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Life could be like a box of chocolates

Mindfulness therapy fights stress and depression by teaching you how to 'own' the present, says Genevieve Fox.



Mindfulness meditations, designed to steer us to an inner place of calm Photo: Andrew Crowley

By Genevieve Fox

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Mindfulness is hip. It's as trendy as yoga or zone-eating. No surprises, then, that when I enter the Oxford Mindfulness Centre (OMC), I see dawn-red soft furnishings, green plants, rubber mats and kneeling stools. Wellbeing gurus would feel right at home.

So would chocolate lovers. Mark Williams, clinical psychologist and the Centre's director, suggests the best way to understand mindfulness is to try it and invites me to join him in a "chocolate meditation".

Mindfulness, he says, is about being present in the moment, being aware of our thoughts and feelings – so that instead of being overwhelmed by them we are better able to manage them. Using meditation and other techniques such as breathing and yoga-based exercises, it helps us think about ourselves, and in turn others, with kindness and an overriding sense of acceptance. It's about finding our innate joie de vivre and feeling able to cope just when we think we're going under. It's as irresistible as chocolate.

Prof Williams has created a series of mindfulness meditations, designed to steer us to an inner place of calm, no matter how frantic and demanding our lives. They form the basis of his new book on the topic, co-authored with journalist Danny Penman. The book offers an eight-week programme of exercises, supported by a CD and is aimed at anyone who feels depressed, unhappy or overwrought.

We start the chocolate meditation. Standing together, we each unwrap a chocolate, shut our eyes, inhale its aroma, then look at it and, finally, eat it. Guided by Prof Williams's gentle voice, the world slows down as I create a pocket of space in which to enjoy a few moments of sensory awareness. I think about what I am doing; something usually rushed and unremarkable becomes a pleasurable experience. I glimpse the elation Charlie Bucket felt when he found the golden ticket.

"You enjoy the chocolate more than you would normally," explains Prof Williams afterwards. The exercise, he says, "allows a sense of holiday atmosphere, here, right now, in the moment".

Mindfulness may be a current buzzword but it is also eminently respectable, rooted in science and approved by NICE, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, as a treatment for clinical depression, in combination with another technique called Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. CBT helps patients manage their anxieties by challenging how they think and act; mindfulness gives them the skills to help prevent relapses of the illness.

This combined approach, called Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), was first developed in the 1990s by Prof Williams, psychologist Prof Zindel Segal of the University of Toronto, and John Teasdale, a research scientist at Cambridge University specialising in cognitive approaches to treating depression. It is the basis of the eight-week programmes Prof Williams conducts three times a year at OMC, which is part of Oxford University's department of psychiatry; sufferers of clinical depression are referred to the centre by their GPs. During the programme, patients meet as a class for two hours a week, then follow 40-minute meditations daily for six days a week.

"MBCT is the first genuinely preventative treatment for serious depression," says Professor Williams. Depression can be recurrent, he explains, so the aim is to teach patients in the periods when they are well the mindfulness skills they need when it returns. "MBCT has been clinically proven to halve the risk of depression in those who have suffered the most debilitating forms of the illness. It also positively affects the brain patterns underlying day-to-day anxiety, stress, depression and irritability, so that when they arise, they dissolve away again more easily."

It is supported by clinical and scientific evidence: the latest study, published in the journal *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging* in January, found that meditating for half an hour a day for eight weeks can increase the density of grey matter in the hippocampus, the region of the brain associated with memory, stress and empathy, our ability to recognise and share others' feelings.

The meditations in his book, designed to reach a wider audience, are shorter than those used at the Centre but, Williams explains, mindfulness practice helps both sufferers of clinical depression and those simply looking for tools to manage stress. This is because "the same patterns that keep us stuck in depression also prevent us from living a full life. We are always on our way to something. But it doesn't take much of a shift to own the present moment," he says.

Jeremy Lane [not his real name], 66, was never able to "own" the present moment: he was too busy worrying about both past and future. A former senior manager with a pharmaceuticals company, married with two adult children, he was for 30 years in a loop of negative thoughts – a "constant low mood", he says. Driven, ambitious and self-critical, he was also deeply unhappy, so he pushed himself harder and the critical

voice got louder.

After years of taking anti-depressants, Jeremy was referred by his GP to the OMC last year. The eight-week programme, he says, finally gave him a way of dealing with his feelings of dissatisfaction and self-loathing. "It's made me more self-aware. I still have negative thoughts, but I step back, recognise them for what they are: thoughts, or historical things I can't do anything about."

Save for two brief occasions, Jeremy has managed without anti-depressants since completing the MBCT training. "It's not a magic solution," he is keen to stress. "If you suffer from depression it is always there, sitting in the undergrowth, ready to jump out and get you. But it's a major plus in dealing with it."

Many of us have a critical inner voice. It may not be as unforgiving as Jeremy's, but it's enough to make us unhappy, sometimes profoundly so, even when we know we've got everything going for us – an interesting job, a loving family, good health. And we try to talk our way out of the doldrums, often with a voice as harsh as Jeremy's.

"We ask ourselves, 'What have I got to be depressed about?'" says Williams. "What's wrong with me? Snap out of it.' It's a brooding loop. Mindfulness gives us the resources to step outside that loop. It teaches us to objectify our thoughts for what they are: just thoughts. You don't have to argue with them, just notice them." The same applies to memories.

"If you think of the mind as the sky, then negative thoughts are dark clouds. It's about learning to be with that weather, and not blaming yourself for it. It's about seeing the mind's patterns more clearly – and not taking them personally – and finding a place of stillness within yourself where the storm is not raging."

For more info, visit www.oxfordmindfulness.org (<http://www.oxfordmindfulness.org>) . 'Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace In A Frantic World' by Mark Williams and Danny Penman (Piatkus Books), is available from Telegraph Books at £11.99 + £1.25 p&p. To order, call 0844 871 1515 or visit [books.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.books.telegraph.co.uk) (<http://www.books.telegraph.co.uk>)

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