

# What is mindfulness?

You may have heard of mindfulness as a technique to help you relax and better process emotions. In this article, we unpack what mindfulness is and how to get started as a beginner.

Mindfulness is the ability to notice your surroundings, and what is going on in your body and mind, without judgement or distraction. The concept of mindfulness started as part of Buddhist philosophy, and it's sometimes practiced as part of meditation.<sup>1</sup>

It sounds simple, but it can sometimes be difficult to achieve as we often don't know if we are paying attention to our surroundings or not. For instance, if you are doing a task that you do every day – such as eating breakfast or driving to work – you may just be 'operating on autopilot' and not really noticing what you are doing.

This is why mindfulness can take some conscious effort. Usually, you can begin by focusing on your breath, to tune out other thoughts and turn your attention to what is going on in your body.

Then, you can try to notice any feelings and sensations you are experiencing without judgement – simply note them and give them the space to be there. If your mind wanders to other thoughts during this process, you can gently direct it back to focusing on your breath.

Mindfulness can be a powerful tool in helping to manage stress, as it can teach you to notice your thoughts and feelings without having to react to them. This can reduce negative thoughts or unhelpful reactions in times of stress, and even help to reduce the effects of anxiety and depression. It's also been shown to help those with chronic pain better manage their symptoms.<sup>2</sup>

This powerful stress reduction technique is growing in popularity, with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention saying meditation now rivals yoga as the most popular type of complementary health activity.<sup>3</sup>

## How do I get started?

Mindfulness and meditation often go hand in hand, but you don't have to meditate to practice mindfulness. Some people find meditation challenging as it involves taking time out of your day – sometimes significant time – to sit and be still.

But there are other ways to learn mindfulness – yoga also incorporates elements of mindfulness, by teaching you to focus on your body and breathing during practice.<sup>4</sup>

You can also try doing different everyday activities in a 'mindful' way, such as walking your dog, commuting to work or cooking a meal. While doing these activities, try to breathe deeply, pay particular attention to the sights, sounds and smells around you, and accept any feelings that are coming up for you, such as nerves or stress about your day.

1 Mindfulness. Healthdirect.gov.au, February 2022

2 Mindfulness meditation: A research-proven way to reduce stress. American Psychological Association, 30 October 2019

3 A lot more Americans are meditating now than just five years ago. Los Angeles Times, 8 November 2018

4 Yoga and mindfulness as a tool for influencing affectivity, anxiety, mental health and stress among healthcare workers. National Library of Medicine, April 2020

