



From mountain to sea

Educational Psychology Service Staff and Parent Wellbeing Toolkit



Introduction to Staff and Parent Wellbeing

Welcome to the staff and parent wellbeing toolkit. This pack was put together to offer suggestions and ideas to promote physical and mental wellbeing during the pandemic but the ideas continue to be relevant as staff and parent wellbeing continues to be a priority.

The themes are:

Making Connections

Paying Attention to Now

Seeking Help

Learning Something New

Looking after you

Managing Feeling and Thoughts

Each theme is presented as a 30-40 minute plan with videos, activities and group questions. It is hoped that the ideas and suggestions are accessible and can be easily incorporated into daily routines which help maintain both physical and mental wellbeing.

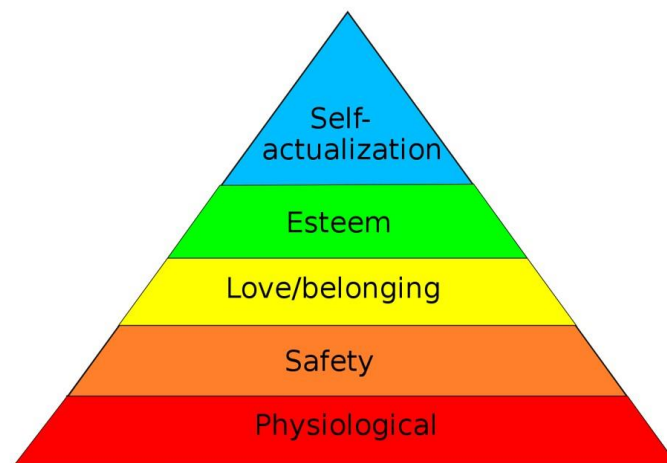
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Making Connections

Connectedness and a sense of belonging are key to positive mental health and especially so during this period of crisis. We all need to feel safe and supported in the groups we are part of; family friends, colleagues and community.



Maslow's triangle of human needs puts belonging as the third most important need after our basic needs are met. The first group we belong to is our family and later we become part of friendship groups, a school group, a group of colleagues and a community group. Belonging to a group helps us to feel connected and included, so how can we promote connectedness and belonging in these groups when we cannot meet face to face?

Family connections

At home we can try to prioritise contact with family and friends through text, phone calls and video links. We can try to make contact with relatives or friends who we have lost touch with or live alone. It can be helpful to arrange times where you have a coffee or a drink together or perhaps do a quiz. It is important to be aware that video catch ups can be tiring so sometimes a phone call can be preferable! The other way of keeping in contact is to go back to writing a letter or a card. Many people including grandparents would be delighted to receive some written communication or a picture from their family. You could also find a number of ways to send your very own 'virtual hugs'

[Click here to view- The benefits of handwriting.](#)

Sending virtual hug



loading...

Colleague connections

Again, the primary human need is to feel safe and supported. Research shows that regular quick check-ins via e mail or text are hugely beneficial. It is also important that all members of any group are kept up to date regularly and are encouraged to keep in touch with each other. Now more than ever, people need feedback that they are valued and that their efforts are recognised. This ensures that people feel ‘held in mind’ and belong to the team. Relationships with our colleagues are often a key to our resilience and should be prioritised, especially at this time.

Teams need to be given time for both formal and informal catch ups to prevent feelings of isolation. The informal catch ups can be a chance to let off steam and have a laugh together. Both are useful in helping to maintain our positive mental health and promote cohesiveness within a team.

As we use different ways to connect it is important to be aware of some of the issues surrounding online meetings. The article below gives some useful tips for online working and managing ‘Zoom fatigue’. [10-tips-to-handle-zoom.](#)

Kindness

Kindness has been chosen as the focus for mental health awareness week for good reason. Kindness does all of the things mentioned above but also creates a sense of belonging. It helps us feel less isolated from our fellow human beings and part of a community.

“We have chosen kindness because of its singular ability to unlock our shared humanity. Kindness strengthens relationships, develops community and deepens solidarity. It is a cornerstone of our individual and collective mental health. Wisdom from every culture across history recognises that kindness is something that all human beings need to experience and practise to be fully alive.” (Mental Health Foundation 2020)

Here are a few suggestions for small acts of kindness you could carry out this week or at any time. <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/blog/random-acts-kindness>

Here is a video of what some young people have been doing during lockdown: www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/articles/

Remember that being kind has a positive effect on the person in receipt of the kindness but also has a positive effect on the giver. It’s a win-win situation!



Gratitude

Like kindness, being grateful or thankful can have a positive effect on our mental health. We can be grateful for the things and people around us and we show our thanks and gratitude by clapping for the NHS, putting rainbows in our windows, providing treats for key workers. This has a positive effect on the recipients of our thanks but also helps us to feel good.

In a 2006 study, Park and Peterson found that gratitude was the personal strength that had the strongest link to life satisfaction. Another study by Jeffrey Froh et al. with teenagers found that grateful teens were less materialistic, had higher grades, used their strengths to help their community and were less depressed.

We can encourage the gratitude habit by writing a gratitude journal or making a gratitude jar perhaps. This could be done at home or at school. You may feel that you don't have to write things down but could 'count your blessings' before you go to sleep.

Or you and the family could go on a 'WOW' walk and try and notice some things that make you say Wow! The blossom on a tree, a bird singing, a rainbow in a window.

Click [here](#) for instructions on how to make a gratitude jar

Saying Thank You

We can say thanks in so many ways – an e-mail, phone call, a card, a bunch of flowers. How did you feel the last time you got an e-mail or a text to say thank you? Our response to receiving or giving a 'thank you' triggers hormones in the brain which soothes stress and make us feel happier.

The BBC Happiness Project did an experiment to see the effect on people of being given a handwritten thank you letter. Watch the responses in this short video – warning – might bring a tear to your eye! <https://youtu.be/JsIPXwr9B>

Discussion Activities



- What has helped and worked well to keep your team connected over this time?
- Speak about a time that you have connected with someone in your team or they have contacted you in the past few weeks – how did you help them to feel supported? Did you feel better after the call? Did they say how they felt?
- Have you sent someone an e-mail or a card to make a connection? Would anyone in your life benefit? (We have become busier as time has gone on so it is even more important to fit in the time for human connection)
- Has anyone said thank you for something you have done in the last few weeks? Tell the story. How did it make you feel? Think about saying thank you to a mentor, perhaps by e-mail or letter.
- Could you make a commitment within your team to send a card to someone weekly or carry out an act of kindness weekly until things get back to normal? – Who knows it might become a habit.
- Download the monthly RAK calendars [here](#)

Looking After You



In these difficult and stressful times, it is very important not to be too hard on yourself. Everyone will be affected in their own way. For some, throwing themselves into work will be an effective and protective response. For others, the thought of working at home will be daunting and perhaps even overwhelming. Similarly, of those who are parents, some may feel extremely able to assume the role of teacher to their children, whereas others will feel that they have no idea where to start, even if they work in a school! What is almost certain is that each person will have ups and downs, with some days easier to manage than others.

Please remember that, whatever your response is to this situation, it is entirely valid for you to feel the way you do and for others to have their own, perhaps different, response,

Whether you are living on your own or with other people, it is important that you look after yourself in order that you are in a position to effectively interact with others, whether that is virtually or face-to-face within a household:

“Put on your own oxygen mask first”: In other words, “Take care of yourself”

When you travel on an aircraft, the flight crew instruct you to “put your own oxygen mask first before helping others”

Why do they tell you that?

Very simply, if you run out of oxygen, you won’t be in a position to help anyone else!

So.....first and foremost, be kind to yourself – and to others. Remember that everyone is having their own unique response to this situation, but remember too, the things that we all have in common.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow proposed that human needs can be organised into a hierarchy, which ranges from more concrete, basic needs e.g. food, water and shelter, to more abstract concepts such as self-fulfilment. Originally, Maslow took the view that individuals move up the levels of the triangle as needs are met, although there is now agreement that movement upwards does not depend on all needs in a level being met as a prerequisite e.g. there are those who feel a sense of belonging to a group of community and feel loved, who, at the same time, lack enough food.



A key message of the hierarchy however, is that if an individual's core needs are not being met e.g. food, shelter then it is less likely that they feel safe and secure and in turn, they are less likely to move further up the hierarchy. In developed countries, safety/security needs are most often highlighted in times of war or disaster e.g. hurricanes, when even the prospect of basic needs being met becomes unpredictable.

This uncertain world of Covid-19 has created a similar situation and many people started off concerned that they would not be able to meet their own basic needs, which may go some way to explain the need people felt to stockpile and prepare for lockdown. People were and continue to be, worrying/feeling anxious not only about their own safety and security, in terms of catching and surviving the virus but also that of their family and friends. Not only that, but the need for social distancing and, particularly, staying at home, has impacted on people's sense of belonging and even their sense of being loved and being able to give love, notwithstanding the possibilities to interact through technology. Perhaps you recognise yourself in this?

Moving up the hierarchy, it can be hard to continue to feel good about yourself and feel that your contributions are valued and recognised when you are functioning within the current social parameters but it is important, if you can, to stand back and notice what you have been doing and the contribution you have been making. Set aside time for this and, again, if you can, find time to give feedback to others about their important and valuable contributions.

Please remember, that everyone will be at different stages in the hierarchy and that it is perfectly possible that people are moving up and down the hierarchy in terms of how they are feeling from day to day and week to week. You yourself, may be conscious that one week you are feeling okay and maybe even ready for a new challenge, heading towards the top of the hierarchy, where another week, you feel that all you can do is get up, eat and sleep and that you're feeling anxious and isolated or lonely. Please reassure yourself that all of this is normal and allow yourself to be where you need to be – look after yourself now in order to protect your resilience now and in the future, as well as to put yourself in a position to understand and support others around you....

The links below offer some ideas about how to look after yourself during this period. It is equally relevant to those self-isolating completely or those spending significantly more time at home than is usual:

[Looking after yourself while working at home](#)

[Wellbeing Pack for self-isolation](#)

Sleep

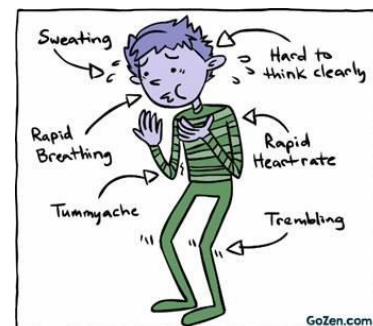
Remember sleep is a basic need. While you're sleeping, your brain does its 'tidying up', allowing it to regroup and get ready for whatever the next day brings. Often, when you're feeling stressed or anxious, your sleep is one of the first things to be adversely affected, yet we know that good sleep is fundamentally linked to positive wellbeing.

The Vagus nerve is the longest of your 12 cranial nerves, running from the brain through the heart to the gut. It is known for its role in your "rest and digest" system. Good vagal tone supports good sleep and helps your body deal with stress. Try out the link below to demonstrate how activating the Vagus nerve can help you relax and get ready for sleep: [Vagus Nerve Exercise](#)



The Stress Response

When you're faced with stressful events or situations, your body activates its 'fight or flight' response. Your heart races, your palms sweat, you 'feel' adrenaline coursing through you. When it all gets too much, you might 'flip your lid'. This link helps explain your brain's response to stress: [Dan Siegal's Hand model of the Brain](#)



Breathing Techniques

Try out some breathing exercises by clicking on the link [here](#). The different breathing techniques have many purposes, not necessarily for reducing stress but for use in different situation.

Healthy Eating

With 'Looking after you' comes eating well – click [here](#) to discover some quick and tasty recipes.

Discussion Activities



Discussion tasks for staff support sessions or team meetings:

1. This task can be done individually or with a partner:
 - Think of a time where you have had to 'put on your own oxygen mask first'.
 - How did you feel at that point?
 - What helped you to 'put on your own oxygen mask first'?
 - How did you recognise that you needed to 'look after yourself first'?
 - How did you feel afterwards?
 - How will you help yourself to remember this important principle in the future?
2. Think about your own response to Covid-19.
 - In terms of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, where would you have placed yourself as being at the start of the lockdown?
 - Where are you now?
 - Has this changed or fluctuated over time?
3. We all know how important good sleep is in helping us manage even everyday ups and downs in normal circumstances. It is even more important in the current Covid-19 situation. The *vagus nerve* is the longest of our 12 cranial nerves, running from the brain through the heart to the gut. It is known for its role in our "rest and digest" system. Good vagal tone supports good sleep and helps your body deal with stress.

Watch the video [here](#) and then try out the exercise to demonstrate how activating the vagus nerve can help you relax and get ready for sleep.

4. Many people have been feeling very stressed as a result of the situation with Covid-19. Living with a heightened level of stress can lead to a greater tendency to react to things that may not normally cause concern.

Watch the video of Hand Model of the Brain [here](#).

- Can you think of a time when you have 'flipped your lid' (You could think about someone you know rather than yourself if you prefer)
 - How did you manage to calm yourself down?
 - Tell your story using Dan Siegel's hand model.
 -
5. Have a look at the different breathing exercises contained in the link below:
<https://www.healthline.com/health/breathing-exercise>
 - Pick one of the breathing exercises to try out for the next few minutes.
 - Discuss your experience with a partner.
 - How did you feel before and after the exercise?
 - Try out some of the other exercises over the next week or two.

You may find some suit you better than others.

Managing Feelings and Thoughts



Managing our feelings and thoughts can be hard to do under normal circumstances, so we are finding it even harder in a world of uncertainty. What we are feeling is a very human response to the situation we find ourselves in, but in order to maintain good mental and physical health it may be helpful to use some simple ideas from Cognitive Behavioural Therapy as a support. It can be useful to consider that we are using these ideas to build up our immune system, both physically and mentally. We can do this by trying to keep our stress levels at a more tolerable level from day to day. Hopefully, it will also help us to live in a more positive way despite the current challenges. These ideas are not the ‘answer to everything’ but can perhaps help us to think and act in more helpful ways.

“The principles are beneficial, regardless of whether you are trying to face a particular problem or situation. Or whether you are just living your daily life. CBT techniques inspire confidence and courage, meaning individuals feel better in themselves and notice an increase in their confidence and self-esteem.” (The CBT Workbook Dr Stephanie Fitzgerald)

CBT is based on the idea that our thoughts, feelings, physical feelings and behaviours all affect and interact with each other.

And that by changing things in one area we will see changes in all the others. A small shift can create positive change, so we are encouraged very quickly.

One of the first steps is to try and identify our thoughts feelings and behaviour. So here is a table to complete: What would your thoughts, feelings and behaviours be?



Situation: **Your partner is late for a meal**

Thoughts	Feelings	Behaviour
That is so inconsiderate and selfish. The meal will be ruined.	Annoyed, angry	Go in the huff and refuse to speak

OR

Thoughts	Feelings	Behaviour
Oh my goodness. I hope everything is ok	Worried, upset	Call to check

As you can see our thoughts and feelings can cause very different behaviours. The focus of CBT is to become more aware of our thoughts and feelings and find ways to check them out and perhaps manage them differently so that we can prevent getting into a vicious and unhelpful cycle.

Thinking and Thoughts

How can we try to manage our thoughts in a way that is healthy for us? We have to remember first of all that a thought is just a thought – a mental act. It is our interpretation of the thought that is important.

We sometimes get stuck in our own ‘favourite’ ways of thinking and there will be a pattern to the thoughts that come into our heads. We may think when we are under pressure ‘I just can’t cope’ - if we think this thought is fact then we may start to feel worried, anxious, unable to concentrate, we become unable to do the work, think ‘I really can’t cope’, start to feel sick/headache, toss the work aside..... As you can see, we can easily get into a vicious circle because of our interpretation of this thought.

Many of the thoughts we have can be unhelpful or distorted and they fall into recognised categories. How many of us in certain situations try to Mind Read, where we try to predict what someone else is thinking ‘Everyone must think I am an idiot for not getting that task finished’

Or we Disqualify the Positive “They are only saying this is good because they feel sorry for me”.

Or we Catastrophise and constantly imagine the worst “I am never going to get this task done, I won’t be given responsibility ever again”)

Using CBT can help us to identify our unhelpful thinking and help us put things back in perspective.

Here is short video about unhelpful or distorted thinking: [How to Stop Cognitive Distortions:](#)

Here are some questions that can help put things in perspective

- Have I had any experiences that show that the thought is not completely true all the time (look for exceptions)?
- If my best friend knew I was thinking this what would they say to me?
- Am I jumping to conclusions that are not completely justified by the evidence?
- When I have felt this way in the past what did I think about that helped me feel better?
- Am I blaming myself for something which I do not have complete control over?



Unhelpful thought	Coping thought
Something's going to go wrong, I can feel it	I don't know what is going to happen. I've had these feelings before
Everyone should like me	No-one is liked by everyone. I will meet people who do not like me
I can't help worrying about this	Worrying never fixes anything and upsets me
It's no use trying I never get it right	I'm going to try and maybe I'll accomplish something
I must excel at everything I do	Nobody's perfect. I'm human and will make mistakes
I must focus on this worry	Brain! You've thought about this for too long! Move on

Things to remember – A thought is just a thought.

Thoughts will come into our heads but we don't have to pull up a chair and invite them to stay.

We can say to ourselves 'Just an unhelpful thought passing on through'.

Let's teach ourselves that thoughts even distorted ones affect our emotional well-being.

Let's learn we can have the power to choose which thoughts we react to.


Worrying

A word about worrying. Many of us can fall into the trap of worrying and ruminating about a problem or concern and investing time in anticipating potential difficulties. It can be very easy to get stuck imagining one negative event after another.

One potential solution is to plan what you would do if these situations actually arose then move on. You don't need to keep thinking about it. The event you worry about might never take place! I have found this worry script very useful:

My Worry Script

- **Who is being helped by this worry?**
- **Who is being affected by this worry?**
- **Can I do anything about it right now?**
- **Could I do something about this later?**



Behaviour

How can we change our behaviour to help interrupt the vicious circle? One of the things that is useful is to make a plan to break the problem down.

We also know that exercise, especially outside can be helpful. Top tip when you find it hard to make the move to go and do something - count to three as you get up and put your hand on your trainers or jacket – don' think – count and do!

Problem-Solving Plan

The goal is to try and find solutions to problems

- Define the problem
- List the possible solutions
- List what might happen for each possible solution
- Select the best solution based on the consequences
- Put your plan into action
- Did it work?



Aberdeenshire
COUNCIL

You could think how your role model might deal with a tricky situation. If you are worried about a meeting for instance think of how they would sit, talk look etc. This can give you the confidence you need to deal with the situation in hand.

Role Model

- When you are feeling unsure of how best to deal with a situation it sometimes helps to imagine what your role model or a colleague you admire might do.
- Imagine you are going to work in a new school and don't know what to expect.
- Rather than panic and imagine the worst, think you your role model or colleague would react.
- Think about:
 - What they would do?
 - How they would walk?
 - How they would communicate?



Relaxation and breathing techniques can also help us to feel better and help to move the thoughts feelings and behaviour wheel in the right direction. There are lots of suggestions for both on the website but here is a relaxing video from Orkney that will soothe the soul <https://youtu.be/bx-fp5yxZeQ>

Discussion Activities



Turning the circle. Remember that making a small change in one area can change the cycle in a more positive direction.

1. Altering Thoughts and Feelings Activity

Try turning red thoughts into green thoughts – you can add some of your own. Children can do this type of activity too.



Red to Green Thoughts

Situation	Red Thoughts	Green Thoughts
Returning an item to a shop	The shop assistant might refuse to take it back. They might think I've worn it and I will be embarrassed	I will be able to choose something I really like. The assistants do this every day and know when an item has been worn
Going to a party		
Giving a talk to colleagues		
Going for an interview		
Joining a gym		
Meeting someone new		

OR

It can be useful to realise how much our thoughts and feelings influence our mental health and that different people react to the same situation in very different ways. (This seems obvious, but we often think that everyone has the same feelings and thoughts as us)

Members of the team may want to try and keep a diary for a week, then share if they have identified particular thinking errors and could also discuss what they did to challenge their unhelpful thoughts. (Only if people are willing to share)

Thoughts and Feelings diary

Situation	Feelings	Thoughts
1.5.20 Sitting at work. Trying to get piece of work finished.	Frustrated. Annoyed with myself.	Why can't I do this? I'm useless. Everyone is managing except me

2. Altering behaviour – small changes can make a big difference

Research has shown that rhythmic and repetitive actions can help soothe stress or anxiety – skipping, swimming, running, deep belly breathing, knitting are a few suggestions, but can you think of anymore?

Research has also shown that the following activities are also very good for us and help us to relax and hopefully keep the wheel going around in a positive direction. They are singing, humming and chanting, yoga, Tai Chi, any gentle exercise, laughing, social engagement.

One piece of research showed that thinking compassionately about others was also beneficial.

Ask members of a group to silently say the following in their heads for a few minutes

- May you feel safe
- May you feel happy
- May you feel healthy
- May you live with ease

In this experiment, heart rates went down and the participants felt more relaxed and less worried. Worth trying to see if it works via the internet!

Seeking Help



Everyone is doing their best to be helpful to others during this crisis, but this can mean that we are not seeking help for ourselves. Being a 'helper' can be exhausting particularly as many of us are now helping people even more than usual:-helping children with their learning, helping the family to maintain a healthy lifestyle, helping to support older relatives, helping in the community and all from a position of feeling isolated ourselves and away from our usual supports.

Research has shown that being able to ask for help and receive it is good for our resilience and positive mental health but even in normal circumstances we can find it hard to ask for help.

Why is this the case?

We may feel that other people are too busy to help or that we have always just 'got on with it.' We may see asking for help as a sign of weakness or know that it will create a feeling of vulnerability.

So why is it important to ask for help when we need it?

Asking for help should be a sign that we are showing self-awareness and a willingness to learn and grow. It gives us the opportunity to move forward rather than letting the situation get worse, along with our ability to deal with it on our own. Perhaps by not asking for help, we are denying someone else the chance to be helpful (It has a positive effect on the person giving the help too as it can make them feel good to be needed). The process of asking for help also means that you are connecting with others and should help you prepare for the next challenge.

Seeking help is much easier in a culture that is conducive to collaboration and one in which everyone, including leaders, models help-seeking behaviours:

'Needing help - asking for help - is an essential part of being a leader. While I've always known this, I've also always secretly felt that it's a leader's job to help others, not to need help.

But it's a myth. The reality is that leaders who don't need help have no one to lead. People feel good when they help. They are inspired when they are needed. They don't think less of the people they help; they feel more connected.

I am not superhuman. Nor are you. And that's not only OK, it's better'. (Peter Bergman CEO - Harvard Business Review)

How to ask for help TED talk click on link [here](#)

So, it can be tough to ask for help, but we know that everyone needs help so how best can we ask for help? The word 'help' can mean a variety of different things so it can be easier to try and break the problem down.

1. Make a list of what you need help with

- I need help to walk the dog
- I need help to finish this project
- I need help with my child's homework

2. Write down a list of the people who could help you and match each one to the things you need help with

- Your children could walk the dog.
- A neighbour might pick up some shopping.
- A friend who is a teacher might help with the Maths.

3. Always remember that it is a good thing to ask for help but choose a good time to ask. You could say 'Is there a good time to talk?'

4. Try to be specific about what you need e.g. Instead of saying 'I'm really struggling with G's homework, rather, say 'I'm finding the fraction section hard to understand, can you explain with a few examples please'.

5. Try not to be over-apologetic or negative.

6. Keep trying if the help you get isn't what you needed. Perhaps try someone else.

7. Try to build a reputation as a helpful person – Helping each other is what happens in a supportive community - big or small.

It is very important that you acknowledge the help you have received right away if possible. Be specific – what difference did the help make to you.

What if you think someone else needs help?

Perhaps you feel that someone you work with is struggling. There are some things you can do to support such as offer them the chance to talk. If they do want to talk listen carefully and let them know they have your full attention. Use non-verbal communication like nodding and eye contact to show that you are listening. Allow them to talk and reassure them.

Ask them if there is anything you can do to help or if there is anyone else who could help.

Signpost them to helplines or other professionals. Offer them your support to get in touch with someone who could help.

Most of us ask those around us for help when we need it – from our family, our friends and our colleagues and it is so important that we continue to use these supports – virtually if need be. We are all having to learn and change very quickly at the moment and with all the added pressures it is vital that we seek help early. Help does not have to come from a specialist or an expert and existing relationships are often the most valuable.

There are many resources available online if that is a way that suits us to access the help we need. There are also a number of confidential phone lines – some of the links to these can be found below:

[Self-help leaflets on a number of topics](#)

[Support for good mental health](#)

[Various organisations of fer Mental Health Phone helplines](#)

[Employee Assistance Counselling leaflet](#)

Discussion Activities



- Ask the team if there is anything that might make it easier to ask others for help if they needed it?
- What might make the 'environment' more conducive to people being able to ask for help?
- Has anything proved to be particularly helpful over this period – e.g. sharing with others?
- Ask the team to complete an 'asking for help plan as described' – could be a plan for home or school.

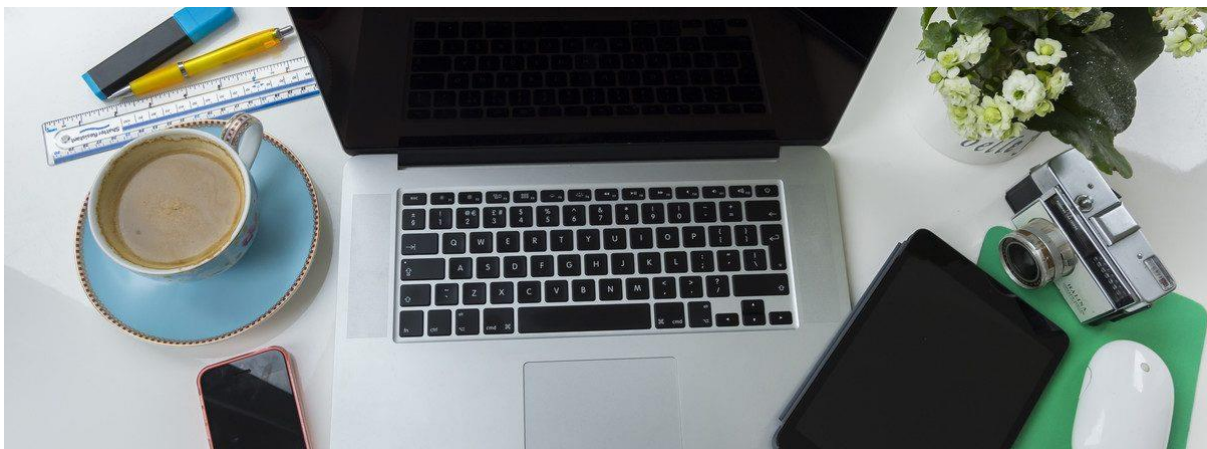
Learning Something New

As human beings we have a natural desire to learn and progress. Learning has been identified as a core need for psychological well-being. Learning can help build our confidence, build our self-esteem and enhance our creativity. We often get a real boost from increasing a skill or achieving something new and this can reduce our stress levels.



The positive effects of continuous learning are numerous

- The more you practise a new skill the more neural pathways are created in the brain- your brain gets bigger!
- You adapt better to change – the more varied your life experience the easier it is to adapt and change
- You become a more interesting person and will have more to talk about
- You grow as a person and develop your knowledge base
- You try new experiences and might find something you love to do
- Learning can fight boredom and can be fun!
- Could help stave of dementia



Learning does not have to be academic nor does it have to take a long time – it might be that we learn how to cook a new recipe or how to crochet a square. It might be that we are learning lots of new IT skills as we adapt to more online working.

Here is a tutorial on how to crochet a square, please click on the photo to view.



Click on the picture to find the recipe for Orkney Patties – **DELICIOUS!**



A recipe for perfect Orkney Patties

There are lots of options out there if you do want to increase your skills in a particular area and want to follow a course in a particular subject. Many courses are free at the moment so now might be a good time to explore these.

[MOOC: Massive Online Open course](#)

[Coursera: Worldwide online learning platform – hundreds of free courses](#)

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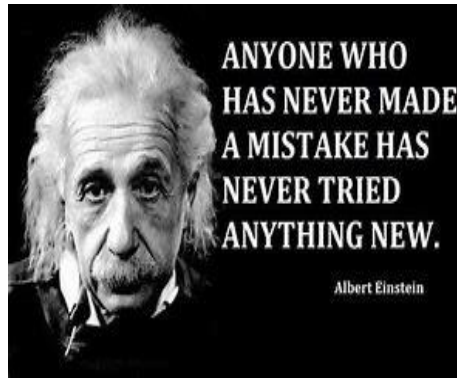
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Learning and Reflection

Learning can be challenging and can lead to feelings of self-doubt and vulnerability, especially in a time of crisis when we are all trying to pick things up very quickly. We are all exploring new ways of learning and teaching and as we adjust and try out new things we all make mistakes. We need to remember that the failures are just as important as the successes and we need to reflect on both to make progress. It is important, especially now to remember the growth mindset messages:



It is useful to make the time to have reflective conversations with colleagues and friends. Think about how things might work better but also reflect on what is working well and try to do more of it.

Using Appreciative Inquiry or Strengths based questioning when reflecting with colleagues to promote learning can lead to more positive and helpful outcomes. This involves helping the other person to use their own resources, rather than giving advice or solutions.

Questions to try might be:

- What is working well?
- What have you tried already? What has been helpful?
- What small thing could you do that would make a difference?
- What would other people who know you say you are doing well?
- What achievements have you made? How did you make them happen?

Remember learning can be fun and very rewarding. Watch this video and be inspired to learn something new. [The first 20 hours – how to learn anything](#)



Discussion Activities



It is useful to make the time to have reflective conversations with colleagues and friends. Think about how things might work better but also reflect on what is working well and try to do more of it.

Using Appreciative Inquiry or Strengths based questioning when reflecting with colleagues to promote learning can lead to more positive and helpful outcomes.

This involves helping the other person to use their own resources, rather than giving advice or solutions.

Step 1:

Watch the following YouTube clip about learning to juggle. [YouTube - How to juggle 3 balls](#)

Why not give this a try?

It can be useful to try and learn something new that requires practice and persistence. How many looked at the video and said, 'I could never do that!' 'It's too hard!'

What does it tell us about learning something new?

Step 2:

Questions to prompt discussion

- Have you been learning anything new recently?
- What is currently working well?
- What have you tried already? What has been helpful?
- What small thing could you do that would make a difference?
- What would other people who know you say you are doing well?
- What achievements have you made? How did you make them happen?

“Mindfulness means paying attention, in the present moment, without making any kind of judgement”

It incorporates a feeling of allowing ourselves to be openhearted or ‘spacious’, meaning that we become open to reinterpreting the world around us, rather than being hidebound by the thinking habits that we have developed over time, which shape our perspective and affect our responses – our ‘autopilot’ mode.

It might be that we are noticing something we are doing, something we are feeling, something we are looking at – the important thing is that whatever it is has our purposeful attention and we are simply noticing. Practising Mindfulness allows us to recognise and name feelings without becoming caught up in them or judging ourselves for having them. It allows us to describe ourselves without making associations with events or others. It allows us to live more in the moment and less in the past or in the future.

Mindful Moments: A Starting Point

You can try this out

- Sit down at a table and place an object in front of you – this could be anything e.g. a cup, a vase, a piece of fruit, a biscuit!
- Look closely at the object for several minutes. Don’t touch it or pick it up, just think about how it looks. Try not to make judgements or comparisons about its appearance or its usefulness.
- Focus on what you can feel. Stay still, close your eyes and notice any physical sensations – Can you feel your clothes against your body? Can you feel the chair underneath you? How does it feel?
- Focus on what you can hear. Are there noises to hear inside? Can you hear noise from outside? What about the sound of your own breathing?
- Open your eyes and reflect on your experience of the past few minutes.



Mindfulness Exercise Linking to your Senses

- Choose an item from around you and sit somewhere comfortable and quiet. The item might be anything at all – a scarf, a cone from the garden, a shell, a piece of cotton wool, an item of clothing etc.
- Look at the item – notice its shape, its size, its appearance – Is it colourful? Shiny? Solid? Floaty? Rigid? etc.
- Close your eyes and touch the item; how does it feel? Is it cold? Is it warm? Is it soft? Is it coarse? Is it smooth or rough? Is it none of these? How does it feel in your hands? How does it feel against your face? Just notice and describe how the item feels.
- Now, bring the item closer to you face. How does it smell? Describe this to yourself. Remember not to judge, this is not about liking or disliking the smell, just accept and describe.
- Listen carefully – move the item about in your hands. What sounds can you hear?



- Now, take a deep breath, in through your nose and out through your nose. Continue breathing in this way as you think again about the look, the feel, the smell and the sound of your item.
- Open your eyes and re-familiarise yourself with your surroundings.

Mindfulness is **not** about relaxation. Whilst you may feel relaxed after engaging in a Mindfulness exercise or having learned to take a generally more mindful approach to life, it requires you to be actively engaged in a process – and bear in mind, very often we don't have conscious control over what thoughts enter our heads or the feelings that arise within us; being mindful of those thoughts and feelings means that we actively notice and pay attention to them – Mindfulness is **not** about emptying your mind or stopping thinking.

It is important to guard against the practice of Mindfulness becoming a 'self-improvement' exercise. Any such exercise inherently contains an element of judgement of yourself, which Mindfulness definitely does not. Mindfulness is, very simply, about getting to know yourself and the things around you just as they are. The more curious you are, the more you will notice. This may well lead you to feeling happier, having an increased sense of being at ease and believing that you are better able to cope with the things that you encounter in life, but Mindfulness is **not**, in itself, about self-improvement.

There is sometimes a perception that there is a religious element to Mindfulness. This is not the case. What is true is that there are a number of Mindfulness practitioners who are linked with Buddhism and who use Mindfulness within their meditation. However, remember that Buddhism is not a religion, rather a philosophy which is about developing insight, as opposed to faith. Mindful practices, in fact, predate Buddhism, having been an element of the Taoist philosophy which underpinned the development of Chinese medicine and healing philosophy, as well as the development of martial arts.

Benefits of Mindfulness

Many benefits of Mindfulness practice have been identified. These include:

- Better physical health
- Improved mental health and well-being
- Increased happiness and contentment
- Increased self-awareness and improved skills for life
- Enhanced thinking skills

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 Wellbeing

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 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.

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.

Mindfulness and the Stress Response

Can you identify with that heart racing-sweating palms-stomach churning feeling that we get when we feel stress? Perhaps this was your response when you first realised that Covid-19 had become real in your local context?

In itself, the stress response is actually designed to protect us. When faced with a perceived danger, our instincts come to the fore and we either 'fight or take flight' in order to protect ourselves and survive. Our assessment of what is stressful and how great the threat is, is individual – it is linked to our



own perception of what is going on in the environment. This explains why it is that what one person perceives as stressful, may have no impact on the person standing beside them.

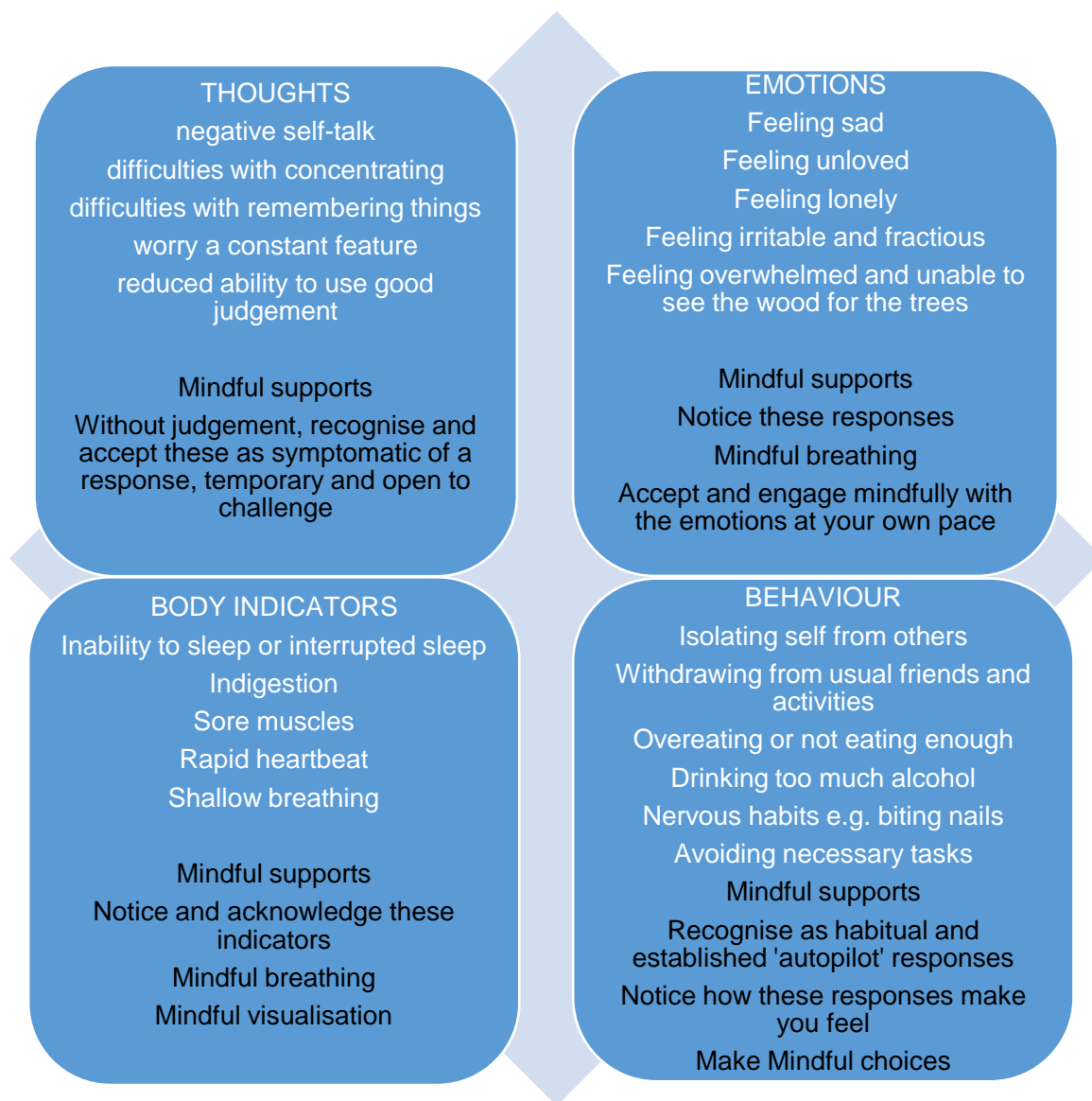
How many times have you revisited an event or a conversation that brought out your stress response in the past and relived it like it was happening for the first time? Many of us do this – we even do it with events we are anticipating in the future as we imagine the situation in our heads.

When we experience a stress response, our bodies produce stress hormones – adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol - which trigger those familiar physical signs. It is important to note that not all stress is bad. Sometimes we respond positively to our stress response. For example, perhaps we are able to work through the stress to achieve something that needs to be done or perhaps we are able to rise to a challenge and discover a strength we were unaware of in ourselves.

However, prolonged exposure to that stress response can be harmful not only to our mental health and well-being, but also to our physical health. In this case, it is useful to have a way to manage our response in order to reduce the damage to ourselves both mentally and physically. Mindfulness can be a useful tool to use when your stress response is triggered.

Mapping Your Stress

Although we all recognise the physical signs of the fight or flight stress response, how we as individuals cope with stress varies. The grid below is designed to help you think about how you and your body respond and how Mindfulness might be able to help you manage these responses. The indicators in the boxes may not be yours – you may like to generate your own map.



Mindful Breathing

We breathe all day and all night long for the whole of our lives. How often do you pay attention to yourself breathing? The chances are that for most of the time, it is an entirely unconscious action.

When we breathe mindfully, we make a conscious effort to 'notice' our breath coming into our body and then leaving our body again.

We might focus on how our throat feels as we inhale and exhale, we might notice how our muscles move, where we feel pressure. It is up to you what you focus on, what is important is that you try and keep the focus there throughout:



Sit on a chair with your feet on the ground. Close your eyes and your mouth and begin to notice your breath entering and leaving your body through your nose. Notice how breathing feels: Is your breath cold? Is it warm? Where is it cold/warm? What is your belly doing? Can

you feel it rising and falling as you breathe? How do your shoulders feel? Do you notice tension or are they relaxed?

Choose your focus and continue breathing and noticing for as long as you are able.....or until you are ready to stop.....

When you start paying attention to your breathing in a focused and mindful way, it can feel very alien. You might be aware of your mind wandering. This is perfectly normal.

If your mind wanders, bring your attention back to your focus. By noticing your mind wandering, you are in fact, being mindful. Remember not to judge yourself, just bring your attention back to your breath and your focus.

As you sit, breathing, you might notice aches and pains of feelings in your body that you have not been aware of before. Try and notice them, without questioning or speculating. Accept them and notice whether the sensations change as you continue breathing. If you need to move, move slowly, noticing how the feelings change as you do so.

Over time, you will find it easier to notice without attachments – keep practising!

Please click on this [link](#) to watch a 10 minute visualisation guided meditation for relaxation

Mindfulness Activities

Take a Mindful Walk

Stroll through your neighborhood in silence for a few minutes. Walk mindfully. Notice how the ground feels under your feet. How do your feet feel in your shoes? Is your weight evenly spread? Can you feel the wind? What can you see? What do you notice about the colour of the things you see? What textures are there in your environment? Pick up a twig – how does it feel? Is it light? Heavy? What about the smells around you? How do you feel?



Make a Glitter Jar

Half fill a jar with water. Add a good squeeze of PVA glue. Add different colours of glitter. These can be thought of as representing different emotions or simply as interest to notice. Put the lid on tightly and shake the jar. Notice how the glitter swirls and then settles. As it settles, breathe mindfully. How do you feel as you watch?

Mindfulness and Anxiety

In the current world of Covid-19, many of us are experiencing feelings of anxiety, perhaps for the first time. One way of thinking about anxiety is to imagine that it sits in the gap between what we see as our threshold for coping and the perceived threat, which we see as presenting a danger at a level higher than one we are equipped to deal with.

It is perfectly normal to be feeling anxious in these uncertain times. Anxiety grows out of uncertainty. In our daily lives, before Covid-19, the future was always uncertain and individuals always managed this uncertainty in different ways and with different perspectives. Perhaps now though, there is more anxiety in the general population as all of us are facing a future with an acknowledged threat which is difficult to mitigate and which is tangibly affecting every area of our lives.

Taking a Mindful approach to anxiety means acknowledging and noticing that it is there and understanding that it is a normal and to be accepted. Be wary of ascribing the personality trait of 'anxious' to yourself, as if it is part of who you are. You may be experiencing anxious thoughts but it is not helpful to identify yourself with your emotions, as this can lead to developing a negative image of yourself. It may be helpful for you, however, to mindfully consider what thoughts, other feelings and sensations you experience in a moment where you identify that you are experiencing anxiety.

A Mindful Focus on Emotion Exercise

- Try thinking about an emotional experience just as you would contemplate a flower.
- Notice everything about it with your full awareness.
- Now, imagine that the emotion would like you to see it exactly as it is.
- Move in as close as you feel comfortable doing – maybe you could use a magnifying glass or perhaps you want to imagine it away in the distance. If this is the case, look through the larger end of binoculars.
- Try not to worry if the emotion becomes increasingly intense as you move towards it – that is perfectly normal.
- Stop when you feel you have had enough. If it is overwhelming, try again another time.
- You could make a note of how you felt so that you can compare your experiences each time you undertake this exercise.



The Benefits of Practice

Mindfulness is an approach. There are many different techniques and exercises. As with everything else, some of these will suit you and some will not. It is important for you to find which of these works best for you. Remember, that you are learning a new skill and, as with any new learning, you may not find it easy at first. However, it will get easier and begin to feel more natural each time you do it.

Practising Mindfulness is no different to practising anything else. The more you do it, the better you get at it! This is because as with all skills, the neural pathways become increasingly strengthened the more they are activated. We know from neuroscience that repeating an activity over and over again actually changes the shape of the brain. This can be seen in the brain scans of musicians whose brains look different from those who do not play instruments,

in the brain scans of taxi drivers who are constantly and repetitively visualising routes, as well as in the brain scans of athletes whose bodies are finely tuned to the demands of their sport and whose brains are similarly trained in the relevant areas.



Imagine the creation of a path within an overgrown forest. The first time it is walked, you have to wade through the undergrowth and when you look behind you, your trail is barely visible. However, the more the same ground is walked through, the more flattened the undergrowth gets and the more established the path becomes. It is exactly the same with practising Mindfulness and the more it is practised the more automatic it becomes, developing into your natural way of 'being'. It is never too late to start practising Mindfulness. Your brain can grow and adapt throughout your whole life!

Mindfulness and Dealing with difficult times

Human beings have been dealing with difficult times throughout history. We are generally resilient and able to adapt to new and challenging situations and we all have strategies for coping. Nevertheless, the global pandemic is likely to be having an impact on all of us. The practice of Mindfulness is another tool to help us manage. Mindfulness gives us permission to acknowledge and, indeed, embrace, the difficulties in the present. A Mindfulness approach allows us to notice our responses – our physiological response, our emotional response – and by its very non-judgemental nature, frees us up to observe ourselves, without attaching these responses to the essence of who we are.

In difficult times, it is important to acknowledge that there is not only one level to the challenge. In 2020, we are faced with Covid-19, a real threat to our health. Coming to terms with its existence and prevalence is a challenge in itself, as is processing the action which has been taken around the world to manage it. At another level, we have the challenge of managing our mind's response to this situation and the impact it is having on our lives. Our first reaction may well have been to feel that this should not be happening to the world in this day and age, which has almost certainly led many of us into feeling anger, frustration and perhaps even fear. Within a Mindfulness approach, these emotions are to be acknowledged and noticed. There is no wish to dismiss or forget them and yet, Mindfulness can help us reduce their impact by both allowing us to accept these feelings and to let them go, keeping them in their own space, rather than them becoming a part of us. If we can do this, it saves our minds from tensing up around these emotions and thereby, almost inadvertently, hanging on to them.

This can be likened to a physical experience of pain. When you have an opportunity, perhaps the next time you have a headache, or have been sitting too long and can feel pain in your shoulders, try using a mindful approach and think about how you are feeling. Try to notice

the sensation of the pain and then notice what is going on round about it. Very often you will discover considerable tension in the muscles around where you can feel the pain. If you are able to relieve the tension, it is likely that the feeling of pain will subside, at least to some extent. In the same way, our minds can tense up around difficult emotions and learning to ease that tension can result in the strength of the emotion diminishing.

I can't let go, no matter how hard I try

Sometimes it can be very hard to notice, but not react to, the thoughts that come into our heads when we are practising Mindfulness. This perhaps particularly happens when an unpleasant thought or memory which is tied up with strong emotions makes its way into our consciousness. If we engage with them, these thoughts or memories have the potential to trigger a re-experience of the event or create an image of what a future event may be like. For many people, Covid-19 will already hold strong memories which may continue to make their way into their consciousness in the future, perhaps out of the blue. Many people are already worrying about what the future is going to look like and what it might hold. If we wish to, how can we manage these thoughts away? Discover below one way that might work for you.



Making a Giraffe Disappear

- Think of a giraffe in your head.
- Now, make a conscious effort to 'unthink' it away.
- How hard was that? Impossible?
- You can't make thoughts (or giraffes!) go away by thinking about them or engaging with them!
- Now, wiggle your toes and think consciously about what that is like and how doing that feels.
- It is likely that while you were focusing on your toes, the giraffe has moved away, unhappy about not being the focus of your attention.....

Click [here](#) to watch a video with an exercise to help you deal with strong emotions

Did you know?

A study in Wisconsin, USA, 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. 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!

Discussion Activities



Note for Team Leaders:

N.B. Some members of your team may be unwilling to engage in some of the following activities – equally, some may wish not to close their eyes. Please do not insist. We do not know about others' individual situations/experiences and there may be something in someone's background which means that they are not comfortable taking part or even not able to take part.

Please be aware that 'Mindfulness' is not the same as 'Relaxation'. When undertaking Mindfulness activities, it is impossible to predict what thoughts/feelings/sensations are going to arise for different individuals. Please monitor the responses of your team members during the following activities.

Activities

1. In groups of two or three, discuss what you understand by the term 'Mindfulness'. Think about what Mindfulness is **not**.
2. **Trainer/Team leader: You will need a timer(2 mins)**
 - Ask members of your team to sit comfortably, with both feet on the floor and to lightly close their eyes. Ask them to remain sitting like this and just to notice the sounds and sensations around them until you ask them to open their eyes again (2mins)
 - In small groups or as a whole group, depending on what is best for your setting, talk together about:
 - What people heard
 - What else people noticed – the feeling of sitting still? The feeling of clothing? Any other physical sensations? Emotional sensations?
 - What the overall experience felt like – did people feel comfortable? Awkward? Content? etc.
3. **Trainer/Team leader: You will need fruit pastilles and raisins.**
Please talk your team through this exercise:
 - Choose either a fruit pastille or a raisin
 - Look carefully at whatever you have chosen- notice its texture, its weight, its colour, its shape (Trainer/Team Leader – wait a few seconds)
 - Move it towards your lips. What do you notice? Are you aware of your muscles moving? How does your arm feel as it moves? Does this change? What else do you notice?
 - Touch your lips with your chosen item. What do you notice? Do you have any particular sensations? How does it smell? How do you feel?
 - Put it in your mouth and let it just sit there without chewing it or moving it about. What do you notice now? What is happening in your mouth?

- Start to chew. What do you notice? Notice what happens to:
 - The texture?
 - The flavour?
 - The size?
 - Can you smell anything?
 - Allow yourself to experience all the sensations being generated.
 - Swallow when you are ready. Notice how swallowing feels. How did you know when you were ready to swallow?
 - **Afterwards, discuss your experience of the above process with a partner.**
4. There are many different Mindfulness techniques and exercises. To try out this visualisation click [here](#).

Afterwards, discuss your experience with a partner or in a small group:

- What was your overall impression?
- Did you feel comfortable undertaking this exercise?
- How did you feel beforehand? And during?
- How do you feel now?

Think about whether visualisation is a technique that works for you or might work for you with practice.

5. At this time of Covid-19, many of us are experiencing strong emotions that are hard to let go of. The 'Soles of your Feet' technique has been shown to help with this. Watch the short video below and try out the technique, then discuss with a partner when you might use it. [Mindful Moment Monday: Soles of the Feet](#)
6. Practising Mindfulness allows us to 'notice without judgement'. As we practise over time, becoming more mindful allows us to function less on 'autopilot' i.e. to rely less on our habitual perspectives, assumptions and responses and become more able to stand back and observe what is happening, how we are actually feeling etc. In turn, this may impact on our responses.

With a partner, or in a small group, discuss the following:

- Can you think of a time when you are aware that you were able to practise being mindful in a situation? What impact did this have?
- Can you think of a time when being more mindful might have led you to respond in a different way?
- How might being more mindful help you in this time of Covid-19 or in the future?