

# Mindfulness in mental health and prison settings



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# Contents

Introduction	5
Learning Outcomes	6
1 Mindfulness	7
1.1 Experiencing mindfulness	8
2 Mindful therapy	10
2.1 Bringing mindfulness into therapy	11
3 Mindfulness in prisons	13
3.1 Experiencing meditation in prison	13
4 Criticisms of mindfulness	16
Conclusion	18
References	18
Further reading	19
Acknowledgements	19

## Introduction

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This free course, *Mindfulness in mental health and prison settings*, looks at the use of mindfulness in counselling and forensic settings. You will start by learning a bit more about the concept of mindfulness and how it can be understood and applied. You will then consider the different ways in which mindfulness can be integrated into therapy sessions, and what the benefits of these might be. After this, you will explore some of the specific ways in which mindfulness has been used in prison contexts. Finally, you will have the chance to think a bit more critically about the whole mindfulness movement after listening to a debate about how mindfulness is being applied in Western contexts.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [\*DD310 Counselling and forensic psychology: investigating crime and therapy\*](#).



Figure 1 'Seeing the light' by Sue Cheval

# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- define mindfulness
- practise mindfulness in daily life
- understand how mindfulness can help clients with mental health difficulties
- describe how mindfulness can be useful in prison settings
- critically evaluate 'the mindfulness movement'.

# 1 Mindfulness



Figure 2 Mindfulness

You may already have some ideas about what mindfulness is, given that it has become quite a buzzword in recent years. Before you go any further, watch this video created by The Open University about what mindfulness is and why we should care about it.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Five reasons to care about mindfulness](#)



From the video, you will have learned that mindfulness is about focusing on the present moment and accepting your feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations. It is something that we can practise in meditation in order to bring that quality more into our everyday lives, and that can help us with emotionally and physically painful experiences. The next section will allow you to experience mindfulness for yourself.

## 1.1 Experiencing mindfulness

To really grasp what mindfulness is, it's important to have some experience of mindfulness practice for yourself. You can't really get a sense of it just from reading about it. Here you will learn about a basic form of mindfulness meditation that you can try. However, many people find it easier – especially at the start – to have somebody talking them through the practice.

### Activity 1 Trying out mindfulness meditation

Have a go at a mindfulness meditation from an app or website. There are lots of apps with audio meditation practices that you can download to your device.

Some of the popular ones at the time of writing are:

- Headspace
- Stop, Breathe, Think
- The Mindfulness App.

If you don't want to use an app, the following websites are run by some of the major mindfulness researchers and practitioners in the UK and the USA. These pages include a number of audio meditations that you can play:

- [Mindfulness: Finding Peace in a Frantic World](#)
- [mindful: taking time for what matters](#)

Pick one audio practice from one of these apps or websites, and have a go at a mindfulness meditation.

When you're finished, think of three words or short phrases that describe what the experience was like for you and enter them in the text box below. There are no right or wrong answers; just write what it was like for you.

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

When mindfulness researchers Nugent, Moss, Barnes and Wilks (2011) encouraged a group of health professionals to do an activity similar to the one you just did, the kinds of things they said were that mindfulness enabled space to pause in life; that it deepened their relationships with themselves (through tuning into how they felt, for example); that it enabled them to observe things they wouldn't otherwise have noticed (such as how tense they were), opening up the potential of changing these things; and that it was a way of paying attention that they could bring to any experience (not just to specific meditations like the one you did).

Participants in the study also said that being mindful often brought discomfort and uncertainty: that it wasn't easy. Most accounts of people's first attempts at mindful meditation include words like 'boredom', 'pain', 'frustration' and 'anger' more often than they do words like 'calm', 'peace' and 'wisdom', which we often associate with such practices. Quietly attending to ourselves doesn't always bring peace. It often brings us face to face with things that we'd rather avoid. It is worth bearing this in mind when we



decide to engage with mindfulness. We should be aware of the expectations that people tend to have, and the reality that most people experience.

You might ask yourself, if people's experience of mindfulness can be quite negative, why engage with mindfulness at all? You'll find out some answers to this question during this course, but for now it's worth understanding that mindfulness is about becoming more able to stay with all of the thoughts, feelings and sensations that you have, easy or hard, rather than trying to get rid of the 'negative' ones and keep hold of the 'positive' ones. This is because, according to mindfulness, the capacity to stay with all of our feelings can help us to weather them when they are hard. Trying to ensure that we only have positive feelings often, paradoxically, makes us suffer more.

At this point you are invited to read a chapter from *Mad or Bad: A Critical Approach to Counselling and Forensic Psychology*(2017). Chapter 16, 'Mindfulness', was written by course authors Meg-John Barker and Troy Cooper for the Open University course [DD310 Counselling and forensic psychology: investigating crime and therapy](#). Click on the link below to read this chapter before moving on to the next section.

['Mindfulness'](#)

## 2 Mindful therapy

In 'Mindfulness' from *Mad or Bad: A Critical Approach to Counselling and Forensic Psychology*, you read about how mindfulness has been found to be helpful for many mental health difficulties, and you explored some of the ways in which mindfulness can work in counselling practice with clients.

Watch this animation, created by some of the course authors at The Open University, for a bit more about why the mindfulness idea of 'being present' is so useful – in general, and in therapy in particular.

Video content is not available in this format.

Being present in therapy – key ideas in therapy



### Activity 2 Mindfulness in counselling

From reading the chapter and watching the animation, come up with a list of ways in which therapists or counsellors could bring mindfulness into their work with clients.

Provide your answer...

#### Discussion

There are three ways in which counsellors can bring mindfulness into therapy:

1. counsellors offering mindfulness ideas and practices to their clients
2. counsellors practising mindfulness themselves
3. cultivating a mindful therapeutic relationship.

You'll cover these in more detail next.

## 2.1 Bringing mindfulness into therapy

The three ways in which counsellors can bring mindfulness into therapy are now explored.

### 1 Counsellors offering mindfulness ideas and practices to their clients

Counsellors can offer mindfulness ideas and practices to their clients in individual sessions, or in groups.

In one-to-one therapy, counsellors could offer mindfulness as:

- a way for the client to prepare for the therapy before it starts
- a kind of 'homework' to engage with outside therapy, to observe themselves and their thoughts and feelings
- something to do in the therapy hour; for example, at the start to ground them, or in order to 'sit with' a difficult feeling that comes up
- practices they can do in order to continue the work of therapy once therapy is over, in order to keep making time in their lives for self-care and self-reflection.

### 2 Counsellors practising mindfulness themselves

In 'Mindfulness', from *Mad or Bad: A Critical Approach to Counselling and Forensic Psychology*, you learned how important it is, from a mindfulness perspective, not to create a 'them and us' between therapists and clients, because we all struggle in similar ways. Mindfulness practice can also help counsellors to develop important therapeutic qualities (Barker, 2013), these include:

- **Attention:** Counsellors need to be able to focus their attention on the client. They also need to have a spacious awareness of everything that is going on in the therapy room, such as the client's body language, the dynamic between themselves and the client, and any thoughts and feelings that are coming up for them as the client talks. Mindfulness is a good way to practise focused attention, and spacious awareness.
- **Empathy and compassion:** These are the qualities which correlate most highly with positive outcomes of therapy (Cooper, 2008). There are loving-kindness and compassion meditations which directly cultivate our ability to empathise and to be compassionate with ourselves and with other people. Living in a culture which encourages judgement, criticism and comparison to others, we need to practise a different way of being, rather than it being something that comes easily.
- **Ability to sit with difficult feelings:** Counsellors need to be able to sit with any difficult feelings that come up for the client instead of rushing to make them feel better, or giving them the message that those feelings are not okay. Joan Halifax (2011) says that meditation practice can help counsellors to learn how to sit grounded like a mountain, welcoming all emotions like the weather.
- **Self-awareness:** It is important for counsellors to have self-awareness so that they can be there for the client, rather than bringing their own prejudices, assumptions or

habits into the room. Sitting with themselves quietly, on a regular basis, can help counsellors to learn what assumptions they make, and how they tend to react.

### 3 Cultivating a mindful therapeutic relationship

You saw earlier in the video 'Being present in therapy – key ideas in therapy' that mindfulness is also a way of viewing the therapeutic relationship. Being present with the client, modelling compassion towards them and demonstrating how to stay with difficult feelings that arise are helpful in and of themselves.

Here are some practical ways in which a counsellor can cultivate a mindful therapeutic relationship:

- doing meditation or journaling before sessions in order to be aware of where they are at, and to practise self-compassion
- doing brief practices right before meeting the client, so that they're ready to be present with them
- employing mindful awareness in session: encouraging the client to attend to their whole experience and to give it time; noticing their own responses and slowing down to consider what to say and do next to best serve the client.

In the next section you will explore some of the ways that mindfulness can be used in prison settings.

## 3 Mindfulness in prisons



Figure 3 Prisoners meditating

In 'Mindfulness', from *Mad or Bad: A Critical Approach to Counselling and Forensic Psychology*, you learned that mindfulness could be useful in prisons for a number of reasons:

- levels of mental health difficulties – including depression, anxiety and suicide – are higher in prisons than in the general population. Mindfulness – particularly in group formats – is a useful, and cost-effective, way of tackling such mental health difficulties (Shonin et al., 2015)
- prisoners tend to have higher levels of difficult emotions, such as anger, and more trouble regulating such feelings. Mindfulness can be particularly helpful with emotional regulation (Chambers et al., 2009)
- prisoners also tend to have higher levels of substance abuse, which mindfulness can help to treat (Bowen et al., 2010)
- linked to the above, there is evidence that prisoners who have taken part in sustained mindfulness programmes have significantly lower rates of re-offending (Auty et al., 2015).

### 3.1 Experiencing meditation in prison



Figure 4 Fleet Maull

This is an excerpt from an interview with Fleet Maull (2005), who you read about in 'Mindfulness'. Here he talks about his journey from being sentenced to 30 years in prison, to applying the meditation practices he'd previously learned in order to get through the experience, and eventually founding the Prison Dharma Network.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Fleet Maull: waking up in prison](#)



### Activity 3 How can meditation practice help prisoners?

Having heard the excerpt from Fleet Maull's interview, use the box below to make a list of ways in which meditation or mindfulness practice can be helpful to people in prison. Also, jot down any criticisms you have of the focus on mindfulness and/or meditation practices in prison.

*Provide your answer...*

#### Discussion

From Maull's interview you might have noticed the following things that he, and other prisoners, got out of their meditation practice:

- something to fill, or structure, their time in prison
- a sense of meaning or purpose: something worthwhile to do with the time, making sure something good comes from a bad situation
- an air of being dedicated and disciplined, which elicits respect from other prisoners and staff
- an ethical code to follow, around being of service to others, with role models in the form of teachers or facilitators
- an antidote to the guilt or shame they feel about the crimes they committed
- a sense of belonging with the other prisoners who are part of the meditation, mindfulness or Dharma group
- a place to talk openly and honestly about their struggles, and to receive support.

Reflecting more critically about the use of mindfulness or meditation programmes in prison, you might have considered the following points about their shortcomings:

- Adding mindfulness or meditation programmes into the existing criminal justice system doesn't address some of the serious problems with this system, such as class and race injustices around who is incarcerated .
- It does little to address the questions over whether imprisonment is effective at rehabilitating people, and whether it is appropriate treatment for people who are, themselves, often the victims of serious abuse. If one of the key aims of mindfulness is cultivating kindness and compassion, what are the implications of

trying to do this within a system which is, itself, often cruel? For example, Maull's interview highlights that there is a high risk of further physical or sexual abuse in the prison system, and that staff often treat prisoners as inferior human beings.

- Many people in prisons may already have existing spiritual practices, faiths and beliefs. Should mindfulness be offered as an alternative to these, or would it be more appropriate to explore what is available in each group's or individual's own cultural background, encouraging them to develop that?

These points relate to some of the wider criticisms of the mindfulness movement, which we will explore shortly. Critics have argued that it is problematic to bring mindfulness practices into settings such as workplaces, schools and prisons as a kind of add-on, without challenging the often unethical ways in which these settings operate. For example, people are frequently unequally valued within hierarchical structures, often bullied or otherwise abused, and treated as objects to produce outcomes and reach targets rather than as full human beings.

Critics have also pointed to the cultural issues with this westernised, secularised version of Buddhism being offered to everyone regardless of the rich spiritual traditions and practices they may already be engaged with – many of which include similar ideas to mindfulness.

## 4 Criticisms of mindfulness

Towards the end of the reading 'Mindfulness' you learned that there have been many criticisms of the ways in which mindfulness has been applied so far. In the Radio 4 *Beyond Belief* programme you will listen to shortly, you will hear three experts discussing mindfulness applications, and the issues with them. The speakers are Buddhist teacher [Christopher Titmuss](#) from [Gaia House Buddhist Retreat Centre](#), Chris Cullan from the [University of Oxford Mindfulness](#) and Rebecca Crane from [Bangor Centre for Mindfulness Research](#). Chris and Rebecca are key UK researchers in this area, and have been involved with the Mindful Nation UK report and the development of mindfulness-based cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

Now listen to [BBC Beyond Belief: Mindfulness](#). We recommend that you listen to the final section of the programme, from 18 minutes and 30 seconds. However, the whole episode, with more discussion of what mindfulness is and how it relates to meditation and other spiritual practices, is available at this link.

### Activity 4 Ethical mindfulness

Based on your learning from this course and the *Beyond Belief* episode, decide whether each of the forms of mindfulness education listed here is 'attention training' or 'ethical mindfulness' (the distinction made towards the end of the *Beyond Belief* programme).

1. Teaching mindfulness skills in the military to help soldiers to be better at targeting the opponent, and coping with any post-traumatic stress disorder they experience.
  - attention training
  - ethical mindfulness
2. Engaging all staff in an organisation in an ongoing dialogue about what can be done to create a work environment where people treat themselves and others compassionately, and work towards ensuring that the organisation operates in the most ethical way possible.
  - attention training
  - ethical mindfulness
3. Giving children in school a mindfulness class once a week to help improve their attention.
  - attention training
  - ethical mindfulness
4. Giving politicians an eight-week mindfulness training course to help them to deal with the stress of their occupation.
  - attention training
  - ethical mindfulness



5. General practitioners sending depressed patients on a brief mindfulness course, given that it has been found to be effective with depression.
  - attention training
  - ethical mindfulness
6. Bringing mindfulness movements together with social justice movements to consider where human suffering comes from and how it might be addressed (e.g. war, discrimination, our impact on the environment, the treatment of refugees, austerity measures, etc.).
  - attention training
  - ethical mindfulness
7. Building mindfulness into school curriculums in terms of both practices and an ongoing discussion at all levels about how to make the school a more mindful and compassionate culture for everybody there.
  - attention training
  - ethical mindfulness
8. Inviting politicians into a sustained engagement with Buddhist mindfulness and compassion in order to think about the implications of their policies for increasing or decreasing human suffering.
  - attention training
  - ethical mindfulness
9. Providing staff in an organisation with optional mindfulness classes in order to enhance productivity.
  - attention training
  - ethical mindfulness
10. Encouraging people on mindfulness courses to develop – through mindfulness – a kind of ‘clear-seeing’ into the consequences of their actions for other people, and how the dynamics of power and privilege operate in the world.
  - attention training
  - ethical mindfulness

## Conclusion

In this free course, *Mindfulness in mental health and prison settings*, you have learned about mindfulness and how it can be used in both counselling and prison settings. You have also reflected a good deal on what mindfulness is, how therapists and clients experience it and the different ways in which it can be brought into therapy.

You've considered both mindful meditation practices, and ways of bringing mindfulness into everyday life. You've heard about the research evidence for mindfulness both in relation to mental health difficulties and in relation to rehabilitation and reducing recidivism in a criminal justice context. You've learned about how mindful therapy can work in practice.

Finally, you've developed your skills in critical evaluation, by exploring some of the criticisms that have been levelled at the 'mindfulness movement'.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [DD310 Counselling and forensic psychology: investigating crime and therapy](#).

This resource is part of the '[Wellbeing and Mental Health Collection](#)' collated by The Open University in Wales. You can find out more and discover other courses, articles and interactives on the [collection homepage](#).

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## Further reading

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### **Mindfulness zines**

The author of this course, Meg-John Barker, has created a comic-style zine about mindfulness issues.

[Staying with Feelings Zine](#) discusses one of the key ideas in mindfulness. This also shows how mindfulness ideas and practices can be incorporated into other forms of therapy than CBT, because it highlights the similarities between mindfulness and the humanistic therapy of focusing.

[Social Mindfulness Zine](#) suggests what a more ethical or social form of mindfulness might look like in practice, and explains why it is a problem just to do mindfulness on an individual basis without paying attention to our wider relationships, systems and structures.

### **The Mindful Revolution**

The film *The Mindful Revolution* is a great overview of the current mindfulness movement, and some of the problems with it. You can check out the trailer for [The Mindful Revolution film](#).

## Acknowledgements

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