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# SIMPLE MINDFULNESS

*A Practical Guide  
to Getting Started*



THERAPY CO.

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# About Me, and How to Use this Guide

My name is Averil Lagerman, M.A., MNZAC. I am a registered counsellor from Auckland, New Zealand. I first came across mindfulness in 2007 when going through a challenging time, and it later became a part of the core skills I teach to my clients as I experienced the differences it made in my own life.

This guide aims to serve as a succinct introduction to what mindfulness is and how you can begin practicing it at home.

Mindfulness is a skill, and one that doesn't necessarily come naturally to many of us. If you can see how increasing your mindfulness would be of benefit, expect that it will be a life-long practice of learning that is not always smooth sailing.

Take your time working through the guide and repeating the practices to build insight and familiarity. Where there are places to do some self-reflection on your own experience, you will get the most benefit from filling them out rather than just reading.

Mindfulness has made me a better, more content person and I hope it becomes meaningful for you too.



## Disclaimers and copyright:

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# What is Mindfulness?

We are habitual time travellers. Our minds chatter nonstop: Narrating, dwelling, worrying, planning, making up stories about previous events and those that may never occur.

This incessant rumination results in distraction, robs us of appreciation and joy, keeps us up in our heads, out of our bodies, and disengaged from our real, current experience.

Others can feel it when we are not truly present with them, and our work and relationships can suffer when we are not giving them our full attention.

My favourite definition of mindfulness comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR):

“Paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment to moment.”

Mindfulness asks us to repeatedly redirect our minds out of where they habitually drift to the past or future, and into what is going on around and inside of us right now.

Mindfulness has its roots in the meditation practices of the Hindus and Buddhists.

However, modern mindfulness practices are not religious in nature, and can be practiced by people of any (or no) faith without creating a conflict in beliefs.

Mindfulness is a practice and a way of being, not a religion or belief system.

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# Benefits of Mindfulness

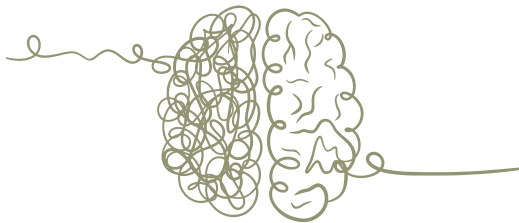
Mindfulness has been quite extensively researched, and has shown links to a range of benefits:

Higher relationship satisfaction through protection against the emotional stress of conflict, and improved ability to communicate in social situations (Barnes et al., 2007; Dekeyser et al., 2008).



Significantly better attention and ability to manage distraction (Moore & Malinowski, 2009).

Reduction in stress through increases in positive affect and decreases in anxiety (Farb et al., 2010).



Increased working memory was found among meditating military personnel under stressful conditions, compared to decreases in working memory in non-meditating personnel (Jha et al., 2010)

As well as (but not limited to):

Lower emotional reactivity (Ortner et al., 2007), improved immune function (Davidson et al., 2003), increased quality of life (Bruce et al., 2002), increased information processing speed (Moore & Malinowski, 2009), and reduced psychological distress (Coffey & Hartman, 2008; Ostafin et al., 2006).



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# Basic Mindfulness Practice

To get a sense of what truly being in the present feels like, and to become skilled at noticing the mind's wandering and returning it to the present, a structured mindfulness practice is a good way to begin.

First, find a quiet spot, indoors or out, where you won't be interrupted for a few minutes. Then:

- Sit in an upright posture on the chair or floor, holding the body relaxed but alert (don't lean against the back of the chair if it can be helped, as this encourages sleepiness). Mindfulness practice is about focused awareness, not about relaxation.
- Eyes may be closed, or open and fixed on a spot on the floor a few feet in front of you. I find eyes-open practice much more challenging, but it is useful to practice this way sometimes given we live our lives with our eyes open, and the overall aim is to be mindful in our daily life.
- Turn your attention to the breath, wherever you feel it strongly – the nose, the chest, the belly.
- Whenever your attention wanders, which it will repeatedly, notice the wandering and return your attention to the breath. Don't fret if it has been wandering for a while before you catch it - the mind secretes thoughts like the body secretes enzymes, and the aim of mindfulness is not to stop thoughts from coming.
- Repeat until the end of your practice (start with a timer set for one minute and work upwards).



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# Mindfulness Anchors

Whatever we return our focus to during mindfulness practice is referred to as the *anchor* - in the instructions on the previous page, the breath is the anchor.

For some, the breath is challenging. Perhaps the breath is restricted, or has been linked to anxiety, or is just plain difficult to focus on. In these cases, there are other anchors you can choose to hold as your focus:

## SOUND:

- White noise such as a fan or air-conditioner is good for this, or just tuning in to the ambient sounds of your environment (without getting hooked into thoughts or judgements about them).



## THE HANDS:

- If you really bring your attention into your hands, many people can sense a slight buzz or tingle that is always present but we tune out most of the time.



## THE FEET:

- Particularly if these are placed flat upon the floor, focusing on the sensation in the feet can have a calming, grounding effect.



## TOUCH:

- Tune in to the sensation of where the body meets the chair, or where clothing meet the skin.



## AN OBJECT:

- Choose a relatively neutral object so as to avoid provoking extra thoughts. The flame of a candle can be soothing.



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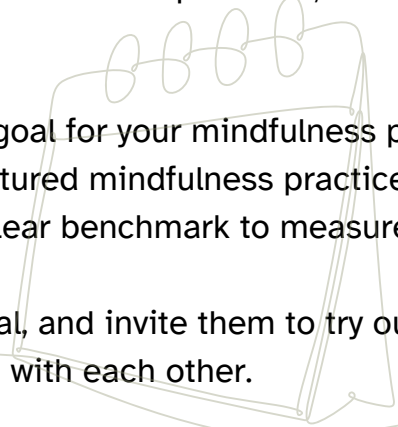
# Establishing a Regular Practice

“Mindfulness isn’t difficult, we just need to remember to do it.”

~ Sharon Salzberg, meditation teacher and author

This is perhaps the most challenging element of mindfulness of all. Even with the best intentions, it is all too easy to slip into bed at night and realise you haven’t done your mindfulness practice for the day.

Establishing a consistent mindfulness practice can be approached the same as any other healthy habit or goal you wish to pursue. The following general goal-setting tips and tricks may be useful - experiment, and find a method that works for you:

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- Set a clear, well-defined goal for your mindfulness practice, such as “I will sit for ten minutes in a structured mindfulness practice at least four days per week.” This gives you a clear benchmark to measure your progress against.
  - Tell others about your goal, and invite them to try out a daily mindfulness practice as well. Check in with each other.
  - Use a goal setting app to track your progress, a meditation timer app like Insight Timer, or mark off on a wall calendar every time you meditate (Jerry Seinfeld’s “Don’t break the chain” technique).
  - If you really need the push, put a monetary incentive in! Give a friend some cash with the instruction to donate it to a cause you do not like if you fail to meet your goal.
  - Make your mindfulness practice space feel luxurious. Have a soft blanket or cushion to hand, light a scented candle that you only use while practicing, and keep the space clean and tidy. Make it a place you want to go before starting your day, or to wind down at the end, so that the practice itself is inviting.





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# Practice Reflection

After you've practiced a few times, reflect on your experience and make some notes below:

Where have you been practicing? How is it working for you?

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Have you found a time of day when you're more easily able to practice?

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What roadblocks to sitting down to practice have you experienced or could you anticipate coming up?

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What anchors have you tried? How did you find them?

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When it's been more difficult to practice, have you felt curious and compassionate with yourself, or frustrated and chastising?

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# Mindfulness in Everyday Life

Formal practice can help to build a foundation of mindfulness, but the real work is in applying it to our everyday existence.

Mindfulness in everyday life means tuning in to our current experience, thoughts, feelings and perceptions in whatever activity we are engaged in.

Whether that activity is an everyday task like cooking or driving, an interaction with a friend, child, colleague, or family member, a walk alone, or our work, mindfulness improves our focus and relationship to these activities.

When you make the effort to tune in regularly throughout the day, mindfulness can give you the space to put the brakes on - whether that's stopping suddenly in traffic, holding back from saying something you regret, or pushing 'send' on that email.

A great time to practice mindfulness in everyday life is during "auto-pilot" activities. For me, that's washing the dishes, driving, and showering. Those are the times I most notice that I get caught up in my thoughts, paying the bare minimum attention to my current experience.

Interestingly, as much as I usually hate washing the dishes, it is far less awful if I focus in on the warmth of the water, the sounds of dishes clinking, and the process of turning a dirty dish into a clean one - rather than my resentful thoughts about standing at the sink.

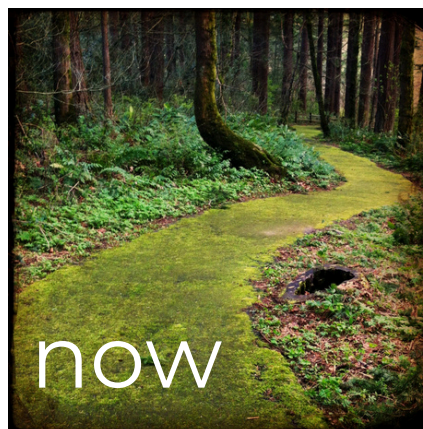
When are you on auto-pilot? Circle your top three or fill in your own:

- |                  |            |       |
|------------------|------------|-------|
| Driving          | Cooking    | _____ |
| Showering        | Working    | _____ |
| Vacuuming        | Walking    | _____ |
| Eating           | Exercising | _____ |
| Washing dishes   | Shopping   | _____ |
| Public transport | Childcare  | _____ |

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# Practice Reminders

Around your home or workplace, post mindfulness reminders for the activities you tend to perform on auto-pilot. Place them above the jug, by your desk phone, on your computer monitor, above the bathroom and kitchen sinks. Print and cut out the notes below or make your own.



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# RAIN for Hard Times

Practicing mindfulness with our own emotional experiences is a powerful way to support ourselves in challenging situations. Many of us tend to push our feelings away, invalidate ourselves (“I shouldn’t be upset, this is silly”), or conversely get swept away in our thoughts and emotions.

My favourite practice for more effectively processing difficult situations is the RAIN acronym used by the wonderful mindfulness teacher and author Tara Brach (screenshot the next page for a portable reference of the steps):

## RECOGNISE

- Bring awareness to what is really happening inside you. Tune in to your internal emotional and physical experience and mental dialogue, using mindfulness to notice it without getting pulled into the content of your thoughts.

## ALLOW

- Let whatever the situation is, and however you feel about it, to be there.
- Don’t push the feelings away, tell yourself you should feel otherwise, or that the situation should be different.

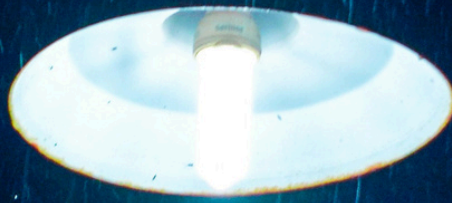
## INVESTIGATE

- With gentleness and curiosity, investigate what is happening inside. Ask yourself questions and listen for the answers rather than trying to consciously “think” them:
  - When I’m feeling this way, what am I believing?
  - What am I ignoring?
  - What does this vulnerable part of me most need from *me*? My patience? Acknowledgement? Care? Recognition?

## NURTURE

- Whatever you found you were needing from yourself in the Investigate step, offer that to yourself now. You might place one hand on your heart as a gesture of self-comfort.
- If it’s difficult to offer that to yourself, you can bring to mind a person, being, or pet that exemplifies that quality and imagine it flowing from them to you.





# Recognise

What is this feeling? Identify it by its name.  
What thoughts and sensations are present?

# Allow

Allow the mental, physical and emotional experience to be here, without bracing or pushing it away.

# Investigate

Be gentle and curious. What am I believing?  
What does this feeling need from me?

# Nurture

With compassion, offer yourself what you most need – reassurance, kindness, patience, care.



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# Learning to Pause

Difficult situations and uncomfortable emotions are where the rubber meets the road for mindfulness.

This quote from Holocaust survivor Victor Frankl perfectly encapsulates how mindfulness can help us to manage challenges in an intentional way:

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

With continued, regular mindfulness practice, we learn to find, pause, and breathe in that space. We respond, rather than react.

We choose our words, notice if we need to manage our emotions before acting, and have compassion for ourselves and others. This includes having compassion for when we forget to use mindfulness and just react instead!

Consider the last unpleasant situation, interaction, or emotion you experienced that you wish you could've handled better and reflect below:

What would pausing and practicing mindfulness have looked like in that moment?

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How might the outcome have been different?

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What could help you try to remember to use mindfulness in similar situations?

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# FAQs and Common Misperceptions

## **I can't do it right, my thoughts just keep coming.**

Mindfulness is not about emptying your mind of thoughts. It is a practice of noticing what the mind is doing and returning it to what you wish to focus on. In formal practice, that might be an anchor such as your breath, and in everyday life that might be the task you are doing or the interaction you are engaged in.

So every time you notice your thoughts wandering and you choose to bring it back to your point of focus, it is like completing another 'rep' of an exercise in the gym - you are strengthening the noticing and returning muscle.

## **I just can't bring myself to do it every day.**

Establishing a regular practice of even 5 or 10 minutes is challenging for most people, and many feel demoralised and give up on mindfulness altogether when it seems like it should be easy. If this happens to you, continue to practice paying deliberate attention in everyday life as often as you can. Even remembering to follow one breath, really tune into your task for ten seconds, or intentionally notice your thoughts or emotional state is building the skill of mindfulness.

## **If mindfulness is about being present in the moment, does that mean I can never think about the future or past?**

Remembering or reflecting on the past and planning for the future are necessary parts of being human. Someone who purely lived in the moment would never learn anything valuable from experience or be able to take proper care of themselves and others by making good choices for the future.

You can bring mindfulness to your thoughts about the past and future. Sit down to do it intentionally rather, and notice what is happening inside yourself when you are thinking.

## **I've tried mindfulness before, but it didn't work.**

Although we understandably want to see evidence of change or progress when learning any new skill, beginning a mindfulness practice with a hope for a quick result or specific outcome is often destined to fail. Approaching mindfulness with an open curiosity about what you might experience on any given day and over the years will support you in maintaining a practice and experiencing the benefits mindfulness can bring.



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## *Final Words & Gratitude*

Thank you for taking the time to read through the guide, and for giving yourself the space and time to learn about mindfulness. My hope is that you found it informative, accessible and encouraging to support you in beginning your mindfulness practice.

There are many resources available to support you in continuing and deepening your understanding and practice. You can continue to practice on your own, or seek in-person classes or online courses to connect with others and ask questions.

There are books, podcasts, videos, guided meditations and apps freely available - just make sure you seek information and resources from reputable practitioners. Some of my favourites are Tara Brach, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg.

Some people might initially see the act of reserving time just to breathe and notice the activity of their minds to be selfish or unproductive. It is my belief that the maintenance of a healthy mental and emotional system is just as valuable as taking care of the physical body, and should be prioritised as such.

There is a ripple effect of wellbeing when those around us are doing the work to take care of themselves, so allow yourself this time as a service to both yourself and others.

Go practice!

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