

From mountain to sea

## **Educational Psychology Service**

### **Benefits of Mindfulness**



#### **Physical Health**

Studies have shown that Mindfulness practice can enhance both mental and physical health. We are living in challenging and stressful times and participation in Mindfulness practice has been shown to reduce levels of the hormone cortisol, which is released when we experience stress. We know that when someone experiences ongoing stress their immune system can be adversely affected, making them more susceptible to illness and so Mindfulness may well be a significant tool in helping us to cope not only with the strange and unfamiliar world that we are living in, but as we move forward into the new normal.



#### **Mental Health and Well-Being**

One of the most significant benefits of Mindfulness is that, with practice, it frees us up from our entrenched patterns of thinking, feeling and perceiving – it encourages us not to use our ‘autopilot’. As a result, we become more aware of our responses, more able to make conscious decisions and better able to see situations for what they are in that moment, rather than having an instinctive response, often linked to past experience, which may set off a familiar pattern of behaviour. Think of teenagers, who may fly off the handle and then go on to engage in a recognisable pattern of behaviour and monologue almost irrespective of the situation or what has actually been said. That is far from Mindful response – perhaps you even recognise yourself as an adult in this? Many of us leap to conclusions without stopping to notice what is actually taking place. It is very possible that our tendency to leap into familiar patterns of response has had an impact on how we are feeling and behaving as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. In changing times, or in the face of uncertainty, we frequently revert to learned patterns of behaviour, which can help us feel safe and secure, particularly because they can almost guarantee a particular response from the others around us. However, at this point in time, perhaps what would be helpful is to develop a new response to fit the novel situation we all find ourselves in, rather than rely on old, familiar and automatic routines



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which, however comforting they may appear to be, are almost certainly not fit for purpose.

Mindful practice can help break these patterns and lead us to making consciously different responses, often resulting in much more positive experiences and opportunities. Mindfulness has been shown to contribute to reduced levels of anxiety, better sleep, higher energy levels and even to a reduction in pain, as the process of noticing the body's physical response separate from its emotional response has been shown to dilute the experience of pain.

The ability to accept what cannot be changed is an important Mindful quality. In this world of Covid-19, there are many elements of the situation and demands being made of us over which we have no control. Acknowledging and accepting what cannot be changed and focusing on experiences and feelings in the present has been seen to have a positive impact on well-being.



## Happiness and Contentment

After we have broken away from old patterns of thinking, feeling and responding, we are in a much better position to construct new, more helpful responses and become mindfully aware of these. Our happiness and feeling of contentment are linked, of course, to our mental health and well-being. It should be no surprise therefore, that practicing Mindfulness has been shown to lead to a greater sense of happiness, increased self-esteem and higher levels of self-confidence, along with a better job satisfaction, more enjoyment of leisure time and improved relationships with those around us. Just now, more than ever, when our lives are being restricted and there is potential for the stress of this unfamiliar, strange situation to boil over, the practice of Mindfulness has huge potential to support not only our own happiness and sense of contentment, but also that of those around us.

You may be interested to know that a study correlated electrical activity in particular areas of the brain with reported feelings of happiness. The study showed that positive feelings went along with extra electrical activity in the left prefrontal cortex. Negative feelings were associated with extra electrical activity in the right prefrontal cortex and the ratio between the two measurements became known as the 'mood index'. Further work revealed that the reading moved to the left in people who had undertaken Mindfulness training. In other words, it could be considered that Mindfulness encourages the brain to be positive.

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### **Thinking Skills**

Engaging in Mindfulness has been shown to support a range of enhanced thinking skills. These include better concentration, quicker reaction times, improved memory, faster mental processing and greater perseverance on tasks.



### **Self-Awareness and Skills for Life**

Those who practice Mindfulness have been seen to have particularly developed skills for effective communication. These skills include good listening skills, showing a high level of empathy, being able to express and manage emotions effectively, an ability to demonstrate emotional intelligence and an ability to respond to each individual situation, rather than habitually.

Importantly, the practice of Mindfulness has also been noted to enhance resilience in the face of adversity. This is particularly relevant in the world as we know it at the moment with COVID-19. Observers believe that this increased resilience is linked to the happiness which can be seen in those who consistently practice Mindfulness. As this happiness can be thought of as stemming from being freed from unhelpful and habitual ways of thinking, feeling and responding, it is not easily compromised. The Mindfulness practitioner is protected in adverse situations as they notice their thoughts, feelings etc. in the moment without judgement and without reverting to prior responses, thereby leaving their happiness intact.