing that we usually end up hyperventilating a little bit, because we're preparing to, if you like, fly or run away, or at least defend ourselves from what we perceive to be an attack of some kind. And we're either preparing to do that, we're either preparing to fight or to fly away. In terms of mindfulness what that encourages us to do is not necessarily to ignore that, but it's to respond to it in a way which is less about warding off attack and more about responding to it consciously, and using all of our senses and using all of our bodily resources. So the difference between the fight and flight process there is that it's in a state of panic or in a state of high arousal. With mindfulness what we're doing is we're responding, but from a conscious place, rather than just reacting in what might be a place of a panic, where we're working too fast and maybe generating more anxiety rather than less.

One of the things about mindfulness is that we tend not to pay attention to one of our most basic resources, which is breathing. What mindfulness encourages us to do is to pay attention to the present moment and to pay attention to the thing that keeps us

alive, which we do automatically, but it's also to focus in on ourselves and to focus in on our bodily awarenesses. So focusing in on our breath and staying with our breath, rather than moving off into other areas or even other distractions. Then we are able to notice more about what is happening within us and that makes us, in a way, more powerful and more able to cope with anxiety or stressful situations, or even difficult challenges which are coming our way. By drawing attention back to the breath then we're able to respond from a conscious place.

The seven basic, what they call attitudinal qualities of mindfulness are: not judging. So in other words, paying attention in the present moment to what is going on around you, but without judging yourself or what is going on around you, recognising that they are passing events, they are transitory and you don't have to hold onto any one particular experience or moment, they're passing moments. So you're witnessing your experience, but you're not judging it as good or bad, it is just an experience and it will pass as will all of our feelings or emotions or experiences.

The second one is patience and it's about accepting things will unfold in their own time, rather than feeling the need to actually do anything active to let something happen. It's about patience it's about accepting that in this moment for instance I might be feeling very anxious and in another moment I might be feeling more calm. Or in ten moments from now I might be feeling quite happy, and another twenty minutes from now I might be feeling quite different, accepting each of those experiences as unique and different and moving onto the next one.

A third attitudinal quality is the beginner's mind, and I see that as quite important, because quite often when people feel anxious or afraid they associate that with past experiences. If we stay with the beginner's mind, then what we're thinking here is that this experience is unusual it's different, we're looking at it with curiosity, so it's interesting rather than frightening. And quite often when we approach things in that way we stand a better chance of responding to it, as is appropriate for that particular moment. So it's experiencing things in the moment, recognising them as being rich, even when it's quite challenging and that's the difficulty. But it's particularly useful with regard to students who are perhaps experiencing difficulties with examinations or in their writing.

A fourth attitudinal quality is trust, and that's developing a basic trust in our feelings and our thoughts, and in your self. So recognising that you will manage every challenge, and accepting that that's going to happen and trusting that that's going to happen.

A fifth quality is non-striving. We already are paying attention to what is, rather than striving for a goal or a target is quite important. If you are tense, pay attention to that, so in other words if you feel tense in this moment pay attention to that. You're not necessarily trying to fight it, you're allowing that tense feeling to take its place knowing that it will be replaced by another feeling at some point. The more we try and fight or resist our feelings or experiences the more likely we are to end up in the fight and flight position.

The sixth attitudinal quality is acceptance. We can create tension in ourselves and waste energy by denying and resisting facts, or trying to force situations to be the way we would like them to be. This prevents positive change occurring because we have little energy left for growing and developing. Acceptance and cultivating acceptance provides the preconditions for us to feel better, for us to feel healed.

And the seventh attitudinal quality is letting go. Letting go is a form of acceptance anyway, but it's about not getting caught with any particular feeling or experiencing. So for instance if I'm feeling very angry at the moment, recognising that it's going to be one of the many feelings that I have during the day, and letting go of that one, in order for another one to take its place might be quite useful, and is about using all of our resources at any one time.

So those are the basic attitudinal qualities that are associated with mindfulness and through meditation, even if it's only for a short period every day, we are working towards feeling calmer, which is what helps with mindfulness, helps us to feel good. And it also helps us to use all our resources in ways which are creative, and we also learn more about ourselves. And mindfulness doesn't take up too much time. We can use it in all sorts of ways including: walking, eating, writing even. It's not something we have to be particularly religious about, and we can do it anywhere. So it's something that is part of you that is your own personal resource that you can carry around with you.