

# WORKPLACE WELLBEING

## Being in the moment

### An introduction to mindfulness



# Welcome

The Workplace Wellbeing offer is a free, confidential package of support inclusive to all UHBW colleagues, whenever helpful.

Full details can be found on our website. Access using [this link](#) or by scanning the QR code.



This guide and other topics in the series are intended to provide general information only with signposts to expert sources of support. If you have any questions or suggestions, please email the Workplace Wellbeing team via [wellbeing@uhbw.nhs.uk](mailto:wellbeing@uhbw.nhs.uk)

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# Introduction

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At this exact moment you may be sat down at a computer reading these words; or perhaps stood somewhere reading them on your phone. Wherever you are, you are physically **in this moment**.

Whilst humans can physically be somewhere such as in a work meeting, having lunch in a café with a friend, or sitting on a bus, we can mentally be somewhere different. Let's consider an example.

*It is morning, and you have had breakfast and are now brushing your teeth.*

*As you brush, are you thinking about the taste of the mint in your mouth and the smell in your nose? Are you fully aware of the sensation of the brush moving against your teeth? Are you focussed on the sound of the bristles moving?*

*For most of us, most times when we brush our teeth, the answers are probably "No, no, and no!"*

This may not be new to you, many of us are familiar with the idea that our minds can almost 'switch off' or go into some sort of 'auto-pilot' mode, particularly when doing things that we've done many times before.

The example demonstrates how our body can be in one place, whilst our mind, (our mental focus, attention, and thoughts) can be somewhere else.

We may be thinking about work and planning what needs to be done; we might be remembering and replaying a conversation we had with a colleague or friend the day before; we might be feeling stressed that there is no food in the fridge and thinking about when we might be able to fit in going to a supermarket.



For many of us, these thoughts sound like our own voice, chatting away inside our heads. For others, rather than 'hearing' the thoughts, they will visualise them, and picture scenes playing out like in a film. There is another guide available in this range to help us better understand our thoughts (access using [this link](#)) but the focus of this guide is on learning the skill of **actively bringing our focus to the current moments as we live them**.

# Where is your attention?

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How often is your attention focussed on what you are actually experiencing in the current moment?

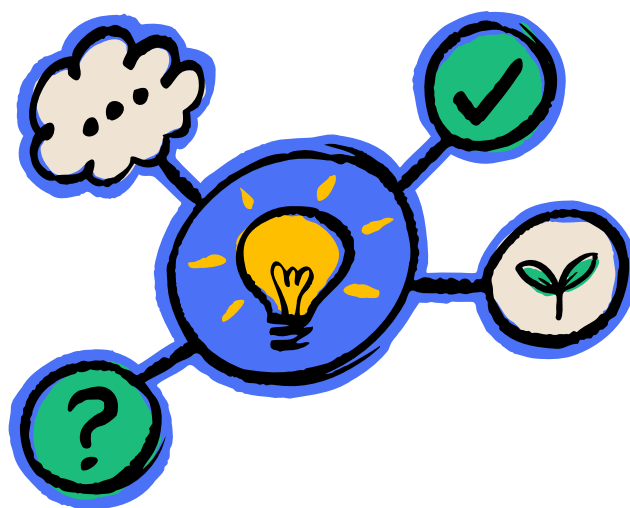
The reality for most of us is that by the time we get out of bed we are already mentally planning what will happen in the day, who we will see, and what conversations we might have, events we are excited about or dreading.

This can be a conscious thing, where we intentionally think about something; but it can also happen automatically. It is quite possible that your attention will have drifted onto other things even in the time it has taken you to read this page.

When our attention does drift away from the current moment we are experiencing, it tends to either focus on past events (e.g. a conversation with someone we had yesterday), or imagined future events (e.g. a presentation we are giving next week).

This can be a positive thing; it can allow us opportunities to reflect and learn from past events, or to plan and prepare for future events.

However, it can become a problem and affect our wellbeing when the thoughts are negative and too frequent, regretting something we've done and playing it over and over in our head, or dreading something coming up and getting anxious thinking about it repeatedly.



When we are spending much of our time dwelling on past events, or worrying about future events, we are not able to properly experience the current moment.

Focussing on the present moment; i.e. practicing really paying attention to what is happening to you right now can be a really positive skill to help our wellbeing, but it does require practice. This guide will help introduce how to better develop this skill; something we call the skill of being **mindful**.

# Practicing being mindful

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Being mindful means making a conscious effort to focus on what is going on right now, by actively bringing your attention to the things you are currently experiencing.

This is not a new concept and has been used for thousands of years to help people improve their wellbeing.

There are many ways people can practice bringing their attention to the current moment outside of specific mindfulness and meditation such as through yoga and tai-chi use similar principals. Indeed, even things like listening to music, going for a walk, exercising, having a bath can all help us be more mindful if we practise paying full attention to each of these tasks when doing them.



The things that we enjoy most in life, hobbies such as eating, cycling, socialising, going to concerts, it is likely that we enjoy these things because they capture and hold our attention. But on occasions, you might have been doing the hobby you love, but your mind was elsewhere you got far less pleasure from the hobby than you normally might, because you weren't really focussing on it. The less we are in the moment, the more we are distracted from what is happening to us in life.

There is evidence to suggest that people with the ability to turn their focus and attention to the present moment can experience:

- Reduced anxiety
- Improved sleep
- Reduced feelings of anger

Being in the moment we are trying to achieve the skill of:

1. **Noticing** when your mind has drifted away from the current moment/activity.
2. Gently **bringing your attention back** to what is going on in this moment, i.e. what is really happening right now.

# Techniques to try now and use throughout life

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We are going to look at three quick and simple techniques to help start practicing bringing your attention to now.

Two of the techniques use our breath to give us an anchor to focus on and keep coming back to, while the first technique is one which uses all five of our senses to anchor us in the moment.

The nice thing about these techniques is that you don't need anything to do them, they can be used in most situations in life no matter where you are, and you can start them right away. The tricky part is getting into the **habit** of using them as and when you find it helpful to do so, rather than forgetting about them.

## Technique 1: '5 senses'

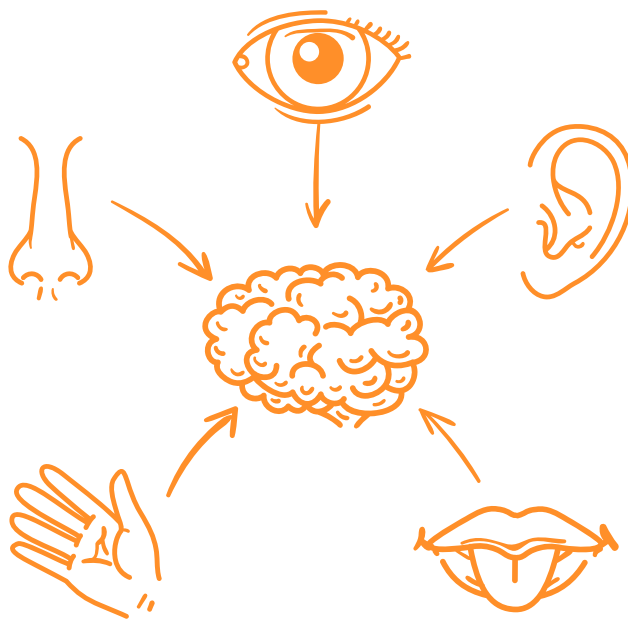
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We are all born with five distinct senses which enable us to experience the world around us:

- Sense of sight, using our eyes
- Sense of smell, using our nose
- Sense of taste, using our mouths
- Sense of hearing, using our ears
- Sense of touch, using our whole bodies

When it comes to practising being more mindful, we can think of these senses like the anchor on a boat. If our mind is the boat, drifting at sea, then thoughts about the future, and memories of the past are all like big waves which can wash us off course, change our direction and generally rock the boat.

Our senses can act like an anchor, something we can rely on to keep us in the moment, or to bring us back when waves/thoughts begin to take us away from where we currently are.



The technique on the next page guides us through each of our five senses, getting us to focus our attention on what each sense is experiencing. The step-by-step instructions on the next page are for you to work through now and whenever you might find that you are getting knocked off course by thoughts.

To start, take a deep breath from your stomach, and then:

- **See:** Look around you and name 5 things in your head you can see. Perhaps, a cloud through the window, or a flashing light on your screen etc. There is no rush.
- **Feel:** Turn your attention to the sensations in your body and name 4 things that you can physically feel e.g. the feeling of the chair on your back, the pressure of your feet on the floor, an ache in your shoulder etc.
- **Listen:** Next, listen for 3 different sounds and name them in your head. Maybe a clock ticking that you hadn't noticed, or the sound of your own breath.
- **Smell:** Next, try and notice two different things that you can smell. This might be tricky, so if you can't notice two, perhaps focus on imagining remember a favourite smell.
- **Taste:** Finally, notice 1 thing that you can taste. Perhaps the aftertaste of your breakfast, or a coffee you recently had.

Once you have gone through each step, you have completed the technique. It might have taken you 1 minute, or 5 minutes; that part doesn't matter.

What does matter is that it is very likely that whilst you worked through the steps your focus was only on what is happening around you in the present moment. **For a couple of moments, you gave your mind a break from distracting thoughts and allowed it to 'wake up' to what is actually happening around you.**

This technique can be done whenever you need it and is an excellent way of regaining control over your mind.



## Technique 2: '4-7-8 breathing'

This technique will sound quite simple but don't let that put you off trying it to see what you think. The technique is about focussing on your breathing by making a conscious change to *how* you are breathing.

As much as we might like to think we are excellent multi-taskers, it is actually very difficult to focus your attention on more than one thing. So, if you are fully focussing on your breathing, your mind cannot wander off onto other thoughts.

This calming breathing technique takes just a few minutes, and you can do it standing up, sitting in a chair or lying down. But for this first go perhaps take a seat and make yourself as comfortable as you can.

You don't have to close your eyes but can if you wish.

1. First, take a breath in through your nose for **4 seconds**, counting in your head.
2. Then hold that breath for a count of **7 seconds**.
3. Exhale through your mouth for **8 seconds**.
4. Repeat the cycle up to **3 times**.

If you have any breathing difficulties, try a shorter pattern instead, such as:

1. Breathe in through the nose for **2 seconds**.
2. Hold the breath for a count of **3 seconds**.
3. Exhale through the mouth for **4 seconds**.
4. Repeat the cycle up to **4 times**.



NB. *If you feel uncomfortable or lightheaded when using this technique, then stop doing it.*

When you have finished the four steps notice how you feel; consider the questions below if helpful.

- Was it a pleasant sensation?
- Did you find it helpful in any way at all?
- If it was useful, do you think it would be worth trying again?
- When would be useful to do it?
- Would anything get in the way of you doing it again?



## Technique 3: 'simple abdominal breathing'

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1. Put one hand on your chest and the other on your tummy.
2. Take a slow breath, breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.
3. Notice your tummy (rather than your chest) rising as you breathe in and falling as you breathe out. Remind yourself that you are safe.
4. Repeat 3 – 5 times as needed.

## A note on developing new habits

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Learning techniques like this is no-good if we only use them once and then forget them. The key to forming a new habit is by using one or perhaps all these techniques regularly to train your brain in positive new behaviours.

The more practise them, the more likely you are to use them when struggling with your wellbeing. Perhaps set an alarm on your phone once or twice a day to remind you to practice of one the techniques, it could take less than 3 minutes.

Learning techniques like these can help you to bring your attention back to the current moment, when you need to.

There is much more that can be learned around the topic of mindfulness, such as further information around noticing and accepting the thoughts that distract us.

You can find some excellent titles in the UHBW Library, and can learn more about the resources and initiatives available to support colleagues to stay well though [this link](#).

