



Mindfulness for Anxiety

Worfolk Anxiety

Metadata

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Introduction

“I’ve tried mindfulness and it did not work for me.”

Sound familiar? I hear this from people all of the time. Mindfulness is touted as the ultimate cure for all mental health problems: yet when you sit down and do it, it feels silly, pointless or just ineffective.

You don’t feel any better. The guided audio sends you to sleep. Your mind switches between being bored and an endless series of anxious thoughts that never seem to go away.

This was my experience of mindfulness.

I bought a copy of *Mindfulness: A practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world* by Danny Penman and Mark Williams and completed the eight-week programme. I bought a subscription to Headspace and sat down every day to listen to their guided audio.

And in the end, I stopped because I could not see the point.

However, I have not given up on mindfulness. I want to make the case that it can be useful, but only if we see it in a different light. In this book, I want to share some ideas with you concerning mindfulness for anxiety. At the end, you can make up your mind

as to whether mindfulness may still have merit.

We will start with a short introduction to mindfulness. If you are already familiar with it, you can skip this chapter and move straight on to the next.

What is mindfulness?

It is often said that depression is an obsession with the past, and anxiety is an obsession with the future. For many people, it can certainly feel this way. I constantly worry about what could go wrong in life.

The problem with these obsessions is that they make us unhappy. We find it difficult to enjoy the present because we are constantly thinking about something else.

Enter mindfulness: a strategy to ground us in the present moment and focus our attention on the here and now. By shifting our attention away from our anxious thoughts and onto enjoying our experiences, we can worry less and find more pleasure in our lives.

Happiness is what you pay attention to

In *Happiness By Design*, Paul Dolan points out that our happiness is determined by what we pay attention to^[1]. Therefore, it is no wonder that anxious people are so often unhappy: all we think about is the bad things that could happen.

This suggests that mindfulness has a solid foundation as a theory. If we can redirect our thoughts to more positive

experiences, we should see an increase in our happiness levels.

What does mindfulness involve?

Mindfulness is a series of techniques to bring your attention back to the present moment.

It is not about blocking out negative or uncomfortable thoughts: it is about allowing them to come and go without getting caught up in them.

Think of it like chatting with someone who has offensive opinions. You can engage in the debate and wind yourself up as they spout nonsense. Or you can think to yourself “ha, what a daft racist”, smile and let them drone on without getting drawn in. Our instinct is to jump into the debate: but learning to keep calm and move on will leave us far less stressed.

Is mindfulness the same as meditation?

No. They do share a common origin, though.

Meditation has been around a long time, and some studies have shown it could be beneficial for our health. However, the evidence available so far does not suggest that meditation is beneficial for anxiety^[2].

Mindfulness attempts to take a scientific approach to meditation. It cherry-picks out the useful bits and discards the nonsense to try and produce something that works. As I will discuss later, the evidence suggests that it does.

But it is sitting around cross-legged, right?

It can be. But as we will discuss, you can also practice mindfulness without that.

Evidence for mindfulness

Right from the start, I want to be clear: mindfulness works. Few treatments work 100% of the time, and mindfulness is not one of them. However, the evidence shows that it is as effective, or more effective, than comparable treatments.

Mindfulness improves wellbeing

A study by Karolinska University Hospital in Stockholm^[^3] measured the effects of mindfulness on anxiety, depression, positivity and perception of health. It was beneficial for all of these points. They concluded:

“Mindfulness is strongly related to well-being and perceived health. Results suggest that dispositional mindfulness might buffer against the negative influence of perceived stress on psychological well-being. These findings give additional support for the use of mindfulness training as a way of improving psychological functioning among people experiencing stress.”

A study by Wake Forest University found that mindfulness improved mood, decision making and memory^[^8].

Mindfulness improves anxiety

A joint meta-analysis by academics from Harvard, McGill and other universities looked at 29 studies focusing on mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR). They found it was effective in reducing stress, depression, anxiety and distress^[5].

A meta-analysis by Boston University looked at 39 studies focusing on mindfulness-based therapy for anxiety^[6]. They concluded:

“These results suggest that mindfulness-based therapy is a promising intervention for treating anxiety and mood problems in clinical populations.”

Mindfulness improves depression

A meta-analysis by the University of Sussex looked at twelve studies that focused on mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs). They found evidence for mindfulness improving depression^[4], though not for anxiety.

Mindfulness improves OCD

Research by the University of Freiburg found that an 8-week group therapy course in mindfulness reduced the symptoms of

OCD in two-thirds of participants^[7]. They concluded:

“MBCT can be applied to OCD patients experienced with exposure and response prevention, that patients report various benefits and experience no major harmful outcomes.”

Mindfulness meditation

This chapter looks at the cross-legged type of mediation. Actually, there is very little leg crossing. You want to sit in a comfortable position. But here, we will be looking at the kind of mindfulness you sit down and do on a daily basis.

What am I supposed to be doing?

The idea behind mindful meditation is to allow thoughts to come and go. Anxiety is often perpetuated by engaging with thoughts: we take them seriously, or we try and drive them out. Either of these approaches gives them attention.

With mindfulness, we want to allow the thoughts to come and go as they please. We will not resist, but neither will we engage with them or give them any attention.

How to get started

The best way to do mindfulness meditation is with guided audio. You can get books that include CDs, download audio tracks from the internet, or download an app to your phone.

This is much better than reading a book or website containing

instructions. You do not want to spend your time trying to remember what you have read. Using audio means you can listen along and focus on the exercise, rather than trying to recall the instructions.

It doesn't work: my mind keeps wandering

A common misconception with mindfulness is that it is designed to stop anxious thoughts arriving. This is not the case. You have an anxious brain: they are going to keep coming.

What matters is what we do about them. Mindfulness meditation is about practising not getting caught up in them so that when they arrive in the real world, you can let them pass by too.

If you find yourself having anxious thoughts, that does not mean you have failed. That is not the goal. Indeed, you need them to keep coming, so you can keep practising not getting caught up in them.

This is never going to work

Some people see the benefit of mindfulness after only a few sessions. However, many others only feel like they really see the advantage after doing it every day for months. And some people never experience that magic moment at all.

Remember: you have anxiety. Your mind is going to tell you that it is not going to work. The idea that you cannot change and nothing can help you is a negative automatic thought. Don't give it the airtime it wants.

Give it time. If, after identifying any negative automatic thoughts, you still feel like it isn't working out for you, that is the time to give up and try something else.

Ten things we tell ourselves

We often come up with excuses before we have given things a chance. Below, I have listed some common thoughts that anxious people have when practising mindfulness meditation. Do you run into any of them?

1. This sounds like such a hassle: I don't want to do this
2. This is pointless: I don't any benefit
3. I am not doing it correctly
4. My mind keeps wandering: I am failing at this
5. I should give up because this is never going to work
6. This feels silly
7. I am embarrassed to do this in case someone walks in
8. I have more important things to do than looking after my mental health
9. This is boring

10. I am falling asleep

If so, the next question to ask yourself is “is this really true?” and “is this a good reason to give up?”.

For example, the idea that you are “not doing it correctly” may be true. But it also may be your anxiety talking. You are an anxiety sufferer, so which one do you think is more likely? By attempting to identify our anxious thoughts, we can more easily determine which are legitimate and which are the anxiety talking.

Summary

Don't give up too fast on mindfulness meditation. It may well feel silly and pointless for the first month. Stick with it. If, after that time, you still feel you are getting no benefit (and it is not just the anxiety talking) then look at other options.

In fact, it may seem pointless and frustrating forever. The question is, do you see a benefit when anxious thoughts arrive in everyday life? Mindfulness meditation is just training for the real thing.

Mindful living

Mindfulness does not have to be about meditation. In fact, if you have anxiety, you will probably find the meditation tough. Our minds are constantly racing around. That is the idea, of course, but it is hard to stick with it.

Another option is to use mindfulness in everyday life. It is all about living in the present. We want to make sure that we enjoy the things we do.

Truth be told, I am more excited about the idea of living mindfully than mindfulness meditation. Meditation feels like brushing my teeth: another chore to do every day. Extracting more pleasure out of the things I already do is much more appealing.

Have you fallen into this trap?

Anxiety tends to zap the happiness out of activities we used to enjoy. It does this in one of two ways.

First, you spend all of them time worrying. Before the event, you worry you will not enjoy it. During it, you worry that you are not enjoying it and feel guilty because you should be. Or maybe you just worry about the future. After it, you worry about whether you did something wrong or embarrassed yourself.

Sound familiar? If not, try this one on for size.

When you seem to be enjoying it, you start worrying that the little bit of enjoyment you are extracting from this situation will be gone soon because the event will end, or you will get bored or anxious.

Both of these situations are common. Rather than focusing on the situation and enjoying it, our mind finds a way to make us unhappy.

How do we fix it?

By practising mindfulness, we can teach ourselves to return our thoughts to the present. Every time our mind wanders off, we gently bring it back to the present.

This takes a lot of work. If you think about it, you are not often conscious that this is what is going on. You just get a feeling that you are not having fun. One of the steps to mastering mindfulness, it simply reminding ourselves to do it!

In what situations can we use mindfulness? Any! However, to get your imagination going, I will discuss some specific examples here.

What exactly do I do?

Step one: identify an opportunity for mindfulness. Maybe it is when you are having dinner or perhaps your walk to work.

Step two: Remove distractions. This means taking your headphones out.

Step three: Focus on your experience. What can you see, hear, touch, taste and smell?

Step four: When your mind starts to wander, gently bring it back to the present moment. It is okay for it to wander: that is what minds do. Just smile to yourself and guide it back.

Step five: Continue to take in your sensory experience, guiding your mind back whenever it wanders.

Ten opportunities to practice mindfulness

1. Brushing your teeth
2. Cooking
3. Eating
4. Walking to work or the shops
5. Getting dressed

6. Consuming a hot drink
7. Exercising
8. Having a conversation
9. Having a shower
10. Waiting for a friend

Mindful eating

Dinner time is a perfect chance to practise mindfulness. It is so easy to wolf down a meal without thinking about it or enjoying it.

This is a shame because meal times are not going away at time soon: we have to feed ourselves every day. It is much better to enjoy the experience.

This behaviour is most apparent in chocolate. If you are a self-confessed chocoholic, you may relate to this experience. I often find myself noticing the first bite and the last one: but nothing in between. This is terrible because I have paid for the chocolate in both monetary terms and calories.

When we pay attention to what we are eating, we enjoy it more.

Mindful dieting

In 2016, I wrote about mindful eating on the [Worfolk Anxiety blog](#)^[9]. It is not just that we enjoy food more when we are mindful of it: it is that we eat less.

In the blog post, I talked about a chocolate dessert I was eating. Normally, I would scoff the entire thing down. However, because I was eating mindfully, I recognised that I was full and stopped.

This is like having a superpower, right? The idea that you could get more enjoyment out of dessert while consuming fewer calories is the stuff dreams are made of. For me, it works. Give it a go: you might find similar results.

Active listening

Even when having a conversation with someone, we can find our mind racing ahead. Sometimes we are worrying about other things and getting distracted. Other times we are simply thinking of the next thing to say.

Whatever the reason, what we are not doing is listening to the other person. Listening is a lost art. So much so that *real* listening now has a separate name: active listening.

When you are actively listening, you are completely focused on what the other person is saying. You comprehend their words and respond appropriately.

Being a good listener makes you a more interesting person than being a good talker. So, when we find ourselves in conversation, we should remind ourselves to focus on what the other person is saying and direct attention away from our thoughts.

Do you ever find yourself struggling to get a word in edge-ways and getting frustrated because you think you have a good point to make? I do this all of the time. Now, I try to let it go. What I have to say is not *that* important. Not compared to being a good listener.

Seriously, put the phone down

Distractions are everywhere in modern life. It used to be that you could lock yourself away in your study. Now, nobody has a study, and even if we did have one, our phone would be in there.

You know, the phone with text messages, and Facebook, and Twitter, and Instagram, and WhatsApp, and WeChat, and, well, the list goes on.

We are addicted to information. I regularly find myself checking emails as soon as I wake up, or before I go to bed, or when I

am supposed to be spending time with my daughter. I do not consciously do it: it is just a habit.

If we want to be more mindful, we need to break these habits. When you are in bed: be in bed. When you are with someone, give them your full attention. Then you are working on something important, turn your phone off.

Give yourself permission to relax

The reason we constantly worry about the future is that we believe that worrying is useful. It has a purpose: to keep us safe, to make us more productive, to allow us to achieve more.

Worrying does none of these things. However, when we cling on to this belief, it is no wonder that we constantly worry. This process of endless worrying is what takes us away from the present.

Therefore, if we want to enjoy the present more, we need to give ourselves permission not to worry. We need to tell ourselves that it is okay to spend a day doing things we like. The world will not end if you spend an evening with a novel, or in front of the TV.

The reality is that doing this will make you more productive because you will reduce time spent worrying, rebuild your energy and have more focus later on. But it all starts with giving yourself

that permission to relax.

Conclusion

Anxiety is the result of constantly worrying about the future. Bringing our mind back to the present, and focusing on what is happening right now, is the fix.

This is not easy. In fact, the battle is never really won. We must constantly but gently escort our mind back to present whenever it wanders. Thankfully, with enough practice, it can eventually become second nature.

When we focus on the present and give ourselves permission to do so, we find the activities we do more enjoyable. We recapture that sense of what it is to be alive. And life becomes even more worth living.

Hang in there. Be kind to yourself. And enjoy right now.

About the author

Chris Worfolk is the founder of the mental health charity Anxiety Leeds and author of:

- Technical Anxiety: The complete guide to what is anxiety and what to do about it
- Do More, Worry Less: Small steps to reduce your anxiety

He lives in Leeds, United Kingdom with his wife and daughter.



Glossary

Meta-analysis: A research project that takes the results from multiple different studies on the same topic and combines them to review the overall results.

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