

Guide to mindfulness and wellbeing during challenging times

These are challenging times indeed, in the context of the Covid 19 situation. Many of you may be facing all sorts of challenges: anxiety, isolation, strained relationships, money worries etc.

While we can't solve these directly for you, we want to help you to support yourself through it. As a coaching and mindfulness social enterprise, that's exactly what Rising Minds does with people day in and out: help them deal best with challenge and change, so that they can thrive in their lives and work.

We believe that some wise application of mindfulness can help you navigate the choppy waters ahead. It's about getting more ground beneath your feet. This is ultimately what mindfulness can do at times like this, so that you're better placed to take good care of yourselves and make wise decisions for today and tomorrow.

So in this short guide, we look at how to apply mindfulness to the current situation. We also include some really good top tips on maintaining general wellbeing at this time of challenge.

Mindfulness in a nutshell

Let's start with a brief overview of mindfulness – what, why and how. The starting point is a basic distinction between two modes of mind: autopilot (or doing mode) and intentional (or being mode). Autopilot evolved in our prehistoric past to keep us safe and functioning. It takes care of basic tasks and activities, and also alerts us to danger. It's essential to our survival. It's also highly useful in carrying out all our routine activities without us having to think about them, like getting dressed, walking, talking.

However autopilot mode isn't so useful when it comes to solving complex tasks, including and especially those that involve complex and difficult emotions. Yet we use autopilot so often that sometimes we get stuck here, particularly when something happens that we perceive as a threat. This may be happening a lot at the moment in the current covid 19 situation.

This is when it's great to activate the other mode of our mind – intentional – located in our 'clever' neo-cortex. This part is better suited to the job of solving complex problems and emotions. It's capable of highly sophisticated, analytical and imaginative thinking and problem solving.

This is where mindfulness comes in, because the best way to step out of automatic repetitive thinking and to step into intentional mode is to create a gap or space for awareness and reflection. And this is what mindfulness is all about. We use a simple ABC model of mindfulness:

Awareness: paying gentle attention in the present moment to your experience in your mind, body, and environment, without judgement. This helps create a gap or space for reflection.

(The best meditation here is 'Waking up to yourself' – see the weblink on the next page).

Being with: having created space, this allows our brain and body to process our experience. The mindfulness approach here is to notice thoughts, emotions and body sensations, and to allow them to run through us without getting overinvolved in them. This opens up the possibility for the third step below.

(The best meditations here are 'Working with your thoughts' and 'Acceptance' – see the weblink in the box below).

Choosing wisely: by doing the A and B we open up access to the wiser parts of our brain where we can see things more clearly, and what's in our best interests. This can include how to understand and process our current challenging reality and all its implications, and to make good decisions about what to do with our time and energy.

(The best meditation here are 'Wise Choices' and 'Kindness' – see the weblink in the box below).

To access our guided meditations go to: www.risingminds.org.uk/mindfulness

Top tips for applying the wisdom of mindfulness right now

- Use this enforced time of lockdown to **establish a mindfulness routine** and practice – ideally first thing in the day, even if only a few minutes. Despite the anxieties the current situation creates, this is actually an ideal time for building a mindfulness practice.
- Use lots of **mini practices** (three step breathing space and the mindful minute – see the weblink in the box above) both to build the mindfulness 'habit' and also whenever you notice yourself getting triggered by current anxieties.
- On that note, be **vigilant around how much news and social media** you engage with right now. It can be quite anxiety-provoking. One dose of news a day is enough right now.
- **Notice strongly triggering thoughts and write them down.** It's also really useful if you can find people to share those thoughts with. Chances are you're not the only one to have had them.
- **Find positive distractions:** keeping busy with activities that are interesting, nourishing and stimulating is a BRILLIANT WAY to keep anxiety at bay.
- **Kindness:** This is perhaps the most important of all, and mindfulness can open up the portals to natural kindness to self and others. Carve out time for gentle, self-caring activities as far as possible. Also, don't give yourself a hard time for the fact that you may be feeling all sorts of difficult things right now. That's entirely natural and understandable and you're not alone.

Five top tips for general wellbeing

The following five top tips are taken from the New Economics Foundation's 'Five ways to wellbeing'. They are all relevant right now, even if they have to be applied differently than in normal times. So we've added our take on them, in the context of our times.

1. Connect

Especially if you are feeling isolated. Reach out for connection with friends, especially using technology like Zoom, Skype, Whatsapp video calls etc. It can make all the difference. The same goes even for those of you isolating with family members...you may well need to have contact with people other than them!

2. Be active

Even if you can't get out of your home much or at all, you can still get exercise and move your body. Youtube aerobics videos, dancing etc.

3. Take notice

This is the mindfulness thing again! It's another way of applying it throughout your day. Take time to look at things in your environment afresh...just notice how things actually are...

4. Keep learning

If you do have any spare time, then this enforced period of being at home is a great chance to learn or develop new skills. There are a great many free online courses at the moment. Or it might be that this is a good time to pick up some activity that you used to enjoy doing but have neglected for a while (e.g. playing a musical instrument, knitting, etc.)

5. Give

Again, if you have spare time, you may feel able to offer your support to others who may need it – like giving people a call to check if they are okay. Being of service to someone else sometimes really helps take the focus away from your own concerns, at least for a while.

Final words

We hope you've found this short guide helpful. As we said at the start, we don't pretend that this will solve some real-world challenges you may be facing. However, we know from our experience working with many people over the years that if you are able to take basic good care of your mind and body by following some of the wisdom above, then you are far more likely to be in a good overall state to deal with difficulty and to make good decisions about how to respond best.

We wish you all the best through this challenging time.