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Wake up to the present moment

Mindfulness can bring about deeper compassion and enhanced wellbeing, but it takes practice.

Mindfulness is an innate capacity. It's useful largely because it's the exact opposite of ruminative thinking, which causes us to become anxious and distressed. Instead of rehashing the past or rehearsing for the future, we wake up fully, to the present moment. We learn to simply see our thoughts as mental events that come and go, like leaves on a flowing stream.

As you read this now, perhaps you might be saying to yourself, "sounds easy enough".

Jon Kabat-Zinn is world-renowned in the field of mindfulness. Professor emeritus of medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, and the founding executive director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society in the US, he describes meditation as the "hardest work in the world". In his article titled *Why Even Bother? The Importance of Motivation*, he says this is because our habitual tendencies are so ingrained that, initially, a strong technique and effort are required to support our wandering minds. However, he believes "each moment missed is a moment un-lived".

Most people embarking on an eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Program are motivated to end their pain and suffering. As humans, we tend to perpetuate our own suffering, by being attached to our narratives, thoughts and unpleasant emotional states. What this does is prevent us from seeing the "truth" of what is really going on in life.

So, this motivation to get to the bottom of things has, at its heart, a willingness to move from habitual conditioning to a state of wisdom and insight. With this comes a deeper compassion for others and for ourselves. However, there needs to be a commitment to practice.

Prof Mark Williams, the former director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre in the UK, says mindfulness means "knowing directly what is going on inside and outside ourselves, moment by moment".

He adds: "Mindfulness could extend your life in two main ways. First, by reducing stress, anxiety and depression, all of which make physical illnesses more severe and life-threatening... Second, and more importantly, mindfulness allows you to notice more of the life you already have, to see it as if for the first time. Mindfulness allows you to let go of the tendency to 'sleep-walk' through life."

As a practice, mindfulness teaches us how to be more skilled in our internal environment. We don't try to fix the internal environment. Instead, we come to understand that each state or felt experience is as it is. Our minds have a tendency to wander. The work is not so much to change the thoughts, but to see clearly the way we relate to them, and to the attitudes we hold towards ourselves.

Through cultivating this practice, we develop an acceptance, which can be defined as coming to terms with the true reality of any given situation.

Mindfulness is a life skill that enables you to be awake to your full experience. It's a faculty which, if worked on, will develop incrementally.

However, the practice is not for everyone. We are all currently facing severe challenges. Sometimes we have the resources to meet these challenges – we feel resilient. At other times, our resources are overwhelmed. Be aware of your capacity. Most importantly, find a qualified professional to support you as you begin your journey towards mindfulness. Make sure you are in safe hands, and be kind and gentle with yourself.