


A brief guide to mindfulness

And how it can help you and your autistic child



*“Mindfulness means
paying attention in a
particular way;
On purpose, in the
present moment and
non-judgementally.”*

Jon Kabat-Zinn



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Mindfulness: it's the big buzz word at the moment but actually it's been around for thousands of years and chances are we have all used elements of it at some point in our lives. Have you ever said, 'Just take a deep breath,' 'Count slowly to 10,'? This is all part of it.

So what is mindfulness and how can it help you and your autistic child? This leaflet will outline the principles of mindfulness, explain why it is beneficial, demonstrate how to practise it and signpost resources to help.

What is mindfulness?

It means being aware, the awareness that emerges from paying attention, on purpose and non- judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment
(Kabat –Zinn 2003).

Mindfulness is like planting and watering seeds and seeing them grow and flower (Snell 2013). It can reduce stress, anxiety and depression and can become a positive way of life, improving health, happiness and wellbeing.

Mindfulness does not mean opting out of difficult situations but it is a way of using and controlling emotions more effectively. It helps us **respond** to situations rather than simply **reacting** in predictable ways out of habit. It is about becoming self aware and it can help construct new positive ways of thinking and behaving.



How is mindfulness beneficial?

Children on the spectrum often suffer huge anxiety and they find it difficult to regulate their emotions. School can be a social minefield and sensory experiences can become unbearable and these children can often get themselves in a blind fury due to frustration and then end up in trouble (*Attwood 1998*). Mindfulness can help regulate the emotions to give children time to respond more appropriately and calmly.

As mindfulness also creates new patterns of thought and breaks down old ones, it is very useful for those on the autistic spectrum who often display rigid patterns of thinking. Mindfulness contributes directly to the development of cognitive and performance skills in the young (*Weare 2012*). Children often like mindfulness because they are in charge of it and they can't fail. Those on the spectrum are also at an advantage when practising mindfulness due to the ability to concentrate intensely on special interests (*Salzmann 2014*). Parents and carers who practise mindfulness also report improved relationships with their children, reduced conflict and greater resilience.

How to practise

Traditionally mindfulness is often taught over an 8 week period with one class of about two hours once a week and homework in between. However in the home it is more likely to be for about 15-20 minutes several times a week, first learning a variety of mindful techniques together. Then the skills can be incorporated into everyday life on a daily basis. For example, when eating, focus completely on tasting each mouthful of food and how it feels, smells, and changes, in cleaning teeth, focus on the texture and smell of the toothpaste and the feel of the brush in the mouth. It can even be practised whilst walking: feeling the way the feet make contact with the ground, the sense of fresh air on the skin, observing the movements of the leg and foot muscles (*Cattley and Lavelle 2010*).



Different mindful practices to try

Playing Games

Although not strictly mindful, these enable children to focus on the here and now and forget about worries. Individually this can include word games, or sudokus, and as a group it can be games such as charades or Pictionary.

Mindful eating

This can be done for any meal or part of a meal or snack at any time. For the first time perhaps practise with sweets! Ideally choose a sweet that has more than one texture: lemon sherbets, chocolate limes, smarties.

First of all, look at the sweet together. What does it look like? What is the colour? Size? Look at the light and shadows falling on it. Hold the sweet in the palm of your hand. Is it heavy? Light? Cold or warm. Smooth or sticky? Hold it between the thumb and forefinger and turn it over. What do you notice?

Now smell the sweet. What does it smell of? Try describing it to each other. Put the sweet to your lips. How does your hand know where your mouth is? Is your mouth watering? Put the sweet in your mouth without biting it. What does it feel like? What is the texture and flavor?



Now really taste the sweet. What happens when you bite into it? Does the taste or texture change? How do you know when you are ready to swallow? Does it taste different in different parts of the mouth? Finally swallow. What taste is left in your mouth?

How different was this to the way you normally eat? What did you like or not like about it?

Mindful body scans and mindful breathing

There are lots available on line. It is worth having a good browse to see what suits you and your family. They can range in length from about 4 minutes to 45 minutes, some have music to focus on and some have pictures and images.

5 minute meditation

Inhale and count to 5

Hold your breath and count to 3

Exhale and count to 8

Hold your breath and count to 1

Repeat

bemorewithless.com





Try this:

Body Scan Mindfulness Exercise from stillmind.com.au

- 1.** Sit in a chair as for the breath awareness or lie down, making yourself comfortable, lying on your back on a mat or rug on the floor or on your bed. Choose a place where you will be warm and undisturbed. Allow your eyes to close gently.
- 2.** Take a few moments to get in touch with the movement of your breath and the sensations in the body. When you are ready, bring your awareness to the physical sensations in your body, especially to the sensations of touch or pressure, where your body makes contact with the chair or bed. On each outbreath, allow yourself to let go, to sink a little deeper into the chair or bed.
- 3.** Remind yourself of the intention of this practice. Its aim is not to feel any different, relaxed, or calm; this may happen or it may not. Instead, the intention of the practice is, as best you can, to bring awareness to any sensations you detect, as you focus your attention on each part of the body in turn.
- 4.** Now bring your awareness to the physical sensations in the lower abdomen, becoming aware of the changing patterns of sensations in the abdominal wall as you breathe in, and as you breathe out. Take a few minutes to feel the sensations as you breathe in and as you breathe out.
- 5.** Having connected with the sensations in the abdomen, bring the focus or “spotlight” of your awareness down the left leg, into the left foot, and out to the toes of the left foot. Focus on each of the toes of the left foot in turn, bringing a gentle curiosity to investigate the quality of the sensations you find, perhaps noticing the sense of contact between the toes, a sense of tingling, warmth, or no particular sensation.

6. When you are ready, on an inbreath, feel or imagine the breath entering the lungs, and then passing down into the abdomen, into the left leg, the left foot, and out to the toes of the left foot. Then, on the outbreath, feel or imagine the breath coming all the way back up, out of the foot, into the leg, up through the abdomen, chest, and out through the nose. As best you can, continue this for a few breaths, breathing down into the toes, and back out from the toes. It may be difficult to get the hang of this just practice this “breathing into” as best you can, approaching it playfully.

7. Now, when you are ready, on an outbreath, let go of awareness of the toes, and bring your awareness to the sensations on the bottom of your left foot—bringing a gentle, investigative awareness to the sole of the foot, the instep, the heel (e.g., noticing the sensations where the heel makes contact with the mat or bed). Experiment with “breathing with” the sensations—being aware of the breath in the background, as, in the foreground, you explore the sensations of the lower foot.

8. Now allow the awareness to expand into the rest of the foot—to the ankle, the top of the foot, and right into the bones and joints. Then, taking a slightly deeper breath, directing it down into the whole of the left foot, and, as the breath lets go on the outbreath, let go of the left foot completely, allowing the focus of awareness to move into the lower left leg—the calf, shin, knee, and so on, in turn.

9. Continue to bring awareness, and a gentle curiosity, to the physical sensations in each part of the rest of the body in turn - to the upper left leg, the right toes, right foot, right leg, pelvic area, back, abdomen, chest, fingers, hands, arms, shoulders, neck, head, and face. In each area, as best you can, bring the same detailed level of awareness and gentle curiosity to the bodily sensations present. As you leave each major area, “breathe in” to it on the inbreath, and let go of that region on the outbreath.



10. When you become aware of tension, or of other intense sensations in a particular part of the body, you can “breathe in” to them—using the inbreath gently to bring awareness right into the sensations, and, as best you can, have a sense of their letting go, or releasing, on the outbreath.

11. The mind will inevitably wander away from the breath and the body from time to time. That is entirely normal. It is what minds do. When you notice it, gently acknowledge it, noticing where the mind has gone off to, and then gently return your attention to the part of the body you intended to focus on.

12. After you have “scanned” the whole body in this way, spend a few minutes being aware of a sense of the body as a whole, and of the breath flowing freely in and out of the body.

13. If you find yourself falling asleep, you might find it helpful to prop your head up with a pillow, open your eyes, or do the practice sitting up rather than lying down.

14. You can adjust the time spent in this practice by using larger chunks of your body to become aware of or spending a shorter or longer time with each part.

M - moment to moment attention

I - in the here and now

N - non judgemental attitude

D - detach from unhelpful thoughts

F - forgive and be grateful

U - unconditional acceptance

L - learn with childlike mindset

Have a look at these too

The Body Scan Practice:

www.mindful.org/the-body-scan-practice (10 minutes)

Livingwell.org.au/mindful-exercises (between 5 and 13 minutes)

Freemindfulness.org

www.stillmind.com.au/documents/bodyscan

And a host of resources on YouTube.

Mindful listening

Mindful listening for kids- 5 minutes YouTube

Annakaharris.com/mindfulness-for-children



*“We’re so busy watching out for what’s just ahead of us that we don’t take time to enjoy where we are”
Calvin & Hobbes*

Mindful yoga

Like other ways of practising mindfulness, mindful yoga is about focusing on the sensation and awareness of what the body is experiencing, in the present, just at the moment. It is not about how well you can do the yoga poses! It is usually good fun trying them out! *Please be careful though and remember these are gentle stretches.*

Find examples here:

yoga.com/poses

Myyogalife.com

www.artofliving.org/Yoga

Try these sites:

themindfulword.org/2013/mindfulness-meditations-children

Mindful meditation for children outdoors - the mindful word

childfamilyyoga.com

ABC yoga

Beginner yoga poses for kids

Yoga poses for kids



Mindful walking

This is to maintain focus whilst in motion and it can be combined with mindful listening and seeing. It can be done indoors but is perhaps more fun outdoors in the garden or park.

To start with, walk really slowly; just thinking about how the legs and feet know how to work and how they know where to go and to balance.

Focus especially on the soles of the feet and how they feel in contact with the ground. When the mind wanders, it probably will, just bring your attention back to the soles of the feet and notice what it feels like to be walking.

When you have practiced this, increase the speed and be aware of whether it is easy to stay focused when you are walking slowly or quickly. How do the sensations in the body change with speed?

Now incorporate some of the other mindful practices if you like. What can you see around you as you walk? From the smallest blade of grass to the tallest tree? How does the light shine on different surroundings? How does the air feel around you? What can you hear? Your feet? Cars, planes, birds, voices?

Before finishing the walk, slow down the speed again and afterwards you can discuss how it felt for you. Try walking mindfully for part of the route to school or work on a regular basis.

You might find some of these mindful practices are easier than others initially. Incorporate one you find easier into daily life straightaway but don't give up on the other ways as later you might find these even more helpful.

*Above all have fun and enjoy sharing
this time with your child!*

Further Resources and references

School projects

stop, breathe and be (.b)

Mindfulness in schools Project (MISP)

Mindfulness for schools: A training course for teachers and teenagers, Cattley and Lavelle (2010)

Websites

autismandmindfulness.org

www.relaxkids.com/uk/Blog/meditation_and_relaxation_for_children_with_autism

Saltzmann www.stillquietplace.com

YouTube - mindfulness and autism - Katharine Annear

Books

Aspergers Syndrome *by Tony Attwood*

Aspergers Syndrome and mindfulness - taking refuge in the Buddha *by Chris Mitchell*

Mindfulness: a practical guide to finding peace in a frantic world *by William Penman*

Mindfulness based cognitive therapy for dummies *by P.Collard*

Mindfulness skills for kids and teens *by Debra Burdick*

Sitting Still like a Frog *by E Snell*

The Rough Guide to Mindfulness *by Tobler and Herrmann*

Articles

Developing mindfulness with children and young people: a review of the evidence and policy context (2014) *K Weare*

Mindfulness based interventions in context: Past Present and Future (2003) *Kabat-Zinn*