

## **WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?**

**What is Mindfulness?** Mindfulness is a learnt mental discipline that enables us to respond differently to challenging circumstances, sensations, emotions and thoughts rather than follow the habitual reactions of the past.

**How is it Used?** Well known for its efficacy in treating stress, anxiety and depression it is recommended for these conditions by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence. Its effectiveness in the medical arena has been the subject of a number of recent studies; significantly in 2008 an 8 week long MBCT course was found to be more effective than maintenance doses of anti-depressants in helping people stay well after significant depression<sup>1</sup>. In the context of pre-natal care, programmes that include Mindfulness have been found to be effective working with the reduction of pain and associated anxiety during labour<sup>2</sup>. There is also established research on the efficacy of Mindfulness for chronic pain relief<sup>3</sup> and again for stress relief<sup>4</sup>.

Mindfulness is now also used in the business arena. In the context of leadership training it has attracted a following due to its positive impact on strategic decision making, for ensuring that there are opportunities for clarity in situations of overwhelming busyness or where there is uncertainty about the way forward and also for routine tasks such as meetings, communications, diary management. Key areas of focus include:

- developing a new social and emotional intelligence;
- inspiring yourself and others to give of their best;
- responding with control to surprises, conflict and avoidance;
- identifying real priorities at times of stress; and
- allowing work and home to have your full attention.

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<sup>1</sup> **Kuyken, W., Byford, S., Taylor, R.S., et al (2008) Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy to prevent relapse in recurrent depression *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology***

<sup>2</sup> **Duncan and Bardacke, 2009b**

<sup>3</sup> **Kabat-Zinn, J., Lipworth, L., Burnery, R., & Sellers, W. (1986). Four year follow-up of a meditation-based program for the self-regulation of chronic pain: Treatment outcomes and compliance. *Clinical Journal of Pain*,2, 159-173;**

<sup>4</sup> **Kabat-Zinn 1990**

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**How does it Work?** Working with Mindfulness differs from the more traditional stress reduction techniques aimed at achieving relaxation directly as it fosters awareness and acceptance in the present moment of bodily sensations and emotions. Becoming mindful involves learning to recognise deep-seated feelings and moods that govern the way we act and react, including when we feel “pain”, or are suffering from stress in difficult situations.

**What do we Learn?** In Mindfulness training we learn a willingness to observe the very movements of mind that are hidden from us as we go about our day on auto pilot, assuming we are paying attention when in fact our minds are somewhere else. Once formal practice is established using meditative techniques that can be likened to “mind gym”, we can apply the approach to everything in every context, from the most mundane and familiar in daily life, to the difficult and challenging. This gives us a way of breaking the habitual reactions that shape our behaviour, including depressive thoughts, addictive behaviours and attitudes to “pain”.

**Does it help Pain Management?** Mindfulness can help lessen the impact of “pain” by teaching us to distinguish between the inherent uncomfortable and challenging body sensations and the suffering and distress we create for ourselves by our aversive reactions. Key to this is developing, through the training, a stance of ruthless honesty to accept the reality of the present moment rather than typically and instinctively wishing to push away from that reality, distracting ourselves by wishing for and holding on to the need for a different one. To discover that we can alter our experience of chronic or acute pain in this way offers a new way to address patients’ needs alongside existing treatment plans. This discovery is also backed up by recent neuro-science research which allows us to understand how the plasticity within the brain responds to Mindfulness, building new neural pathways at all ages<sup>5</sup>.

**How will it Develop?** It seems likely that in the near future additional ways in which Mindfulness positively impacts clinical needs will be

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<sup>5</sup> **Holzel B.K., Carmody, J., Vangel, M. et al (2011) Mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional brain gray matter density. *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, 191 (1), 36-43.**

clarified, such as for: hypertension, cardiovascular disease, cancer and infectious diseases, reducing prescribed medication and addictions<sup>6</sup>.

**What to do Right Now?** Mindfulness offers an opportunity to work with emotions and awareness in such a way that individuals can become better equipped to deal with the difficulties and challenges that come up in daily life.

For more details contact **Hugh Poulton MSc. MCIM, [E-RYT](#)**

**Hugh Poulton** specialises in teaching the practice of mindfulness to private individuals and corporate clients in the public, private and not for profit sectors. With more than 30 years' experience begun in the monastic tradition of Thailand, he has also taught at the Oxford Mindfulness Centre at Warneford Hospital and continues to teach Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy Courses on a private basis. His courses are suitable for any organisation interested in developing the mental discipline of its staff so as to promote productivity, effective working relationships and well-being. Registered with the Yoga Alliance as an Experienced Yoga Teacher E-RYT, he teaches Ashtanga Yoga combined with mindfulness.

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<sup>6</sup>The UK Mental Health Foundation's 2010 Mindfulness Report