

How to do Mindfulness meditation

Some people still think of meditation as a new-age fad and imagine seeing people sitting cross-legged relaxing in a beautiful location. However it is not about relaxation. I have been doing mindfulness meditation since I learned it nearly 40 years ago. Even after the first session I immediately noticed an improvement in what I would describe as mental focus. For example when driving I would notice the feeling of holding the steering wheel and the action of changing gear, which would normally be automatic and unnoticed. As I became interested in hypnosis and hypnotherapy and helping people with depression I began to realise how important meditation could be in helping to notice negative thoughts. When we are depressed for some reason our unconscious minds will often bring up unhelpful thoughts for example “I will never get this job done”. If you do not notice that thought in your mind and ruminate on it then it will lead to other unhelpful thoughts and you can get stuck in an endless loop of thinking. Noticing the thought and deliberately ignoring it will stop it from affecting you in the same way. The problem is that we do not always notice these thoughts and we can get stuck in negative self talk. This is why mindfulness meditation is so useful.

The meditation I’m going to explain how to do is called the mindfulness of breathing. It is a Buddhist meditation but there is absolutely no religious content to it and I see it as a purely mental exercise helping us to become aware of our thoughts and focus our minds.

The meditation is very simple to do but can also be frustrating when you realise just how much your mind wanders. There is however no pass or fail, no good or bad sessions. The practice helps you focus and be aware of your thoughts and has positive effects even if you spent the whole time with your mind wandering all over the place.

Location

Ideally meditation should be carried out in a sitting position. It is totally unnecessary to sit on the floor in the lotus position but you can if you want to. Lying down however is not a good idea as it is very easy to fall asleep which is not the purpose of the exercise, although you can do this deliberately if you have trouble sleeping.

State of mind

It is not a good idea to practice meditation after reading a book or watching a film, or if you have got something on your mind as it will make meditation much harder. Also it is not a good idea to do it if you are tired as you will fight to stay awake. I find the best time for me is after having a shower in the morning but before breakfast.

The practice

When meditating the object is to focus our attention on something to the exclusion of everything else. It can be a candle or a scene or any object. In this meditation we are going to focus on our breathing which of course is something that is always with us. It is important to note that we are focusing on our breathing but not changing it in any way. It is very easy to take control of our breathing when doing this practice but this is wrong we need to observe only.

Stage 1

The first stage is to sit comfortably with our eyes closed and breathe normally in and out through our nose. With each breath we mentally count from one to ten with each breath. So we breathe in, breathe out and say to ourselves one then breathe in breathe out and say to ourselves two and continue to do it until we reach ten. When we reach ten we repeat the whole procedure again from one. As I said before it is important not to change your breathing in any way as we are purely observing our breathing and becoming mindful of it. It is very easy to consciously take control of our breathing and then count but this is not the object of the exercise.

The idea is to become aware of your breathing and the counting keeps your mind focused on it. It is inevitable that at some point your mind will wander off onto other things. When it does this and you realise you are no longer observing all you do is return to observing your breath and start counting again at one. This will happen many, many times especially to begin with and you shouldn't get annoyed with yourself when this happens. In fact it is important when this happens as it makes you aware of how much your mind wanders. As you practice meditation your mind will slowly quieten down and with practice can become completely still. It doesn't matter if your mind becomes still though as noticing your mind wandering is the important thing.

Stage 2

The second stage is similar to the first but this time you count just before each in breath. As I said before it is important not to take control of your breathing consciously. You are watching your breath and counting just before you sense that you are about to breathe in. Again when you reach ten start again at one. If you notice that your mind has wandered off just return to watching your breathing and start counting at one. Do not get annoyed or frustrated with your mind wandering as it will happen a lot. Just acknowledge it has happened and return to watching your breath.

Stage 3

In the third stage we drop the counting and just be aware of our breath at the first point we notice it entering our body. If you are breathing in through your nose you might be aware of a sensation of coolness. It doesn't really matter where you notice your breath the important thing is to focus your attention on that area. Again when you notice your mind wandering just bring it back to focussing on the area where you first feel your breath.

Stage 4

In the final stage we just pay attention to the flow of the breath in our body. Noticing it entering our nostrils, filling our lungs and our chest rising. Then our chest falling and the breath leaving our body through our nostrils.

Each of the four stages slowly makes us become more aware of our breath which is usually completely automatic and unnoticed. You spend the same amount of time on each stage and to begin with it is probably best to start with say five minutes on each stage so twenty in total. It doesn't have to be accurate and you can just move on when you think you have spent five minutes on each stage. I use a meditation timer app on my phone called Insight timer which you can program to chime after each stage and twice at the end. I have programs for twelve, sixteen, twenty minutes setup so I can select a session based on the time I have available. Even ten minutes can be beneficial.

If you have any questions please feel free to email me at chris@truefocushypnotherapy.co.uk