

Meditation and Mindfulness

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You've heard of them, but what are they really about and how do they help you?

"We can never obtain peace in the outer world until we make peace within ourselves."

- Dalai Lama

Mindfulness is being aware, being present, and can be practiced both informally and formally:

- Formal practice: mindfulness meditation
- Informally: attempting to be more aware in everything that you do, throughout your day

Meditation is a 'concentrated state of mind in serious reflection'. At its core it's about setting aside time to do something good for yourself – that can involve other activities such as yoga, walking, running, gardening... anything that is pleasurable and allows your brain the space to freewheel.



Regular practise changes your Reactive Responses...

So, how does it help you?

We do so many things in auto-pilot mode not paying attention to what is happening or what we're doing or experiencing. Mindfulness (or being present in the moment) and Meditation, are integrative, mind-body approaches to life that help you relate to

experiences throughout the day. It means paying attention to your thoughts, feelings and body sensations in a way that can increase your awareness.

Regular practise trains the brain to be present - to the point that, when you feel yourself reacting in a certain way during a moment of pressure or stress, you're so aware of the 'now' that you're able to take a step back, and literally change your knee-jerk reactions. It does this in two ways:

- Chemical level – changes your hormonal balance, reducing stress hormones
- Physical changes in your brain, known as neuroplasticity – reducing the size of the Amygdala (your freeze-flight-fight response centre)

“You can't change the waves but you can learn to surf”

- Jon Kabat-Zinn, the Godfather of Mindfulness

Both forms re-train your mind away from overthinking, something we are predisposed to do, which creates stress and anxiety all on its own. Effectively it teaches you to recognise the thought and change your reaction.

So, you might habitually think (or indeed overthink):

“I'm on a deadline, I might lose my job if I don't get it done in time, it's a disaster! I won't be able to afford the mortgage, how will I tell my partner, what if I can't get another job...?!”

Which understandably activates the stress response system (freeze, fight, flight response), your stress hormones start flowing, you notice physical reactions such as sweaty palms, a raised heart rate, a churning stomach, and you become more anxious which affects your ability to focus and be productive – and yet more negative thoughts intrude. It becomes a negative cycle that keeps you stuck, relying on your responses of:

- freeze (depression)
- flight (anxiety)
- fight (anger)

When you practise meditation or mindfulness, you dampen down that response so instead you may think:

“Oh, there's that thought, blowing things out of proportion again! But it's just that, a thought, and not reality.”

Which prompts you to step back and take a breath, regroup and refocus, and your stress system stands down. It might mean you continue to do the piece of work, bring in help or

flag up that you're not going to make deadline, whatever the best course of action is – but you can make a considered decision rather than spiral down into anxiety.

In essence you can change the way your brain works which may have great implications in particularly stressful times and even more: meditation and mindfulness reduces the release of stress hormone cortisol, help us sleep better, and rewire the brain with a host of positive emotional qualities. They physically re-shape the brain (neuroplasticity), causing us to rely less on the freeze, flight, fight response part of the brain, and more on the intellectual, reasoning part of the brain... because when we are relaxed, we are in control and better able to make considered decisions.

Incorporating either mindfulness or meditation into your life is not as difficult as you might think...

You don't need to spend huge amounts of time practising but you do need to create the habit, and that means repeating your short practise regularly so that it becomes second nature.

With these techniques, their benefit is felt when practised regularly and consistently, the positive effects build up over time and the results are a calmer, more relaxed you, able to cope better with stress and to enjoy your everyday.

- Being Everyday Mindful – Start with one activity and build on it, i.e. drinking a cup of coffee or tea mid-morning: instead of having it as a prop in the day, stop and focus on the act of drinking it, it takes a moment. Try to use all your senses to tune into the activity. Being mindful in your everyday living becomes a habit, so instead of seeing things as a chore they become an opportunity to clear your mind of 'noise' and connect with people and things around you.
- 5 Minute Meditation – Choose a good time for you, without interruption (you can use apps like calm or headspace to help focus your attention). Spend 5 minutes focusing on your breathing (breathe deeply and slowly) or doing a body scan (working from head to toe or vice versa, bring your awareness to each area, taking a deep, slow breath at each point, if you notice any area of tension breathe into it, focusing your attention on that point).
- Anytime Meditation – You can also incorporate meditation into everyday activities, simply by focusing on your breathing. So every time you go to boil a kettle or when you're waiting at traffic lights, or you arrive early for a meeting, use those 2, 3, 4, 5 minutes to focus on your breathing, either eyes open (if you're waiting in traffic!) or eyes closed, which helps to centre you and push away outside distractions.
- Phone break – In everyday life, every time you have a moment, when you would automatically reach for your phone, stop, take a moment to look around without thought, rather than keeping your brain busy.

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to managing stress, it's important to try a few techniques and see which ones you enjoy doing – so that you will continue to use them over the coming days, weeks, months and years. This is about making positive changes that will last throughout your whole life, so make sure you enjoy it!

Quest Hypnotherapy Ltd offers a range of hypnotherapy and psychotherapy services including personal stress management, specialist programmes such as phobia removal, sports and performance motivation. Under the banner of 'Mind Your Business' we also consult with organisations to help develop employee-centric corporate cultures, specialising in stress prevention and wellbeing training.

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