**FREE MINDFULNESS COURSE**

**Session 1 Mindfulness – the importance of living in the moment**

**Introduction**

Our youngest son is called Darragh. At the time of writing, Darragh is four years old; he lives in the moment. He scampers from one thing to another with hardly a thought about what he’s been doing or what he’s going to do next. All he cares about is what’s happening right now. He is happy in himself, in the present. His older brother is Oisín, a wonderful, sensitive boy. Oisín sometimes worries about going to football practice. Normal stuff for a six-year-old. His thinking is in the future, which creates little worries for him. He anticipates things. He has a memory of past anxieties. When he gets to practice – with our encouragement – he loves it. When he lives in the present, his worries dissolve.

Take Jennifer. Jennifer is in her late fifties, and she would tell you herself she’s ‘out-the-door busy’. She has three adult children: Chloe in Dubai, Dylan in London and the youngest, Aoife, at home. ‘I’ve got to get a dress for the christening, renew my health insurance, pay the property tax, go to the gym, do the laundry when I get home, ring Chloe, drop Dylan to the airport . . .’

Jennifer is very good at ‘human doing’, but she struggles at ‘human being’. Four years ago, Jennifer lost her husband. Perhaps if she stopped for a while, she’d start to think about how much she misses him and the two children, who live so far away. Sometimes ‘doing’ is easier than ‘being’. But Jennifer isn’t quite being her real self by filling her time with busyness. Jennifer will have a richer life and a deeper connection with herself, her children and her friends if she makes space for simply being in the moment.

Does Jennifer remind you of anybody? Is your head full of lists? How do you divide your time between ‘doing’ and ‘being’? Often in our adult lives we spend too much time in the past and too much time in the future, leaving too little time for the present. The truth is that when you live in the present, rather than regretting the past or worrying about the future, you are more your real self.

**Mindfulness**

60 Minutes Special on Mindfulness

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KDxIBQT7F54

Mindfulness is the practice of bringing your awareness and attention into the present moment. Mindfulness takes us from the ‘doing’ mode, where we are trapped on auto-pilot, into the ‘being’ mode. When mindful, you work from the standpoint of compassion, curiosity and acceptance towards yourself and your experiences.

Mindfulness offers many ways to deepen your awareness, insights that can anchor you in the present and help you to keep things in perspective. It offers tools you can use in your daily life. While mindfulness is rooted in the meditation and philosophical practices of the East, it has a central role in the twenty-first-century West. Using the techniques pioneered by Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn, I – along with many other psychologists and therapists around the world –  have found mindfulness to be incredibly helpful to clients with all kinds of issues – stress, emotional eating, physical illness, anxiety.

There is increasing evidence to demonstrate its effectiveness in treating depression and, importantly, in preventing relapse. In addition, mindfulness boosts energy levels and the performance of the immune system, while enhancing people’s general emotional well-being. When mindful, you are aware of what you are doing while you are doing it. Mindfulness increases your awareness of your thoughts, feelings and actions. In effect mindfulness is a relationship within yourself, and between you and others. Like any new skill, it takes effort and commitment to master mindfulness. Yet – and this is going to sound contradictory –  despite the techniques and tips described here, mindfulness isn’t actually something you do. Rather it is about letting go of doing.

It’s about simply being as you are. Being your real self – authentic, compassionate and confident.

However, the techniques and tips will hopefully bring you to a stage where simply being is as automatic to you as breathing.

**Session 2 Meditation – The heart of Mindfulness**

**Guided Breathing Exercise** [**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awc8MLSpjlQ**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=awc8MLSpjlQ)

Central to mindfulness is the practice of meditation. Meditation is about paying attention to, and focusing on, certain areas, such as your breath, or one of your senses, or your body, or your thoughts, or your emotions. Mindfulness and meditation take practice. There is no easy way. Some people choose to take 20 minutes out of the day to practise and deepen their mindfulness. Others concentrate on being mindful while cooking, walking, talking to a friend, eating – anything really. And, like any skill – swimming, riding a bike, dancing, playing golf or baking – the more you do it, the better you become. Courses are a great way to start.

**Mindfulness and thoughts**

We can’t control the thoughts that keep pouring into our minds. Sometimes the stream of thought is like a non-stop, never-ending loop of information and judgements and plans and trivia – a bit like the headlines that run across the bottom of the screens on the 24-hour news channels. But, when you think of it, you are actually aware of your thoughts. Just as you might be aware of a pain in your big toe or an itchy ear. So here’s a startling truth: You are not your thoughts. Your thoughts are just thoughts. They are not facts. And you are simply an observer of your thoughts. When truly mindful, you do not attach meaning to thoughts. Nor do you react to them. You just observe them and accept them without judgement. You do not get carried away. And you do not get snared by negative thinking or swamped by the negative feelings that spring from it. Because you are not your thoughts. Often I imagine mindfulness at its most advanced as being like the scene in the movie The Matrix, in which the Keanu Reeves character gets to such a powerful level of awareness and being-in-the-moment that he is able to dodge a hail of bullets. In a way these bullets represent the constant barrage of negative thoughts that can afflict you, particularly if you suffer from depression or are in a bad place in your life. Imagine that you can be aware of these thoughts but not overwhelmed by them. As an observer of your thoughts, you can choose to dismiss them. This is so liberating. It gives you the freedom and space needed to become your real self.

**Mindful breathing**

Breathing is at the heart of mindfulness. It gives you the opportunity to ‘tune in’ to your body, mind and heart. Try this two-part exercise for 3 minutes.

• First, sit up straight. • Awareness. Reflect on the following questions. What emotions am I aware of at the moment? Where am I feeling these emotions? Scan your body. What sensations are you aware of at this moment? Just accept them. What thoughts are you aware of? You are an observer of your thoughts. • Breathing. Bring your attention to your breathing. Notice your in-breath and your out-breath. You don’t need to change your breathing; just become mindful of it. If your mind is wandering, gently guide your attention back to your breath. Be grateful and appreciate your breathing.

**A Five Minute Mindful Meditation**

[**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGFog-OuFDM**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wGFog-OuFDM)

**Session 3 Mindfulness and feelings**

Inside a space of compassion and curiosity and increased awareness, you can observe your emotions, in just the same way that you can observe your thoughts. And that leads to another startling realization:

**You are not your emotions.**

There is a significant difference between you and your emotions, and the practice of mindfulness can help you recognize the difference between the two. You are an observer. In the next few chapters we will look at changing your thinking in such a way as to recalibrate your emotions. Working on your thoughts in this way is a hugely valuable method of dealing with negative emotions. However, in mindfulness you are invited both to acknowledge and to give mindful attention to your feelings, rather than avoiding them or reacting to them. This is a powerful technique that is capable of reducing the strength and intensity of painful emotions. For example, when you experience a strong feeling, such as stress, sadness, anger or sadness, try this exercise:

• Purposefully sense the emotion. Be aware of the emotion and its effects from a stance of gentle curiosity. Give yourself just enough space to learn from the emotion. Don’t run away from it. • Feel the emotion. Open up to the emotion with compassion, kindness and acceptance. Scan your body and notice where this feeling resides within it. Breathe into that part of your body. Allow the feeling to be as it is. Be with the experience. Don’t fight it. And don’t run away. • Be the observer and step back from the feeling. Notice your awareness of the emotion without becoming the emotion itself. As you observe, notice the space between you and the feeling. You are separate from it. Imagine yourself standing by a riverbank. As you watch the water pass by, you recognize that you are not the river itself. Every so often you may feel as if you are been pulled into the water (feeling), but as soon as you notice you remember that you are the observer and simply step back from the bank. • Breathe. Bring your attention to your breath. Notice your in-breath and your out-breath. Notice how each one is unique and supports your health and well-being.

**Mindful Meditation**

**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5uaDoOCMb4**

**Mindful walking**

**https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X7lO4rF9qrc**

Advanced technology has created robots that walk. However, I have never seen a robot that moves with the fluidity, agility and grace of a woman or a man. Have a go at mindful walking. It’s an excellent way of staying in the moment and of letting go of your anxieties and worries. Try going to the garden, park, forest, river walk, lake or seaside. Become aware of your breath. Notice how many steps you take on your in-breath during this time. Let’s say it’s four steps. Repeat in your mind: ‘In . . . in . . . in . . . in.’ And on your out-breath, if it’s, say, three steps, repeat: ‘Out . . . out  . . . out.’ This helps you to become aware of your breathing. Don’t try to control your breathing. Just go along with what happens naturally. When you see something beautiful – such as a flower or ducklings on the water or children playing – stop and look at the scene. Notice that life exists in the present moment.

**Mindful eating**

You eat your breakfast running out the door. You have your lunch in the car or by the computer. You have your dinner in front of the TV. You eat because you are upset. Sound familiar? Mindless eating leads to overeating and results in unhealthy choices about what you eat and how you eat. Mindful eating is about slowing down. Look, feel, smell, chew, concentrate on the taste of the food and the speed at which you are eating. Before eating your next mouthful, lay down your knife and fork and pause for a few seconds. Pay attention to the here and now.

Session 4

**Mindful loving kindness**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7i1SyFMu2Tc>

Mindfulness is about being compassionate and loving to ourselves. Find a place where you feel secure, safe and warm. Notice your in-breath and your out-breath. Allow phrases to come from your heart about the things that you deserve, for example: ‘May I have compassion’, ‘May I be healthy’, ‘May I be accepting’, ‘May I be happy’, ‘May I be of sound body and mind’, ‘May I thrive’. Repeat the phrases over and over again, until they permeate your being. Allow your heartfelt expression to generate loving kindness towards yourself. If this doesn’t happen, don’t worry: your intentions are more important than the feelings. Now you can bring your mind to someone you care about. Picture that person and then with your good intention say: ‘May you have compassion’, ‘May you be healthy’, ‘May you be accepting’, ‘May you be happy’, ‘May you be of sound body and mind’, ‘May you thrive’. This can be a very healing exercise. Allow yourself to practise it slowly, and with compassion. Of course there are people in your life towards whom you don’t feel particularly loving or kindly. Perhaps they’ve hurt you and you find it hard to get past that. Realistically you’re not going to feel very forgiving towards people you think have done you wrong. If you do feel like this, may I reframe the situation for you? I often reflect on this thought and I share it with clients: forgiving and letting go is not something we do for others; it is something we do for ourselves in order to get well and to move on with our lives. Holding on to anger is a toxic habit. But forgiveness may take time. Being compassionate with yourself will allow forgiveness to come in. Remember that repeating over and over the story of the pain someone caused you or the wrong they did you only serves to hurt you more. Become an observer and try to let go of that particular story.

**Gratitude**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCUTv6k1FwY>

The old advice to ‘count your blessings’ is well founded. Gratitude is a powerful emotion, and studies have shown it to be very strongly linked to our well-being. It’s also crucial to mindfulness, since, by definition, when you are grateful you are mindful: you are thinking about what’s good in your life right now, not about what you didn’t get or don’t yet have or will never have. When grateful, we are mindful, because we are open to possibilities, positivity and optimism. Imagine being grateful as similar to the process of developing a muscle: the more you use it, the stronger it becomes. To strengthen your gratitude-muscle, try this:

• Before going to sleep, think about three good things that you are grateful for today. This is a lovely exercise to do with children. • Say thank you regularly and genuinely. • Do something to say thanks: a handwritten card, make someone a cuppa, mow the grass. • Be grateful for small things: friendships, nature, flowers, fresh air, water . . . • Now think of something you are not so grateful for – for example, having to go to work. Take 2 minutes to write down all the positive things about your job. You might include the salary, the friendships, the routine, the holidays it pays for, etc. Overcome your natural resistance to your attitude towards work.

Commit to doing this each day for a week, focusing on a different area of your life every time. Eventually you will become becoming your real self grateful for a wide variety of things. Indeed, some people find it so enriching to keep a record of what they’re grateful for that they permanently make it a part of their daily routine. Flexing your gratitude-muscle might well be one of the nicest and most rewarding things you can do on your way to becoming your real self!