Mindfulness for Postgraduate Research

# Introduction

Do you ever feel lost during the struggles and competing priorities of your research? Mindfulness can help improve concentration, help you get less stuck at times of difficulty and can positively enhance your wellbeing.

With this resource, you will learn some simple mindfulness practices and how to apply mindfulness to the day-to-day challenges of your PhD.

This resource has been developed for Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) to support wellbeing and increase resilience.

# What is Mindfulness?

The good news is, mindfulness is something you are already familiar with, but you probably would not call it ‘mindfulness’ when you experience it. Typical moments of mindfulness include:

* Lingering a moment to enjoy the feel of water when you get into a bath or shower.
* Taking a moment to really taste a drink as you sip it.
* Pausing to really listen to a sound such as birdsong or sudden rain on a window.

Mindful moments are moments when we are choosing to really notice, with genuine interest, whatever is going on right now.

Without practise, we experience these moments fleetingly as our attention wanders off, typically becoming lost in thoughts. This resource will introduce you to some simple practices to help you experience more of these mindful moments.

## What are some reasons for practising mindfulness?

There are three main reasons to cultivate mindful awareness through mindfulness practice:

* To get more out of the good times in life.
* To spend less time in unhelpful, stressful mental loops and be less affected by them.
* To make more resourceful and insightful choices in life, so we do what matters most to us.

# How to practise mindfulness

In this section we will explore different ways of practising mindfulness including ‘informal’ practice and ‘formal’ practice.

## Informal mindfulness

Informal mindfulness practice involves bringing mindful awareness to your everyday activities. This means engaging your senses and being fully present as you go about the things you do every day.

Examples include taking a mindful sip of a drink, focusing on the feeling of the ground underneath your feet as you stand in a queue, or focusing on the sounds around you such as bird song. You can do this in just a few seconds, and you can build it into your daily routine.

Research has found that engaging in informal mindfulness can lead to positive outcomes. For example, Hanley, Warner, Dehili, Canto and Garland (2015) [4] reported increased positive affect and decreased negative affect in university students who completed a mindful dishwashing practice compared to a control group.

We will look at some different examples of mindfulness in the next section.

## Formal mindfulness

“Formal” mindfulness practice involves setting time aside for a more structured practice. We will explore some examples of formal mindfulness in section three.

A key aspect of formal mindfulness practice is to focus the attention on a particular place, e.g. the breath or parts of the body. We call this a focusing “anchor”. We will look at how to choose a focusing anchor in the next section.

Research has shown that practicing a ten-minute mindfulness meditation practice regularly over a period of two weeks resulted in reduced stress and increased self-compassion in US university students (Berghoff, Wheeles, Ritzert, Wooley & Forsyth, 2017) [5].

## Choosing a focusing anchor

In formal mindfulness practice we choose an "anchor" for our attention. It is important to find an anchor that you feel comfortable with, which will vary from person to person. Some examples include:

* your breath
* the feeling of your feet on the floor
* an object you can hold (e.g. a pebble, a warm mug of tea/coffee)
* sounds around you
* something that you can see

## When your attention wanders

When your attention wanders it is not a sign that you are doing anything wrong. It is a normal part of mindfulness practice.

The task each time is to notice your attention has wandered, and gently guide it back to your focusing anchor with a sense of kindness. In this way we are training our attention muscles just like we train our physical muscles at a gym.

Remember your attention will naturally and inevitably wander from your focusing anchor, this is normal.

# Mindfulness practices

In this section you can find written guidance for a selection of mindfulness practices so you can practise at home. At the end of this document, you will find a link to a playlist on Soundcloud that includes audio guidance for these practices.

## Examples of informal mindfulness

Here are some examples of how you can bring mindful awareness to everyday experiences.

* Standing in a queue: Feel the ground under your feet or an object in your hand. Notice what you can see or sounds you can hear.
* Birdsong: Focus on the sounds, from one bird or many birds.
* Stroking a pet: Notice the feeling of fur, movement and warmth as you stroke a pet.
* Unlocking the door: Notice the feel and look of your keys, selecting the right one, and the feeling of movement as you turn the key to unlock the door.
* Boiling the kettle: Notice the sound of water heating up and boiling. Notice the look of coffee or tea colouring the water.
* Walking: Notice the ground under your feet, the weather on your skin, the sounds as you walk, or the details of what you can see.

## Mindful eating or drinking

Mindful eating or drinking is a good example of an informal mindfulness practice. It may include taking a mindful sip of a drink or mindfully eating. With this practice you can notice different sensory experiences as you drink or eat, such as touch, smell, taste etc.

It’s important to remember that you don’t need to sip a whole drink mindfully or eat a whole meal mindfully. Just take a couple of sips or a few bites and be fully present with the experience. This is a practice you can easily build into your daily routine.

## Urge surfing

Many of our choices and behaviours are driven by habitual reactions and impulses. We often try to avoid or cut short the things we don’t like and prolong or get more of the things we do like.

Yet there will always come a time when we have to do things we don’t want to (e.g. our reference list, or give a presentation), or when the things we want (e.g. more cake, or to check social media again) might not be good for us.

To help us notice and manage these impulses and urges we can use a technique called ‘urge surfing’. Urge surfing involves bringing mindful awareness to these feelings of liking and not-liking and the bodily feelings that go along with them. We can then choose whether to act on these feelings or not. See the next slide for guidance on how to practice urge surfing.

## Urge surfing guidance

1. Notice the body. When you become aware of a strong urge or impulse, notice how it feels in the body. Is there any tightening or loosening, a feeling of wanting to lean towards or move away? Feelings of hot or cold, tension or twitches? Briefly notice and explore whatever is here.
2. Label the reaction you have noticed. Keep this simple so you don’t get tangled up in thoughts about it. E.g. ‘anxious feeling’, ‘worry thoughts’, ‘tight feeling in the belly’, ‘urges to move’. You might notice a flare of thoughts, feelings, or physical sensations that are triggered as you do this. See if you can notice these with curiosity, and label these too, if it helps.
3. Choose to direct the attention to a familiar focusing anchor. This might be your breath, your feet on the floor, sounds around you etc. When you feel the attention being pulled away, back to the flare of thoughts or feelings, label what is present and return the attention to your focusing anchor, each and every time.
4. Be easy on yourself. You might be surprised by how difficult it is to surf the urge of well-established habitual reactions and impulses. Even trivial things like not immediately checking the phone when you hear an alert can create surprisingly large waves of thoughts and feelings. It is important to be really kind if you find the impulse is so strong that you go along with it. For well ingrained habits, this is likely to happen and is normal. The gap between the urge and acting on the urge might only be tiny, but over time it will grow and enable you to choose not to act on the urge. This growth can be up and down so be easy on yourself - simply being aware of this process is helpful.

## Three-step breathing space

The three-step breathing space practice is a very short formal mindfulness practice that you can do almost anywhere.

There are three steps to the practice:

1. **Checking in:** beginning with broad awareness and noticing what is here now. Noticing how your mind is, noticing any feelings you have and noticing how our body is.
2. **Narrowing:** narrowing the attention to focus on the feeling of breathing. Notice each breath as it comes and goes. Whenever the attention wanders, acknowledge what pulled it away and gently guide it back to the breath. If you prefer to use a different anchor than the breath, you could instead focus on sounds, or the feeling of your feet on the floor.
3. **Checking out:** broadening the attention again to focus on what’s here now. Noticing how your mind is, any feelings that are present, and what you can feel in your body.

## Sitting practice

Sitting practice involves focusing the attention on the breath. However, you are welcome to choose a different focusing anchor if you prefer.

The aim of this practice is not to make the mind go blank or block out any sounds or feelings that pop up. It is simply to notice your experience however it is, and as best as you can accept it. This isn’t always easy as we often find ourselves wanting things to be different to how they are. With mindfulness we are practising allowing things to be just as they are.

## Body Scan

The body scan is a formal mindfulness meditation practice that involves taking the attention to different parts of the body one after the other, and noticing what we can sense.

The aim of the body scan is not to make anything happen or to feel something in particular, just to notice whatever is here. And that can include noticing if some parts of the body feel a bit vague. For example, you might find there isn’t much to notice in the toes, or in the thighs. That’s ok, we can include noticing a lack of feeling as part of this practice. The aim is to notice all aspects of our experience as best we can.

# Making mindfulness part of your life

In this section, we will explore how you can make mindfulness part of your routine, including using mindfulness to respond to situations as they occur.

## Practice as part of your routine

Setting time aside to practise mindfulness regularly can improve your wellbeing and resilience in the long term. Practising regularly will build resources so that when difficulties arise, you are better equipped to deal with them. Here are some suggestions for how to fit mindfulness practice into your daily routine:

* **Morning**: try some informal mindfulness, e.g. feeling the water on your skin as you shower, looking at the sky and noticing the weather when you leave home.
* **Lunchtime**: take a three-step breathing space before or after eating your lunch.
* **Evening**: complete a body scan practice when you arrive home, before enjoying the rest of your evening.

Try to make mindfulness practice a daily habit like brushing your teeth. Start small so this feels easy and so you are likely to continue practising.

## Using mindfulness responsively

As a Postgraduate Researcher you will be extremely busy and will likely have to manage your time between various activities such as progressing your research project, preparing for conferences and writing. You will encounter different stresses and demands, and mindfulness can be a useful way to respond to some of these challenges.

To help you plan how to respond you can set “if - then” and “when - then” plans: If [xx happens] then [I will respond by using mindfulness in this way]. Here is an example of how you might use “if - then” and “when - then” plans if you have become frustrated with your writing.

“If… I get writer’s block when working on a new paragraph -

then… I will use a three-step breathing space practice to help me refocus.”

or

“When… I am due to begin a meeting and I feel nervous about it-

then… I will use informal mindfulness – a brief pause to help me feel more grounded and present.”

## Responding to the challenges of Postgraduate research

All postgraduate researchers experience challenges. Setting time aside to practise mindfulness regularly can help you to deal with these challenges more easily. You can also use mindfulness as a way of responding to challenges as they arise.

**Supervision:** Meetings with supervisors can sometimes be difficult and you may feel nervous or anxious. Mindfulness introduces a pause, and when we focus on something that is pleasant or neutral, it can help the stress system to stand down. Before meetings, you might want to spend a few minutes practicing a three-step breathing space just before you go in, to help steady yourself. During meetings, if you find yourself feeling overwhelmed or upset during a meeting, use informal mindfulness- a brief pause to focus on another sense. This could be your feet on the floor or pen in your hand.

**Feeling overwhelmed:** Postgraduate research can be mentally and emotionally demanding and at times this can feel overwhelming. If you are lost in thoughts about the future, mindfulness can help bring you back to the present. A short practice may help you to think more clearly and decide how to proceed. After a practice such as the three-step breathing space, you may find that you are able to continue more productively or recognise that you need to access extra support.

This could be from supervisors, advisors, or other University support services.

**Procrastination:** Procrastination has more to do with emotions than time management. We are usually trying to avoid something we don’t like or get more of something we like. For example, is what you are working on difficult? Are you bored? Does checking social media seem more interesting or important right now? Would you prefer to be out with friends? These feelings can turn into urges to move away from what we are working on, and we end up procrastinating. Mindfulness can help us to identify the discomfort of this ‘not liking’ and move towards accepting it. The urge surfing techniques mentioned earlier can help with procrastination.

**Perfectionism:** Perfectionism can impact your work and wellbeing, and manifests in many ways. You may feel so concerned with your work being perfect that you struggle to get started, or you might overwork and feel reluctant to share drafts of your work out of fear it isn’t good enough yet. Mindfulness can help you to be with the discomfort that arises with perfectionism, and the difficulty in letting go. When we practise mindfulness meditation, we notice distractions (e.g. our thoughts, feelings, sounds around us) and we practise accepting these experiences, letting them go and coming back to our focusing anchor. In the same way we can notice our symptoms of perfectionism, practise accepting them just as they are as symptoms of perfectionism - and practise letting go. This isn’t easy, but practise helps.

## The challenges of practising mindfulness

Mindfulness is not about making our thoughts go away or trying to achieve a state of bliss. It’s about noticing how we are, and as best we can, accepting our experience as it is. This isn’t always easy. In the article “[This is why mindfulness isn’t working for you](https://mashable.com/article/why-mindfulness-isnt-working-for-me?europe=true)” J.D. Cresswell, Associate Professor of Psychology and mindfulness researcher, explains:

“It’s not unicorns and rainbows. … I liken mindfulness meditation practices to aerobic practices for the brain. [Exercising] hurts, it’s a little unpleasant, but at the same time, it’s building muscle. With mindfulness you’re building a brain that’s more resilient.”

It’s important to be aware that there could be times when you feel worse during or after mindfulness practice, and there are choices you can make to help manage these experiences. We’ll look at these next.

## Practise in the right way for you

There is no right or wrong way to practice mindfulness and it’s important to find what feels right for you. This might change depending on what is happening in your life. It’s important to know you can adapt how you practice, and that it might not always be easy. You can adapt any or all of the following:

* **How long you practise**: from a few seconds to an hour or longer.
* **Being still or moving**: you might like the stillness of a sitting practice or a body scan, or you may prefer mindful movement or walking.
* **Eyes open or closed**: experiment and see what feels right for you.
* **Focusing anchor**: you can choose an internal anchor, e.g. the breath or the body; or an external anchor such as sounds or something you can touch. At times when you experience lots of strong thoughts or feelings, it might be more helpful to focus on an external anchor.

## Experiencing discomfort

It is normal to experience some discomfort, e.g. restlessness or boredom. Difficult thoughts or feelings might also come to the surface during a practice. If this discomfort starts to become overwhelming it may be best to make some changes or take a break from a practice.

Some discomfort can be useful because we can learn how we react to difficulties. However, you need to ensure you look after yourself – mindfulness is not an endurance test - so always make choices that are right for you.

# Summary

Remember mindfulness is about choosing to really notice, with genuine interest, whatever is going on right now. Over time mindfulness practice can help to improve your wellbeing and resilience. Mindfulness can help us to get more enjoyment out of life by savouring pleasant experiences. It can help us to spend less time in stressful mental loops, and it can help us to make more skilful choices. These are all important abilities that will support you to navigate the ups and downs of the Postgraduate research journey.

If you are concerned about difficult experiences related to mindfulness, try to speak to an experienced mindfulness teacher, or take a look at the following websites: [cheetahhouse.org](https://www.cheetahhouse.org/) and [meditatinginsafety.org.uk](https://meditatinginsafety.org.uk/)

## Related resources

You have reached the end of this resource. Further support resources in relation to this topic can be found below.

* The Counselling and Mental Health Service offer resources and support to help you relax, study, and work more effectively. This includes online sessions on mindfulness and hypnotherapy for stress.
* Listen to the audio practices from this resource on [SoundCloud](https://soundcloud.com/uomlibrary/sets/mindfulness).