

Mindfulness for Unsettling Times

An introductory practice for teachers and parents that can be used with children and students



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Important information:

This document provides a brief overview of mindfulness and how it can help during unsettling times. It explains the neuroscience behind mindfulness and the psychology underpinning it. Parents/teachers should read through the information below so they feel familiar with the content before using it with their children/students. Mindfulness is normally taught in small group settings with experienced teachers. We continue to recommend that this is how mindfulness is delivered and we hope to release some online courses that will give teachers and parents a more holistic introduction to mindfulness.

Before doing the practice please always check in with your children/students to ensure they feel ok to do the practice. If a child is receiving counselling or therapy currently please check in with their practitioner first to ensure it's appropriate. If anything difficult comes up for them after the practice please do talk to the affected child/student. If you feel worried or concerned that further help is required then discuss this with them. A chat to a medical practitioner can help as well as other organisations such as Mind.

What exactly is mindfulness and how can it help during unsettling times?

Mindfulness is essentially the practice of training the mind to enhance awareness of our thoughts, feelings and sensations. It can help us all – teachers, parents and students included – by increasing attention span, concentration, and emotional resilience throughout periods of uncertainty such as COVID-19, when it's common for stress and anxiety to build up.

Just as people go to the gym and lift weights to strengthen their muscles, the regular practice of mindfulness (meditation) helps to strengthen an awareness of our thoughts and feelings, and enhance our ability to cope at challenging times. This is often considered and described as a form of '**neuroplasticity**'. Studies suggest mindfulness increases neuroplasticity in two main ways:

1

Increasing the connectivity in the front of our brains (called the prefrontal cortex). This is the part of the brain associated with memory, the ability to solve problems and to manage distraction.

2

Calming the activity in the part of our brain which manages difficult or strong emotions such as stress, anxiety or worry (called the limbic system).

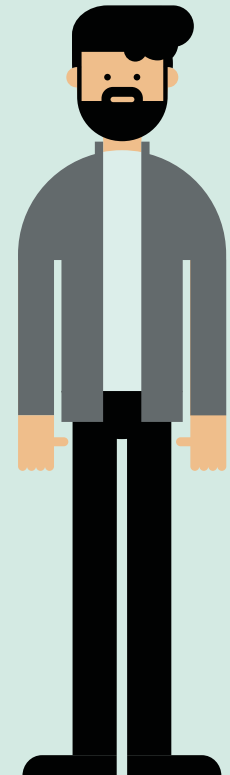


During mindfulness practice, we slowly learn how to step away and more objectively observe the feelings and emotions we are experiencing in the present moment, without being judgemental. Over time, this can help us to reduce our automatic responses based on emotions and increasingly make calmer, more considered decisions.



For example, it's easy for us to want to get straight into doing a task to resolve it, this is called '**doing mode**' and, as it suggests, it helps get things done. However, mindfulness practice encourages us to take a moment to pause, ground ourselves and be in the moment – known as the '**being mode**'. This helps us to consider the wisest, calmest way to tackle the task before beginning it, meaning they are more effective and often experience a greater sense of wellbeing.

Mindfulness isn't just about training the mind, though – it's also about reconnecting with our body. Emotions can affect the body, and vice versa: just as feelings can cause physical reactions (such as 'butterflies' in the stomach before an exam), our body can affect our thinking. Mindfulness practice encourages us to review how our bodies are feeling at any given moment – perhaps how much tension we're holding in our shoulders and neck. By becoming aware of these physical reactions, we can change them before they grow too strong and start to take over their thinking.



Mindfulness practice for your children and students

Just like learning any new skill, such as playing a sport or an instrument, mindfulness will have the greatest benefits if practised daily; just ten minutes can make a difference to how we feel.

Supporting young people with daily practice can be modelled at home and through virtual classes. In this guide, we have provided a basic practice called the 'Mindfulness of Breath and Body', which is an introduction to mindfulness for you and your children/students to do together, to benefit you all. We suggest you do this yourself a few times first, as a teacher, tutor, or parent, so that you're familiar with it and can draw on your own experience when supporting your children/students with doing it.



Getting started

The script for the practice is included on page 8, or you can [access the audio online](#).

The basic introductory practice that follows can be done as part of a virtual lesson, or at home as a family. Before you start:

1

Check-in with your children/students to ensure that they are okay. Remind them that if they feel stress and anxiety or any other feelings are overwhelming them they can speak to an adult they trust. Opening up about how they're feeling can really help in dealing with challenges.

2

Explain what mindfulness is and how it can help. You can use the information above to do this. Let them know that you will be doing a mindful practice together.

3

Explain you will be focusing firstly on your breathing and then different parts of your body. They don't need to change the way they breathe, but just be aware of how they're breathing. It can be helpful to close their eyes for the practice, but they can open them again any time to ground themselves.



The 'Mindfulness of Breath and Body' practice



Read the script on page 8 to your children/students, or play the audio. It will last just under 10 minutes.

When the practice is complete, ask your children/students to form pairs (or if you're doing this as a family) so you can talk about your experiences. Here are some questions to use to focus their enquiry:

What were your experiences (remembering there's no right or wrong!)?

Was there much mind wandering?

What else was going on?

After 5 minutes of pair discussion, bring your family or the virtual class together to share what they talked about. What are the key themes that emerged?

Ashley Lodge is the Mindfulness Lead for Pearson and also oversees their mental health and wellbeing product development. Ashley holds a degree in Philosophy and trained as a teacher in RE and PSHE at University of Cambridge and has taught in both primary and secondary schools. He has been practising mindfulness since 2013 when he first did the eight-week Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy course at the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, part of the University of Oxford. In 2016 he trained as a mindfulness teacher and has been running Pearson's Mindfulness Programme since 2017.

Nearly 700 staff across Pearson have been through the Six Week Mindfulness Course based on the Frantic World curriculum. Following these courses data is showing the positive impact of the programme with drops in anxiety of around 40%, perceived stress of 22% and an increase in focus and attention of around 25%. In late 2019 Ashley ran a pilot of a teacher mindfulness course at the Italian Ministry of Education, the results of which will be published later in 2020.

The 'Mindfulness of Breath and Body' practice

Script

You can read this practice to your class, or [access the audio online](#).

This practice is called 'breath and body'. Focusing on breath has a calming effect. Moving the focus to the body can help identify feelings in the body caused by stress. If your mind wanders bring it back with a sense of kindness to the areas you're being asked to focus on. This will help you develop your attention. Remember, it doesn't matter how many times the mind wanders. It's bringing it back each time to the focus on the breath or the body that's key.

Settle into a comfortable position either sitting up or lying down and close your eyes. If you are sitting down find a chair that allows your feet to rest on the floor with your knees and ankles at right angles ensuring that your back is straight and your shoulders aren't hunched. And if you are lying down, ensure that you are comfortable, but not so comfortable that you might fall asleep.

Start in the first part of this meditation by bringing the focus of the attention to your breath, feeling the physical sensation of the breath coming into the nose, travelling to the back of the throat, down the windpipe and into the lungs. As the lungs fill, the abdomen rises and then begins to fall as the breath leaves the lungs, travels back up the windpipe and then out through the nose or mouth.

Focusing now on the rhythm of the breath coming in, going down into the lungs, the abdomen rising and then falling as the breath comes back up out of the lungs and out through the nose or the mouth. Becoming fully aware of any physical sensations associated with the breath coming in and the breath going out.

If the mind should wander, then gradually acknowledge where it has gone to and then bring it back, ever so gently, not by telling yourself

off, but by being kind and compassionate. It's only natural that the mind may want to wander, that's what minds do. This meditation is about bringing the mind back to the focus of what you are doing in each moment, which is breathing in and out and seeing what physical sensations there might be.

Now, moving the attention from your breath coming in and going out and starting to focus now on the body. So, whilst continuing to breathe in and out, moving the attention with the next in-breath imagining the breath now as coming all the way down from the lungs, down through the legs all the way down into your feet. And now letting go of the focus on your breath, and focussing instead on feeling your feet on the ground or, if you are lying down, feeling the back of your ankles on the bed or the mat you may be lying on, seeing what physical sensations there are in this part of the body. Sometimes there may be strong sensations, and other times there might be none; there is no right or wrong, just simply what there is in this present moment.

Just having a moment in silence now, exploring what is going on in the feet.

And if your mind starts to wander, then that's absolutely fine; it is doing what minds do. Just gradually bringing the mind back to the focus of the attention right now: the feet. And seeing what sensations there are there.

Then with the next in-breath moving the focus of the attention now up from the feet through the ankles and into the legs, starting with the lower part of the legs, the shins, the calves, through into the knees, and then into the upper part of the legs, the thighs, the back of the legs, holding both legs in full awareness now. And seeing what sensations there are in this part of the body.

If the mind starts to wander then that's absolutely fine, it's just doing what minds do, acknowledging where the mind had gone to and bringing it back to focus the attention here and now on the legs seeing what sensations there are in this part of the body. And if there are no sensations, then just allowing things to be as they are for now.

And then with the next in-breath shifting the focus of the attention up into the torso, starting with the abdomen, and then the lower back and then moving into the mid-back, the thoracic area around the heart at the front, then the upper back, and then into the chest, seeing what sensations there are anywhere across the torso right now.

And if the mind wanders, gradually bringing it back, focusing in on the part of the body that we are looking at right now, the torso, and seeing what sensations there are in this part of the body. And if there's no particular sensations, then that's just as fine too, acknowledging what's going on and remaining in the present, with full attention on the torso.

Then with the next in-breath focussing the attention into the shoulders and then down the arms, down through the elbows, then from the elbows into the wrists, then all the way to the fingers, the very end of the fingertips, seeing what sensations there may be in this part of the body, in the arms.

If the mind wanders, then bringing it back to the focus of the attention, here and now, on the arms, and seeing what sensations there are in this part of the body. And if there's no particular sensations, then that's fine too.

Then with the next in-breath focusing the attention into the neck, the back of the head, the top of the head, down through the face, around the eyes, the ears, the nose, the mouth, the chin and then the throat, holding all of the head in awareness, seeing what sensations there may be in this part of the body.

If the mind wanders, gently bringing it back to the focus of the attention now, on the head, seeing any sensations that there are in this part of the body. If there are no particular sensations then that's absolutely fine too, just acknowledging that and being fully present to it.

Seeing what's here, right now.

Coming towards the end of this meditation now, letting go of awareness of all the different parts of the body and turning the focus of the attention now to the breath: feeling all of the sensations as the air the enters through the nostrils, travels to the back of the throat, down into the lungs, lungs are now going to expand, and then contract as the breath then comes back up and out through the nose or mouth. Allowing yourself for a moment just to focus on the rhythm of your breath coming in and the breath going out. Feeling any sensations there are, using the breath to fully anchor you in this moment. Allowing yourself to be fully aware of any sensations in the body connected with the breath coming in and the breath going out.

And then finishing this meditation by gently opening the eyes and coming back to full awareness of the room which you are in.