

Information about

Mindfulness and Chronic Pain



What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness seems to be all over the place right now. News, television, online, it seems to be everywhere! But what is it? It's simply a way of helping you become more aware of how your mind can drift off and become caught up with worries, the past, the future, etc. It helps "train the mind" to stay a little more in the present.

What's it got to do with my pain?

At first it doesn't seem it has much to do with pain. But if you think about how your pain makes you feel, how it affects your mood, activity, and how you think and feel about yourself, it might begin to make a bit more sense. We often react, think, and feel things about the pain automatically, and these reactions can often make us feel even worse, on top of the physical pain. Mindfulness can help us become more aware of these automatic reactions to pain, and be able to respond in different ways which might help.

Can you give me an example of what you mean?

So, you might have a flare up with pain, and automatically react to this with a range of thoughts such as;

"Here we go again", "what have I done to deserve this", "no one understands", "the medication doesn't help," "I can't carry on like this" or "I hate not being able to do things"

All of these reactions are entirely normal. Over time, they can become so automatic we don't realise we're saying them. However, look at them and consider how they might affect our emotions. How might they affect what you do or don't do? So, we can end up feeling even worse on top of how the physical pain can make us feel.

We can also develop other automatic responses to the pain, such as trying to push it away, ignoring it, taking too much medication, and generally trying to get away from it. Again this is normal but can become automatic and add to the negative experience of pain.

Mindfulness is good at helping us become more aware of difficult thoughts and reactions associated with the pain, and stopping us from getting too caught up with them. It's also good at getting us back to what is really going on right now, not what our thoughts tell us is going on.

But I don't want to get back to "now" – that's where my pain is!!

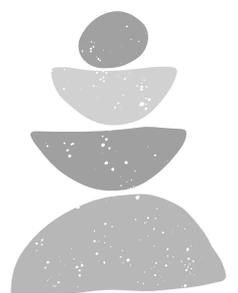
Understandable. People often want to stay away from unpleasant stuff like pain, but this often just makes us more exhausted, and of course the pain often just catches up. What folk find with mindfulness is that just sitting in the present can often be surprising, and less awful than our minds often tell us it will be. This can lead to an ability to sit with the pain to some extent, rather than constantly rush away from it. Mindfulness can often lead to not being as affected by our thoughts and the things we say about the pain.

Will it reduce my pain?

Probably not, but what may happen with continued practice is that the distress generating by all those difficult thoughts and moving away from the pain is reduced, and we can be less affected in our daily life by the pain.

How does it work?

Mindfulness works by gradually "training" the brain to stay more in the present, become less critical and judgmental of ourselves, and be less caught up in our thoughts, worries, past experiences and future concerns.



What do you actually do?

The general aim is to bring your attention to what is going on now. Not the thought of what's happening, but the actual experience itself. So this might include noticing your breath, how your stomach rises and falls, the feeling of your ribcage expanding and contracting, or perhaps the feeling of breath going in and out of your nostrils. You are encouraged to "come to your senses" by paying attention to sounds, smells, touch etc. Your mind will wander off. This is normal. Each time it does is an opportunity to gently notice this, and bring your attention back to the present. That's it. No analysis, no getting rids of thoughts, no positive thinking, no clearing your mind. Just paying attention to whatever comes up.

There are a few forms of mindfulness but they all do the same thing and there are lots of audio recordings of led practices to help you.

What about the other treatments I get?

Mindfulness won't affect any other parts of your treatment, and these should not change. You should consider how much time you have to dedicate to regular mindfulness practice.

How can I get help with mindfulness?

Your GP practice might be able to provide some information on mindfulness. Alternatively there are a number of useful websites below which will give you more information.

What can I expect to happen with it?

Probably not much to start off with. But with repeated practice, you might become more aware of how you think and react to your pain. This awareness might help you take a step back from what's going on automatically. You might also expect to notice things about your pain that you had not previously considered, including how it comes and goes in intensity, different sensations, and how you react to bringing attention to it.

Is it really worth it?

This will be entirely decided by you, but we encourage you to "let in breathe" as a technique for a while (a few weeks of willing and open commitment), before coming to any conclusions. Don't expect miracle cures. We encourage you to decide for yourself if the above effects are worth it for the time invested.

It still doesn't make sense!

Don't worry. Sometimes it's ok not to "understand" something from a verbal or logical point of view. But this should not put you off trying. How many medications have you tried from your GP without knowing how they work chemically? Mindfulness is best understood by trying it. What have you got to lose?

Ps. If you decide to commit, don't be put off by your mind wandering (normal), or your tendency to fall asleep. Alter the time you practice, and bring your mind back gently each time it wanders.

Useful Websites

NHSGGC Mindfulness Based Approaches

<https://mindfulness.nhsggc.org.uk/mindfulness-community/>

