



FIGHT OR FLIGHT: Mark Williams, co-author of Mindfulness, explores ways of coping with the anxiety of modern life. Picture: TREVOR SAMSON



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“The frantically busy mind has become the norm in the 21st century. This results in a cycle of anxiety and stress”

AUTHOR: Stay mindful of the problem and it'll flee

Mindfulness is recommended in the UK as a cost-effective way of preventing a relapse of depression, writes Penny Haw

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A LONG time ago, when our ancestors roamed barefoot, eating fruit and nuts , they encountered carnivores and poisonous snakes. Threatened by these, their systems reacted by going into the "fight or flight" response. Adrenalin pumped through their bodies, their hearts beat faster, they began breathing rapidly and their muscles flexed and hardened. This response gave them the strength and motivation to flee for their lives or stay and put up a fight. The fight or flight response is a genetic effect that has always been fundamental to our survival as a species.

In the old days, however, shortly after terrified individuals had won a battle or fled to safety, their anxiety gradually subsided and their systems, including the chemistry in their brains, returned to normal.

That has changed.

These days, says Mark Williams, professor of clinical psychology and Wellcome Trust principal research fellow at Oxford University, because many of us constantly operate at such high levels of anxiety – as we rush from one engagement to the other, juggle countless activities and put ourselves under pressure to keep up with the Joneses – our systems operate in the fight or flight mode almost all the time.

This means we continuously experience the physical and psychological symptoms of

someone in grave bodily danger, producing more adrenaline and cortisol, our pulse racing, our breathing heavy and our immune systems less effective, which can lead to blurred vision and headaches. And as we function in the flee or attack mode almost permanently, the part of our brains that controls rational thought is bypassed: we're less attentive, capable and contented than we could and should be.

"Because of the lifestyles we lead, many of us function as if we're constantly being pursued by a venomous snake," says Williams, who received the MB Shapiro Award from the British Psychological Society for eminence in clinical psychology in 1999 and was elected Fellow of the Academy of Medical Sciences in 2004. "The frantically busy, overwired mind has become the norm in the 21st century. This, instead of improving our lot, results in a cycle of anxiety, stress, unhappiness and exhaustion."

Williams, who was in SA for a training session with the Institute For Mindfulness SA, is the co-author (with Danny Penman) of *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World*. The book explains mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), which Williams co-developed in the 1990s with Zindel Segal and John Teasdale, following Jon Kabat-Zinn's research into mindfulness-based stress reduction and its effect on treating chronic pain and stress.

While his initial interest in mindfulness was spurred by his work with people with depression – Williams also wrote *The Mindful Way Through Depression* in 2007 – his latest book is a guide "not to only release people from negative emotions but also to enhance positive emotions and wellbeing, and to help people find calm in a frenzied world".

"The idea for the new book came about when Danny (a feature writer for the Daily Mail with a PhD in biochemistry) approached me after having read my first book and suggested we do something for people who do not necessarily suffer from depression. Understanding MBCT, Danny's point was that many more people could benefit from the therapy but that they might be uncomfortable to be seen reading a book entitled *The Mindful Way Through Depression*. So we began work on a new book, which is more general in its approach and provides a means of achieving peace for those of us who are not depressed but struggle to keep up with the constant demands of the modern world."

The book takes you through eight weeks of mindfulness training. It provides examples of stressful situations and guides readers through processes for understanding what they're experiencing and how mindfulness will help them cope.

Mindfulness, explains Williams, simply means being aware in the moment and seeing clearly what is happening in your mind and in the world. The idea is to experience each moment with appreciation and compassion rather than with judgment, whether that judgment is of yourself or of whatever you are experiencing.

"MBCT is essentially about training the mind to see things more clearly to prevent it getting totally entangled with negative emotions and thus heading on a downward spiral. While it's unrealistic and dangerous even to pretend that we can banish negative emotions from our lives altogether, it is possible to catch ourselves earlier and stop things from getting out of hand. It's all about training the mind to follow a different pattern."

This is done by mindfulness meditation, a secular form of meditation that, Williams says, "anyone can learn with training and practice". It is explained in the book with meditation sessions on an accompanying CD: "The book guides readers through the programme but where individuals have difficulty learning alone, it is helpful to join a class."

And, once you've got it right, the benefits are promising. After reading two chapters

and doing a single meditation session with the CD, I began using the techniques to treat my 3am insomnia-cum-neurosis with very satisfying results. The exercise, which encourages you to isolate and appreciate one sensation and thought at a time, has a calming effect on the mind.

In the long term, studies reveal permanent changes in those parts of the brain associated with attention, decision-making and empathy in people who regularly practise mindfulness meditation. MBCT has also been found to help regulate emotions and improve productivity, performance and satisfaction at work.

"Actually, there's nothing new about mindfulness. It has been central to traditions in Asia, particularly Buddhism, for years and is also found in other cultures, religions and traditions which advocate periods of silence and contemplation."

Despite its ancient roots, MBCT is widely acknowledged as an effective and scientific method. In 2001, Williams was awarded a 10-year Wellcome Trust Programme Grant to continue his research into mindfulness. MBCT has been evaluated in six research trials and is recommended by the UK's National Health system's National Institute For Health And Clinical Excellence as a "cost-effective treatment for preventing relapse in depression". It has also been proved to be as effective as maintenance antidepressants in preventing new episodes of depression. Other studies have found that MBCT reduces fretfulness in people suffering from general anxiety and bipolar disorders. So, just think what it can do for those of us who spend our lives fleeing venomous snakes and thoughts.