

Experiences

A Pocket guide to **Mindfulness**

A Practical Introduction to Mindfulness in your School

Amy Malloy



About the author



Amy Malloy is from Oxford in the UK. She's a writer, teacher and the founder of yoga & mindfulness school "No More Shoulds".

She is on a mission for healthier, kinder minds in education

and throughout every stage of life. She's helping people through yoga practice, mindfulness and by taking the pressure off feeling or being a certain way.

With over a decade's experience of ELT teaching, editorial and assessment development for global education providers, she came to realise how many "shoulds" existed within education. These often put undue pressure on both students and teachers alike.

She now blends her passion for wellbeing practices with her experience in education to dust off the myth and mystery around mindfulness and yoga for almost any context, and to encourage her students not to worry about whether their practice fits what the books say!

She is also the founder of The Breathe Project UK, a social enterprise seeking to make private talking therapy accessible for those in need.

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Access Amy Malloy's website, video and resources by scanning the QR code.



VIDEO

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a very simple thing: it is the awareness which comes from noticing the present moment, without judgement and with kindness, accepting whatever you observe.

The basis of mindfulness (or mindful awareness) is to cultivate an awareness of the present, of moment-to-moment experiences and thoughts, and to non-judgmentally and kindly pay attention to those experiences as they are.

You may often see mindfulness associated with seated meditation, maybe on a rock, at sunrise, in robes. This is of course a very beautiful way to access the present moment, but it is by no means essential. And also completely impossible for a school to achieve on a daily basis. Unless, maybe, you go to school on a mountain of course.



“ *Live the actual moment. Only this actual moment is life.* ”

Thich Nhat Hanh

Meditation itself is not necessarily mindfulness. You could sit in a robe on a rock at sunset with your eyes closed, and be thinking about your lunch the next day. Mindfulness is about the awareness that comes from consciously focussing on the present moment. Sitting with the eyes closed is just one (really nice and effective) way to access that awareness. It only works if you're actually focussing your attention, of course. Otherwise you're simply thinking about your upcoming lunch.

Other ways to access mindful awareness include mindful walking, mindful eating, yoga and physical exercise. We'll explore this more later on in the guide.

How does mindfulness help us in school?

Anchoring

Every second of every day, in every interaction we have in our lives, we form associations in our mind. During a busy school day, when we are surrounded by lots of people, we are likely to have many more of these interactions. More often than not, we are completely unaware of the associations that have been made in any given moment. We can go along on autopilot, unaware of the thought processes that might be influencing our feelings and sensations and therefore our behaviour on a daily basis.

By anchoring ourselves in the present moment, we become aware of what our thoughts and feelings are doing. Once we are mindful of our experiences, we then have the opportunity to explore our relationship with them. We can react impulsively or we can sit with them, accept them, and ultimately choose how to respond consciously and skilfully to a situation. For children, it develops their brains, which in turn helps them find it easier to calm down and stay calm.

Surfing

Life will always have ups and downs. We will always encounter situations that are both pleasant and unpleasant, in the classroom and in life. Mindfulness helps us explore and change our relationship with thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and external events. Beginning to grow familiar with and shape this relationship early on in life is a wonderful gift, as we will see.

The key thing to notice here is that mindfulness is not about resisting or changing our thoughts and feelings. Rather it is about changing our relationship with them, so that they do not have as much impact on our happiness and in time we can simply surf the ups and downs.

“ You can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf. ”

Jon Kabat-Zin



The science of mindfulness

It changes our brain for the better

Every time we do something with our brains, they make a new connection (a neural synapse forms). The more often we do that same thing, the stronger that pathway becomes. It gets easier for the brain to do the same thing the second, third, fourth time round because it has already made the connections and already knows the way. Just like water finding a way to flow through rocks, gradually the path gets wider until it becomes a stream, then a river. Eventually maybe the water dries out but the path remains. When new water comes along, it provides an easy path for the water to flow down – it doesn't need to forge a new path. At primary school age, fewer pathways have been formed, and it is easier to form new ones as our brains are still developing more basic functions.

The benefits of mindfulness have been observed for thousands of years in ancient Eastern texts. More recently, however, studies have shown that the people who regularly practise mindfulness develop the areas of the brain associated with patience, compassion, focus, concentration and emotional regulation. The earlier in life we start this, the better!

The brain and stress, especially in children

When we feel threatened by something physical, the most primal part of our brain, the amygdala, sets off the alarm signals for our bodies to respond and either run away (flight), stay and defend ourselves (fight) or play dead (freeze). It signals to the hypothalamus to release adrenaline and

cortisol and off we go. This process happens before our logical, conscious mind has even noticed. This part of the brain (the prefrontal cortex) doesn't get a seat at the table – the body takes care of it. This is very useful when facing a tiger. It is less useful for exams. Our brain doesn't detect the difference between physical threat and emotional threat, so will fire off the same alarm signal whether facing a tiger or doing homework.

The more often we get stressed, the more easily our brain detects a threat and goes down the same pathways. So the physical symptoms (racing heart, blank mind, dry mouth) and emotional symptoms (shouting, crying, hitting) will kick in before we have chance to regulate them.

In children, our primal brain is very prominent and we are still learning to regulate these huge emotions. We simply don't have the same level of executive function (the prefrontal cortex, logical part) development to be able to regulate them, nor do we necessarily have the language to explain them to others or ourselves. It's not surprising being at school is challenging, even without the pressure of homework, concentrating in lessons, and making friends.

Those with a regular mindfulness practice have been shown to use a completely different pathway in the brain when they meditate: bypassing the stress triggers, and simply experiencing the senses in the moment. The parts associated with positive feelings, compassion and kindness also grow in strength. And as we've learnt above – if you use it, it grows. Below the age of 10, our brains are the most malleable they'll ever be, so it's a great time to start.

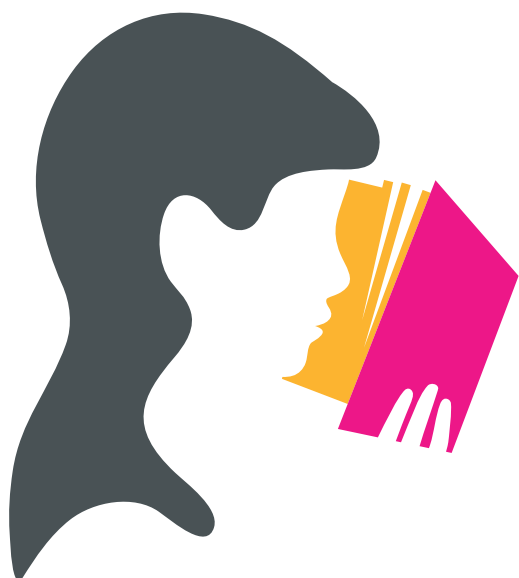
What skills does mindfulness practice teach us?

Let's look at some of the key skills we learn when we practise mindfulness and how they can help us in school.

- Focus and concentration
- Observation without judgement
- Curiosity
- Acceptance and self-compassion

We put all of these ingredients into our mindfulness practice to create a state of mindfulness awareness.

We'll look at them now in a little more detail and learn some basic practices to start building these attitudes.



Focus and concentration

One of the key tenets of mindfulness is to focus our attention on a physical anchor in the present moment. In school, this has been demonstrated to help children concentrate more easily on classroom activities. The anchor most commonly used is the sensation of the breath moving in the body, or maybe the scent of the air going into the nose. It may also be focusing on the sensations in a part of the body, or focusing our gaze or hearing on something around us.

As we learnt above, the more we do something, the better we get at it. Even ten minutes of meditating or mindful focus a day has been demonstrated to improve our concentration. Which makes sense, because we are doing targeted exercises to create brain "strength" in the parts of the brain associated with concentration. In particular, in school children, this kind of regular activity has been demonstrated to calm down disruptive behaviour and improve classroom focus overall.

“Meditation is not evasion; it is a serene encounter with reality.”

Thich Nhat Hanh

Have a go

Count the breaths

This is a really good starter activity.

All of the activities in this guide are designed to be practised anywhere in the school, but this one is particularly suited to the start of class, after break time or when you just need to re-focus your class' attention.

- Sit somewhere comfy. On a chair is fine – you don't need to move.
- Close your eyes or blur your eyes softly.
- Notice how your feet feel against the floor.
- Then focus your attention at the tip of your nose, by the nostrils.
- Count ten breaths going in and out of the nose: 1 in... 1 out. 2 in... 2 out, and so on.
- Whenever you notice your mind has wandered off, gently bring it back and start where you left off.
- Open your eyes and notice to yourself what the experience felt like.
- (As you get used to this exercise, you can practise counting up to 20 breaths, or returning to 1 and starting again over and over again).

“ *Everyone's mind wanders, without doubt, and we always have to start over. Everyone resists or dislikes the thought of or is too tired to meditate at times, and we have to be able to begin again.* ”

Sharon Salzberg



Observation without judgement

The second skill we can learn from mindfulness is how to be aware of the present moment, without judging, criticising or otherwise forming an attachment to it.

An interesting way to understand this concept is to think about how we listen to sounds. A lot of what we think of as a sound is actually the story and label we place on to the sound in our minds. For example – we hear a school bell, and we think “that’s a bell. Break time is over...”. But the sound isn’t a bell – it is simply sound waves at a certain frequency being picked up by the sensory organs in our ears. We associate those sound waves with a bell because we know that is most likely what is producing them. Our previous experience has attached that association. So what we think of as the sound is actually our story about the sound.

The same can be applied to thoughts and physical sensations in our bodies. We think “I feel really tired”. What we can actually feel is a set of sensations that we associate with tiredness – discomfort in our muscles, stinging or heavy eyelids. Those are simply physical sensations which our prior experience has led us to associate with tiredness. This association could lead us off into another rabbit hole of thoughts (“I wish I wasn’t in class – why can’t I be in bed at home? This feels awful”) which may even serve to worsen those sensations.

Mindfulness teaches us to consciously observe our thoughts, feelings, sensations (and any other sensory input) without necessarily applying a label. In time, we often notice that those sensations have lessened when we sit with them and gently encourage our minds away from the rabbit hole

that we might have gone down on autopilot, and back into the present moment. This can help greatly in building resilience to stress and difficult emotions, such as being nervous about a test or tired in class, helping us sit with those experiences rather than panic or impulsively react.

(Please note: There are some situations and psychiatric conditions – including but not exclusive to ADHD, ASD and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, that may require more professional support before embarking on mindfulness activities so it is advisable to seek advice from a medical or therapeutic service for any students about whom you feel concerned.)

“ *Non attachment is not the elimination of desire. It is the spaciousness to allow any quality of mind, any thought or feeling, to arise without closing around it, without eliminating the pure witness of being. It is an active receptivity to life.* ”

Steven Levine

Have a go

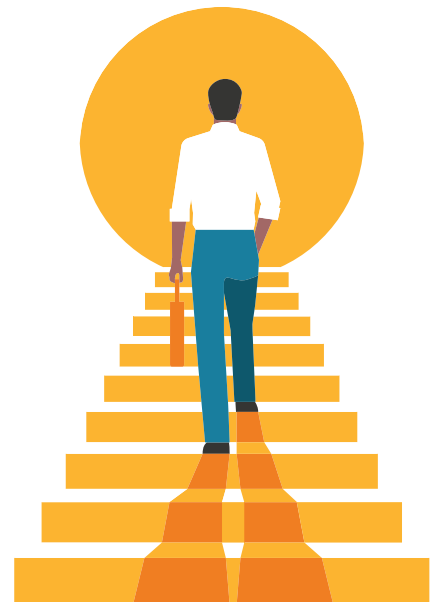
“Head Shoulders Knees & Toes” body scan

This is another really nice starter activity. It can be pleasant to lie down to try it if you have space in your classroom, or it can also work well seated wherever the students are. It can be helpful to try this at the start of a school day or lesson, to encourage students to check in with how they are feeling before they embark on the day. A little chat in the class afterwards about what the students have noticed about themselves can be a gentle way to help students support each other and realise others may have the same difficult feelings.

- Either lie down comfortably or find a seated position where you feel supported.
- Close your eyes if it feels okay or blur your eyes softly.
- Notice how your body feels against the floor.
- Notice and say hello in your mind to any sounds around you.
- Focus your attention on each part of your body in turn, working from the top of the head all the way down to the toes.
- Simply say each body part in your mind and focus your attention there as you say it.
- Watch the physical sensations you notice in each part of the body, without jumping to fix or change them.
- Carry on moving through the body until you reach the toes, noticing without judging.
- Open your eyes gently, and notice how you feel and what the scan felt like.
- If your thoughts wander off at any point, that is absolutely fine. Simply guide them back to wherever you left off as soon as you notice. wandered off, gently bring it back and start where you left off.

“ If you just sit and observe, you will see how restless your mind is. If you try to calm it, it only makes it worse, but over time it does calm, and when it does, there’s room to hear more subtle things – that’s when your intuition starts to blossom and you start to see things more clearly and be in the present more.”

Steve Jobs



Curiosity

The third essential component of mindfulness practice is to foster a sense of curiosity. Try this for a moment: look up at your surroundings with the intention of noticing something you've not noticed before. It might be a poster on the classroom wall, or a detail on the back of a chair. When you spot something, focus on it for a moment, explore it. In that moment, our brains naturally produce a little spark of interest, be it conscious or unconscious.

Mindfulness encourages us to stop, look up and examine our surroundings and our thought processes with that little spark of curiosity.

Children are naturally curious: this is how they learn and develop, by being curious about their surroundings and scrutinising adults' every move. At some point along the way into adulthood, we lose this curiosity, particularly with regards to our minds and bodies. They simply need a safe, familiar space in which to allow that curiosity to grow, and the support of peers and adult carers/teachers to share what they learn from that curiosity.

In adults, the brain's processes are so familiar we have stopped noticing them (and they get away with behaving badly under the surface sometimes). In children, their minds are developing rapidly and curiosity can help them notice what is happening in their thoughts and feelings without feeling defined by it.

Cultivating curiosity in a school setting has been shown to encourage greater interest in lesson content and compassion for classmates.

Have a go

Curiosity exercise

Try this activity at a quiet point in the class, perhaps when students are feeling tired or low in energy. Try bringing in a selection of objects for students to look at, or ask them to choose something from around the classroom for a partner to look at.

- Sit quietly with a familiar everyday object in front of you (e.g. a pen or piece of fruit). Imagine you've never seen it before.
- First explore it with your eyes. Turn it over and watch how the light catches it, the different colours etc.
- Next, close your eyes or look softly away, and explore how it feels in your hands.
- Then maybe explore what it smells like or sounds like if you shake it up and down.
- Notice what you have learnt and how curiosity felt.



Acceptance & compassion

These last two attitudes, acceptance and compassion, are the secret sauce of mindful awareness. The greatest kindness we can offer ourselves and others is acceptance. When we observe the present moment, it can be easy to want to fix something if it isn't particularly pleasant or comfortable. This fix may be reacting impulsively or setting off our brain's discrepancy monitor to try and not feel a particularly uncomfortable feeling. Mindfulness practice teaches us not only to be aware of the present moment but to accept what we find there, with kindness towards ourselves and others. It's okay to feel happy, it's ok to feel sad or stressed. Equally, it's ok for others to feel the way they feel.

Think of a toddler trying to climb some stairs when they shouldn't. The parent may try to stop them, in which case the toddler will only resist and desire to climb them more. If the parent accepts the situation and lets the toddler go for a few moments, and then asks them to come, the child is more likely to acquiesce because they have got their own way.

Our minds are the same: if we resist something uncomfortable or push it away, we create friction and want to think it even more. If we accept discomfort being there, we reduce the friction and in time, more often than not, the discomfort may reduce or dissipate of its own accord.

In primary school, acceptance and compassion skills teach our students that they can feel what they feel and it's okay, as they learn to regulate their emotions. It also helps develop empathy for their classmates, and can foster healthy self-esteem by highlighting that when a classmate is quiet or cross with them, it doesn't necessarily mean they have done something wrong. It could simply be that classmate feeling sad or angry about something else, and we can be kind to them regardless and simply wait for it to pass.

Have a go

Acceptance meditation

This exercise is really nice to practice with students when they are in a quiet time in the day, to allow them to build the skills for later in life when school may get a little more pressurised with exams. If they've developed the brain habit already, it will make stress and discomfort much easier to handle when they get older.

NOTE: If you know a child has experienced trauma or abuse, seek advice from their therapeutic or medical professional before trying this exercise with them, in case a focus on discomfort in the body may activate further traumatic response. With all students, make it very clear that they can open their eyes, or take a walk, whenever they like. It is important not to force any child to continue with any practice with which they don't feel comfortable, for whatever reason.

- Sit or lie quietly and close your eyes (or take a soft gaze).
- Focus on the flow of your breath in and out of the body.
- Scan down your body in your mind from the top of the head to the toes. Notice any pockets of tension or discomfort.
- Notice your response to the discomfort. See what happens if you sit with it and simply observe the sensation with curiosity.
- Try repeating "Whatever this is, it's okay" in your mind. See what happens. Keep breathing and see what happens to the sensation.

Setting up space for mindfulness in your school

The wonderful news is you do not need to sit on a mountain at sunset to meditate. Nor do you need a dedicated studio, or even any special equipment.

When we talk about space, it can be helpful to think of it just as much in terms of creating a safe, calm atmosphere to an actual physical space in a room. If students (and staff) feel secure and encouraged to try something new, embedded in the culture of the school and the attitude of the staff around them, then they are far more likely to give it a go, and to share their enjoyment of it with their parents and carers.

Meditation and mindfulness practice are possible almost anywhere you find yourself. It may be taking a moment to focus and breathe at desks, encouraging mindful walking in the corridors, or having a dedicated break-out space.

As with any regular practice, routine and consistency (at least for the first few weeks) can really help embed the habit for lasting benefits.



Have a go

Space options to try

- Move desks aside after lunch and invite students to sit in a circle on the floor. Allow the energy of the room to settle naturally and encourage quiet. Students may be excitable at first, but if the routine becomes consistent they will soon learn what is expected during this time.
- 5-10 minutes of breathing sitting at desks in the classroom, either at registration, start of a lesson or after lunch.
- A dedicated corner of the classroom if you have the space with a circle of chairs or everyday cushions. Students can use the space as a break-out or led sessions could be held in there each day.

“Meditation is to be aware of every thought and of every feeling, never to say it is right or wrong but just to watch it and move with it.”

Jiddu Krishnamurti

Meeting objections and use of language

The term “mindfulness” is one we hear a lot, particularly since the term was brought over to the West and translated. The concept originally comes from Buddhist teachings in the term “sati” which can be defined as “to maintain awareness of reality, whereby the true nature of phenomena can be seen”. It is a term linked to both memory and holding something in conscious awareness. However what is most important to know here is that first, mindfulness is not a religious concept – it is a secular wellbeing practice originally referred to in ancient philosophical texts, from which further secular texts and religious texts alike have branched out independently. Secondly, as language teachers, we know that any time we attempt to translate or define a concept into another language, we limit or reduce it in some way from its original sense.

This definition can then become a benchmark against which to measure our experiences of that concept. But, in those original texts, the concept of “sati” was something which a) does not have a direct translation in English and b) was based on an attempt to put into words a personal reflective experience.

I invite you to simply try mindfulness practices with your students and for yourselves as teachers. Encourage students to reflect on their own experiences, keep notes or talk about it together in class, and in doing so find their own experience, not one defined by someone else (or you) and apply the language they feel expresses it best.

“ *The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existence. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvellous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery each day.* ”

Albert Einstein

The same can be applied to explaining the concept to parents and school leadership, remembering that it is not a religious practice – it is secular. Experience alone is the best way to learn the benefits for our own and our students’ mental health.

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