

Well-being

Mohammed's grades have been slipping for a while and he's now in danger of failing if he doesn't pass his next set of exams. Everyone else seems to be doing better than he is and he often beats himself up for "letting himself down." Although he sits down each evening for hours intending to study, Mohammed can't seem to resist the temptation to check his social media, reply to emails and flit from website to website. By the time he puts his books away and is getting ready for bed, he's tearful, overwhelmed with stress and disappointed with himself. He knows that he's easily distracted and that it isn't helpful, but he just can't seem to do anything about it.

Sarah likes things at work and home to be organised and tidy. At work, her organisational talents have even earned her a promotion. At the end of most workdays, though, she returns home to find the house a mess that she ends up cleaning. She keeps waiting for her family to acknowledge all she does for them, but they never do. Becoming more irritated, resentful, and tired, she finds herself snapping at her children continually to the point where they now withdraw to their rooms straight after school.

Ling plays sports for her national team. She has always loved her sport and trains daily with specialist coaches to hone her reaction times and improve her fitness. Although she still looks forward to training, she no longer stops to remember why she is doing what she does. At her level, the pressure can be high and mistakes can be disastrous. She notices she doesn't love the matches themselves quite as much as she used to.

Although Mohammed, Sarah and Ling's lives are very different, there are some common features. They have perhaps become stuck in patterns of reactivity that can lead to unhappiness and can stop them leading their lives as fully and meaningfully as they would like. This can happen to all of us, and sometimes we feel powerless to do anything about.

We all have the capacity for better well-being, but far too often it can feel tantalisingly just out of reach. We often feel that we don't deserve to be happy and can find ourselves comparing our well-being with someone else's and berating ourselves for not being as happy/successful/fulfilled as we *should* be. Of course, our expectations and comparisons with others only make us feel worse.

What does well-being actually mean? Well-being is the state of being comfortable, healthy and/or happy; it means leading a life that is enjoyable and rewarding. Although this seems simple, well-being is actually a more complex concept because it is individual to each of us. What makes us feel happy and gives us a sense of accomplishment might be different for someone else, and it can change for each of us from day to day, year to year.

What gets in the way of our well-being

Research has shown that our minds are more naturally drawn to the difficult and unpleasant (such as aches and pains, irritability, sleepiness) while ignoring the lovely and pleasant. A useful way of looking at this is to picture our minds as being like either Teflon or Velcro, where the sticky Velcro mind latches onto the unpleasant and the smooth Teflon mind moves over pleasant experiences without absorbing any of it. Neither the Teflon nor the Velcro mind tends to notice pleasant experiences, which means that we don't always see that there are good things in our lives.

We don't usually stop to look at what we're thinking, how we're feeling or what we're doing. Our habits, even the destructive ones, can feel comfortable and familiar. Many of us operate in our daily lives on automatic pilot, not really attuned to what is going on in our hearts, minds, bodies or noticing the world around us. For example, we've all had the experience of driving somewhere only to realise that we don't remember much about the journey at all. Although we've performed the complicated task of driving and navigating, we haven't truly paid attention to what we are doing or the sights around us. This is a relatively trivial example, but about what when we do this in our important relationships, our work and other parts of our life that we care about; we can find ourselves slipping into automatic pilot. Although being on autopilot can be positive, enabling us spread our focus across different tasks so that we can get things done, it can also stop us from noticing when we need to do things differently. Sometimes it takes something to jolt us into asking ourselves if there is another way of being, as we saw with Mohammed, Sarah and Ling.

What keeps us locked in these unhelpful patterns of reactivity? The following are just a few examples of the unhelpful psychological traps we most frequently fall into:

Rumination. Rumination is another word for brooding about something, such as when we wake up in the night, tossing and turning while we worry over a problem. Ruminating is not helpful and tends to add to our problems because it makes us feel more anxious and worried without actually solving anything. Sarah fell into the rumination trap by brooding over her resentments towards her family to the point, which only fuelled her anger.

Avoidance. Avoidance can take many forms. The most obvious form of avoidance is when we make a deliberate decision to stay away from certain people, situations and places. Although there are times when this is a perfectly appropriate strategy, avoidance - including avoiding our own thoughts and emotions - frequently harms us by stopping us from facing the things we need to face. We often don't even realise that we are doing it. Mohammed the student, for example, was easily distracted from his learning. Although he felt badly about it, he also felt powerless to change his habits. By avoiding learning, however, he avoided facing his fear of failure, despite the fact that he was doing the very thing that could lead him to fail. This pattern of self-sabotage is something we do to ourselves all the time in different ways.

Emotion-driven behaviour. Emotion-driven behaviour is often impulsive and imprudent. When we act impulsively, we don't always think about the consequences or give ourselves the chance to handle things differently. All too often, we end up feeling regretful or badly later on. An example of this is when we lash out and say something hurtful out of anger, instead of pausing to assess the situation so that we can choose our words more thoughtfully. Sarah, brimming with resentment towards her family, found herself lashing out, with the result that the household had become a tense and lonely place.

Self-criticism. Although self-criticism can be constructive, far too often it is judgmental and harsh, making us feel badly about ourselves.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a *mental training* technique that teaches us to be aware of our thoughts, feelings, moods and bodily sensations as they are in the present moment so that we can see things as they are they are, and not as we wish them to be. When we pay attention to how we are thinking and feeling right now, we become better at spotting the build up of difficult emotions and thoughts so that we can deal with them more skilfully, instead of just reacting in ways that might not be good for us. We learn that thoughts are just thoughts. They are not facts and we can choose whether to give them power over our minds and hearts.

As we know, our minds tend to get locked into the negative (Velcro mind) while ignoring the positive (Teflon mind). We tend to follow well-worn grooves of automatic pilot both in our thoughts and feelings, not recognising that our habits have become unhelpful. Mindfulness helps us take back control of our minds and hearts by intentionally bringing our attention back to our immediate experience; we can get better at spotting our automatic unhelpful tendencies (habits and temptations) so that we can choose where to place our focus and make changes to how we respond. This new awareness must come from a place of curiosity, friendliness and compassion. We can ask ourselves: what does this moment need? As we step out of habitual patterns, we can choose how we want to *be*.

Sometimes, those of us who are new to mindfulness believe that mindfulness is a goal to be pursued, where we can succeed or fail. We berate ourselves for "not doing it right" or not learning "fast enough." We want to be perfect. This misunderstanding about what mindfulness is leads to unnecessary stress. It is important to understand that mindfulness is not about perfection, fixing or problem-solving. It is about developing a new kind of awareness. In fact, mindfulness not only teaches us to stop treating our moods and difficulties as problems to be fixed, but also that we shouldn't feel badly about not being able to fix them.

We are often our own worst critics and far harsher with ourselves than we ever would be towards someone else. Developing a more compassionate, kind stance towards ourselves and others is central to mindfulness. It is important for us to accept and honour our thoughts and emotions as inevitable aspects of being human, for both the good and the bad have something to teach us.

Mindfulness-based Practices

Mindfulness-based practices include focusing on the breath and body and the development of a more mindful attention to everyday activities. All of these practices help us learn to recognise the feelings and patterns of thinking that cause unhappiness. Mindfulness-based practices all use the breath as an anchor to the present moment, for no matter what we are doing, thinking or feeling, our breath is a constant. This is important for the simple reason that when our mind wanders during a practice - as it inevitably will - we can simply bring our focus gently back to the breath, our anchor to the present moment.

During the practice, we do not have to do anything but breathe, allowing thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations to arise, but without engaging with them, or trying to change them. What we begin to notice, with friendly curiosity, is that although feelings, thoughts and sensations arise, they also pass when we don't engage with them. We may feel sleepy, bored, irritated or even angry as we practice. When we have a present-focused attention, we allow ourselves the space to be aware of what is really happening within ourselves in terms of our emotions, thoughts and bodily sensations. We can then watch the ebb and flow of whatever is arising within ourselves with friendly curiosity, without judgment or trying to change anything.

Moving from Reacting to Responding

These wise words beautifully illustrate the concept behind mindfulness:

Between stimulus and response there is a space.

In that space is a choice about how we respond.

In our response lies our growth and freedom.

Stimulus



Reaction/
Response

A very basic example of the stimulus-response cycle is that when we feel an itch, we have an immediate impulse to scratch it. We don't think about scratching it; we just do it. Very often the stimulus and response are so inter-twined that they are indistinguishable; stimulus into response happens quite automatically and fast.

By training our attention, mindfulness helps us widen the gap between the stimulus and our response to it. In a nutshell, when something happens or we are facing difficult thoughts and emotions (the stimulus), mindfulness teaches us how to pause before responding. Taking a pause in the present moment gives us vital time to ask ourselves, "What is a skilful response, what does this moment need?" We don't have to *react* in our usual, sometimes unhelpful ways. This gives us the freedom to choose how to speak and act. When faced with new challenges, we can see them more clearly. When inevitable temptations and urges arise, we can resist them, if we choose to. Or we can choose to indulge our impulses with awareness. Sometimes we may choose not to respond at all.

Regardless of what we choose to do or don't do, taking a mindful pause breaks the cycle of our habitual reactions. When our attention is infused with curiosity, friendliness and care, we can have a fresh approach to our lives that gives us a greater capacity for meeting both the pleasant and unpleasant (including thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations) without being carried away by reactivity. As a result, any experience - such as taking a walk, being with friends, eating and driving - can become a rich experience infused with depth and detail that we had not noticed before.

Mohammed, Sarah and Ling: How did mindfulness help them?

Like many of us, Mohammed, Sarah and Ling all engaged in habitual patterns of behaviour, thinking and feeling. Through practising mindfulness, though, they became better able to step out of automatic pilot so that they could see when they were reacting in their usual unhelpful ways, such as when they reacted to the difficult with a Velcro Mind (which latches onto the unpleasant) or a Teflon mind (which glosses over the good). Without trying to "fix" the external problem itself, mindfulness helped them develop the skills to begin to respond more skilfully not only to the difficult, but also to the beautiful and lovely, enabling them to savour the positive in their lives.

Student Mohammed, for example, began to do a mindfulness practice first thing in the morning. He noticed tension in his shoulders and feelings of fear and anxiety arising as thoughts about failure broke into his awareness. As he learned to let these feelings ebb and flow, he noticed that they lost their power since he didn't have to respond to them. A new clarity in his thinking and calmness in his being enabled him to approach his studies with better concentration and confidence.

Ling had started to lose her enjoyment of sport because her Velcro (sticky) mind could only see her mistakes, while her Teflon mind didn't pay attention to all the things she enjoyed about her sport. Ling 's mindfulness practice very simply brought her back into full contact with all that she loved about her sport, an experience that was very rewarding, and affirming. It reinvigorated her!

Sarah's Velcro mind only focused on the mess at home. What her Teflon mind hadn't noticed is that her children had worked hard to complete their homework, and did other things that were useful and would make her proud. Sarah's mindfulness practice taught her to pause before speaking and behaving in ways that were destructive, which gave her time to reflect so that she could handle things differently. She found that she was able to notice the positive aspects of her home life, which made her feel much more warmly towards her children.

Mindfulness in Everyday Life

Bringing mindful attention to our everyday activities (such as brushing our teeth, showering, taking a walk, eating and preparing food, etc.) can help ground us in the present moment and break us out of our autopilot mode. It is a powerful way to keep our *mindfulness muscles* in shape during the good times for when we need them during the tough times. When doing an everyday activity, we can practise tuning into our breathing, our senses and how our bodies move. As we do this, we can become aware of any tension, feelings or thoughts that arise such as stress, impatience, anger or sadness. As we perform our task, we can use our breathing to let go of difficult sensations or to simply breathe as we allow ourselves to *be* with whatever we are experiencing. The beauty of doing an everyday mindfulness practice is that we can do it anytime, anywhere. The *pause* it provides is a gift of renewed awareness and greater well-being.

Training our attention to be more present-focused takes time and practice. Mindfulness is not a goal to be achieved, but a process that gently unfolds in ways that are different for each of us. As we gain more experience with taking a moment to pause, we become better at spotting when challenging emotions and thoughts arise within us - in the here and now - so that we can respond in ways that are more helpful and compassionate towards ourselves and others.

A student asked a mindfulness teacher, “What is the point of a lifetime of mindfulness practice?” The teacher answered, “An appropriate response.” For Sarah this was to enjoy her work and home life, for Ling to rediscover her love of sport and for Mohammed it was to be able to study with discipline. For each of us, the journey of stepping out of automatic pilot, understanding our minds and learning to respond more skilfully in the world is likely to be as individual as we are.