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Mindfulness for Academic Success – a brief guide



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Welcome- thanks for your interest in Mindfulness for Academic Success!

I'm really pleased you are interested in how mindfulness can assist you to study more effectively, with greater enjoyment, less stress and less procrastination.

My name's Maureen and I first started using Mindfulness and yogic techniques for stress management when I was a student in the 90's. I am now an accredited mental health social worker and a qualified yoga and mindfulness teacher and have been at the Flinders Counselling Service since 2016.

For the past few years, along with my colleagues, I have been teaching mindfulness at Flinders with individual students, mindful yoga classes and through the Mindfulness for Academic Success program. This program was developed by Richard Chambers and Craig Hassed from Monash University and teaches a range of mindfulness skills in an applied experiential setting over 5 weeks. Through practice, reflection and discussion, many students have been able to find mindfulness techniques that suit their lives, are easy to apply and provide measurable study benefits. I want to sincerely thank Monash University for their permission to continue to use and adapt the Mindfulness for Academic Success program for the Flinders university student population.

This guide outlines some of the key concepts of this interactive program and is offered to assist you to reflect and document your own experiments with mindfulness outside of the formal course setting. Much of the information in this guide is adapted from this program, and from books written by the programs' authors: Craig Hassed and Richard Chambers.

Of course, you are welcome to sign up to the next 5-week Mindfulness for Academic Success course when it is next run, or to attend the meditation sessions at OASIS, or the Mindful Yoga, or to use some of the resources listed at the end of this guide to help you develop your mindfulness muscle.

However you practice – best wishes with the journey and all the best with your studies!

Warm regards,

Maureen Germein

Counsellor, and Mindfulness for Academic Success and
Mindful Yoga program facilitator



Why Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is about paying attention, on purpose to the here and now, so that we can fully engage with whatever is happening around us. It invites us to train our attention to be in the present moment, rather than worrying about the future or dwelling on the past.

There are so many benefits of mindfulness in our everyday lives. Mindfulness can:

- Improve our short-term memory and processing speed, so we can remember and recall what we learn
- Improve ability to process information quickly and accurately, so we can understand what it is we are learning more easily.
- Increase the thickness of brain regions involved in self-awareness and sensory processing

Students who have previously done the Mindfulness for Academic Success Course have told us they experience a range of benefits:

“I experience less anxiety in the morning and less stress related to emails and supervisory feedback, I’m less reactive”

“I’m more aware of my feelings, I learnt many new strengths to deal with stress and procrastination”

“I’m more able to get to work and notice/be aware of stress responses and default mode”

“I am more mindful of myself, not just others and my surroundings. I am trying to be less judging and critical of myself and my thoughts. I try to acknowledge them and put them aside.”

“I feel a sense of calm approaching study. I am not panicked and overwhelmed. I also am sleeping better and have a better schedule daily work/sleep/study.

Being clear about why you are practicing mindfulness can help us develop a habit and routine of bringing Mindfulness more into our lives.

Reflection:

What are your reasons to practice Mindfulness?

What mindfulness isn't

We all have periods of walking into a room and putting down our car keys, or phone and then almost instantly forgetting where they are. Or driving to a place only to not remember the journey. Or to be listening to a lecture, or our parents or partner or children talking and not actually hearing a word that was said.

These moments are when our brain has the default mode network activated. Not being mindful is not bad, its just a different way of operation for our brain. However, if we spend a lot of time on auto pilot this can be accompanied by mental chatter – typically worry about the future, or dwelling on the past. This type of rumination is characterized by many judgements and criticisms. Often these types of thinking patterns can trigger the amygdala – our fear centre of the brain which can trigger our flight/fight/freeze response. This increases stress hormones, and states of anxiety or depression.

When we are not paying attention, we are more likely to get caught up in the stories about a situation and to react from a place of stress, rather than respond from a place of curiosity and openness.

When we start out with mindfulness practice, often what happens is we start to notice just how much time we spend in default mode- on auto pilot. We might notice that we get caught up in stories about ourselves that are critical which then impact on our ability to study. Or we might notice how easily we get distracted when we are trying to write an assignment.

Reflection:

When have you experienced Default Mode?

Knowing that we are in default mode is a good thing – as often we are not aware of it. Becoming aware of our automatic patterns gives us an opportunity to make a choice about how and where we place our attention.

What is it then?

There are many definitions of mindfulness. Mindfulness is both the practice and what happens when we remember to pay attention to the present moment.

Often mindfulness is how we experience things – being in the present moment requires us to use our senses- the sense of sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell, as well our sense of interoceptive awareness – how our body feels from the inside and our sense of proprioception- where we are in space and time.

Often it is easy to experience being in the present moment when things are pleasant – watching a beautiful sunset, being absorbed in playing sport, or a musical instrument, or playing with children.

It is much more challenging though, to be present when things are difficult or unpleasant, such as an exam, or a complicated assignment. This is when we need to make a deliberate choice to pay attention and to be mindful.

Mindfulness includes three vital ingredients:

- Choosing to pay attention
- Awareness of the present moment, and
- A nonjudgmental, kind attitude

Mindfulness then, is paying attention to the present moment, with intention, and with a sense of openness and curiosity about that present moment.



MINDFULNESS DEFINITIONS

“To remember to pay attention with care and discernment”

-Bhikkhu Bodhi

“The awareness that develops when paying attention on purpose in the present moment and non-judgementally”

-John Kabat-Sinn

“Paying attention with flexibility, openness and curiosity”

-Russ Harris

Words of caution

Mindfulness is an enormously beneficial practice, however occasionally there may be adverse effects. This is more common for people currently going through very stressful life events, or those with mental health conditions such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or illnesses involving psychotic states.

If you identify with any of these conditions or situations, we suggest that you consult with your usual health practitioner prior to starting formal Mindfulness practices to discuss its suitability, and also ensure that you have professional supports in place while you are learning these practices (e.g. psychologist, social worker, counsellor, doctor).



Informal mindfulness

Developing the habit of mindfulness means making an intention to become more aware of our senses in each moment of our lives. It is through the senses that we experience the present moment.

Sometimes, trying to add another thing to our busy lives is just too hard. Luckily, we can bring our attention to any task to build the mindfulness muscle in our brain. When we use informal mindfulness, we are choosing to pay attention to one or more of our senses, such as the taste of toothpaste when we brush our teeth, or the feelings of warmth on our hands when we wash the dishes.

Here are some suggestions on how you can practice everyday mindfulness:

- Notice the feel of your feet on the ground when you first get out of bed.
- Eat breakfast mindfully.
- Notice which way you put on your shoes – left or right first. Take them off in the opposite order at the end of the day.
- Mindfully brush your teeth. Notice the smell and taste of the toothpaste and the feel of the brush in your mouth.
- Take a few moments to notice tension in your body during the day, and deliberately relax your shoulders, neck or jaw.
- Take three breaths in the afternoon where you follow the flow of the breath in and out of the body. If three is too many, take one.
- Notice the autumn colours as you walk to your car or bus. What are the different shades of orange and yellow you can find?
- Take a mindful shower, absorb yourself in the flow of the water with all the senses
- Notice the smells of the garbage when you empty a bin – remember we need to be mindful of unpleasant as well as pleasant experiences!

Using mindfulness through the day is a lot like adding punctuation to a page of writing. Sure, our brain can make sense of a book with no full stops or commas, but it needs to work harder.

Punctuation helps our brain make sense of what we are reading. In much the same way, mindfulness punctuated through our day can help our brain make sense of what we are perceiving – noticing when we are caught up in our imagination or worry. This helps us to be able to choose more how we respond, rather than reacting out of habit.

Formal mindful practices

Formal practice invites us to set aside a specific time in our day to focus on the present moment—this could be the sensations in your body, the feeling of your breath, or the sounds around you. In a formal practice we are invited to set an intention for our focus, and to return our attention back to that focal point anytime we notice that our mind has wandered.

You can use a guided audio practice, or practice without a guide. You can use walking, standing, sitting, or lying practices – there really are so many formal practices to choose from.

It is important to remember that our minds will wander – that’s what minds do.

Mindfulness practices have been shown to activate areas of the brain involved in executive functioning – this is the part of the brain responsible for thinking and reasoning, cognitive flexibility, planning, problem solving, working memory, and focusing and paying attention – all great things for study.

Hassed and Chambers, in their book, ‘Mindful learning’, sight a range of studies, including one of tertiary students given a brief mindfulness meditation practice prior to a lecture. This research showed that even a brief formal mindfulness practice increased students’ retention of information of the lecture content.

We know that the brain continues to change in response to our experiences. Using formal mindfulness practices has been shown to make changes to the brain. MRI scans conducted after 8 weeks of mindfulness practice have shown that the amygdala – the part of the brain responsible for fear and stress starts to shrink, and the pre frontal cortex, which includes executive functioning, as well as the parts of the brain responsible for self-awareness, impulse control and decision making- becomes thicker.

The moment of mindfulness is the moment we notice that our mind has wandered, and we choose to redirect it on our point of focus – with kindness.

The process is a bit like teaching a puppy to sit – we know that the puppy will wander off, and we calmly and firmly encourage it back, again and again. any practice will have an impact. As little as 10 minutes a day can have significant benefits

Short practices during the day, as well as bringing increased mindfulness to everyday activities, helps train the habit of mindfulness.



Mindfulness Practice: Record Form

To support you with your practice, you might want to use a record sheet to record your daily practice. Recording what you notice in your formal mindfulness practice can help us to establish the practice as well as increases our awareness of what gets in the way, and what supports our practice.

Remember to be non-judgmental in your recordings and remove labels of good/bad and right/wrong.

Day/date	Meditation	Inquiry
Example	<i>Practiced 5 minutes in morning. Attention was scattered, found it difficult to concentrate. 5 minutes at night. It was easier to get to sleep.</i>	<i>Noticing how often on automatic pilot us paying attention. Shocked at how often I am not paying attention!!</i>
Day 1		
Day 2		
Day 3		
Day 4		
Day 5		
Day 6		
Day 7		

Using Mindfulness tools for study

A woodcutter was once asked:

“What would you do if you had just five minutes to chop down a tree?”

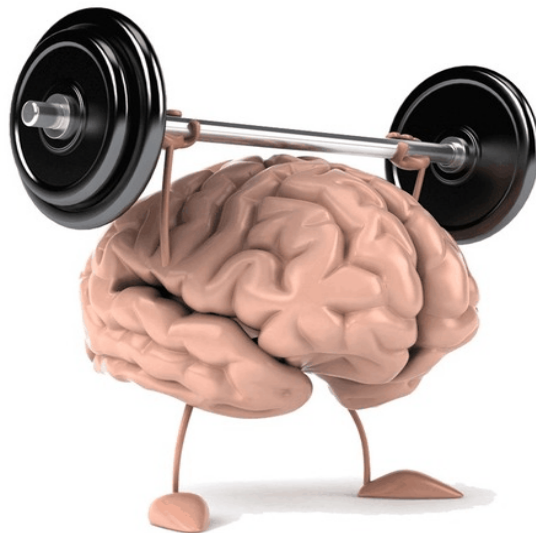
He answered:

“I would spend the first two and a half minutes sharpening my axe.”

Mindfulness practices are like sharpening our axe for study. When we choose to spend time on purpose, paying attention to the present moment, the part of our brain that supports our study is strengthened. The more we choose to practice mindfulness, the more quickly we can notice when the mind wanders, and we can decide to bring it back to what we want it to focus on – such as our next assignment, or the lecture we are listening to.

When we are focused and paying attention, we learn more efficiently and function at our best. We can make better decisions about where to focus our attention. Mindfulness is the tool that sharpens our ability to pay attention for sustained periods of time.

There are several costs to not being mindful – We might waste time by having to read the same paragraph over and over and not really absorbing its meaning. We might get stuck in unhelpful thinking patterns- “I don’t get this” -which can stop us from accessing mental flexibility to persevere with more challenging tasks. This then might increase our stress and frustration as students, and even lead to an increase in anxiety and depression and helplessness.



Using mindfulness for studies – is an exercise in applied mindfulness. Richard Chambers and Craig Hassed describe applied mindfulness as **“doing things with the intention of being fully present while doing them”**

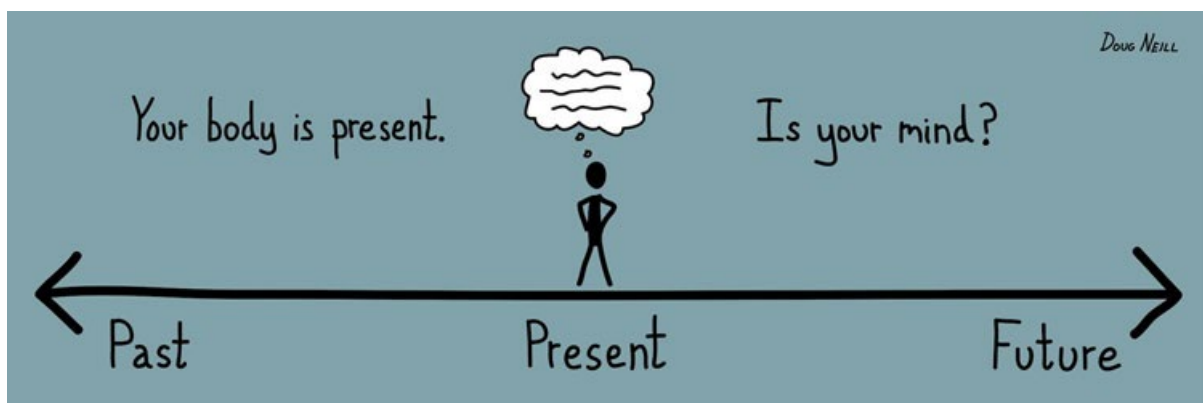
In the 5-week Mindfulness for Academic Success program, week three is devoted to choosing to stay focused. The mindfulness exercises offered involve starting to notice not just that the mind wanders – but where the mind wanders – what thoughts are helpful and what thoughts are unhelpful? What thoughts hook you into them and keep you away from the present moment, and what thoughts might assist you to come back to the task you were originally wanting to focus on?

We simulate a study task by offering a sudoku, find a word or written comprehensive task for people to choose – it is always useful to notice why you might choose a certain task. When doing this task, we invite people to use the tasks as their object of attention – just like we might use the breath or sounds in a formal mindfulness practice. While undertaking the task – students are encouraged to notice when and where the mind wanders – to notice what distractions arise. In noticing and acknowledging the distractions this makes it so much easier to fully let go of them and turn our attention back towards our chosen task. This mindfulness practice normalises that distractions are part of a common human experience.

Perhaps keeping a pad next to you while you study to make a note of your distractions – and then returning your attention back towards your study tasks may be helpful for your studies?

Of course, when we start to notice distractions, we start to notice how often we get distracted by things. Using applied mindfulness encourages us to start doing one thing at a time- uni-tasking, rather than multi-tasking. This then encourages us to use applied mindfulness to other areas of our life – such as using technology or social media mindfully. This can then help us reduce procrastination, and further increase our satisfaction with our studies.

A common question is often about the need to plan the future and recall the past to study effectively – and how do we do this if we are always in the present moment? It is useful to remember that **mindfulness can be applied to any activity** – including planning for the future or recollecting the past. Mindfulness is about where we are choosing to focus our attention in that moment.



Mindfulness practice: Applied mindfulness to a task

Use this exercise as an opportunity to practice mindful attention.

Set a timer for 5 minutes (or longer if you wish). Each row, column, and 3x3 box (outlined in bold) must have the numbers 1 to 9. Any time you notice that your mind has wandered, briefly make a record of it below, then gently bring your attention back to task.

		2		3				
3		6	2	8			1	
7			4	5	6		3	
		1	6	7	4			2
		5					3	
2			3	9	5	8		
	7		1	4	3			8
	8			2	9	1		7
				6		5		

Place a tick, or a mark below anytime you find your attention wandering off while completing this task. If you notice the *actual thoughts* write them down briefly and then redirect your attention back towards the task.

After you have finished, reflect on where your mind wandered – was it perhaps to a helpful thought? And how easy was it to bring your attention back? Did whether you find this type of activity enjoyable or not influence what happened do you think?

Mindfulness and Self compassion

Practicing mindfulness can lead to greater compassion for ourselves and others. Increasing our sense of compassion for self and others can have the benefit of reducing our threat responses, which helps reduce stress. The release of oxytocin through compassion practices can increase our cognitive flexibility – our ability to see things from different points of view.

Cultivating self-compassion can be challenging, especially when our habitual way of talking to ourselves includes a lot of judgements, and harsh criticisms. Practicing mindfulness involves taking notice of the content of our thoughts and gives us more options to choose how we speak to ourselves. Often when we start to notice our thoughts, we become increasingly aware of how critical and harsh we can be towards ourselves – we can then judge ourselves for being judgmental!

We often believe that being critical will be motivating and help us achieve our goals, but what research has found is that people who are self-critical tend to procrastinate more and tend to give up more easily when faced with setbacks or failures (Powers et al, 2011).

Self-compassion is like treating ourselves like our own best friend. Using kind and encouraging words, and a soothing tone and touch can be incorporated into mindfulness practice and increases the flow of oxytocin.

Like any mindfulness practice, compassion-based practices can be challenging. Compassion can be practiced formally, or more informally. We end our 5-week Mindfulness for Academic Success with practices that cultivate compassion for ourselves and others.

The practice on the following page is one example of a brief mindful self-compassion practice.



Mindfulness practice-: Self compassion break

This brief meditation can be used when confronted by a setback or failure. You may want to offer yourself soothing mindful touch while you do this by being aware of where you place your hands – maybe holding them in your lap or touching them to your belly or chest.

Talk yourself through the following three steps:

Step 1. “This is a moment of suffering”

Acknowledging a moment of stress is a type of mindfulness. If you are able, you may like to name the emotions present – *“this is what it feels like when I feel stressed/angry/overwhelmed...”*

Other options include: *“This hurts”*; *“Ouch”*; *“This is stress”*

Step 2. “Suffering is a part of life”

It can be useful to connect to our common humanity. Remind yourself that other people have also had challenges in their lives. You are not broken or damaged because you are struggling. Tell yourself one of the following:

“Other people feel this way”

“I’m not alone”

“We all struggle in our lives”

Step 3. “May I be kind to myself”

Offer yourself kindness in this moment. Ask yourself *“What do I need to hear right now to express kindness to myself?”* Is there a word you need for this such as compassion, acceptance, forgiveness, strength or patience.

It might also be helpful to ask what do I need to do in this moment – e.g. have a glass of water, or sit in the sunshine or some other small action of kindness towards yourself.

It can be useful to practice this meditation first with little setbacks (e.g. stuck in traffic) or by calling previous setbacks to mind. As the meditation becomes more automatic, you may find it easier to practice during more upsetting situations.

Where to for more info?

Thanks for dipping into the many ways mindfulness can be used to support your studies. I hope this encourages you to experiment with mindfulness practices, join us in the next Mindfulness for Academic Success Course or to do more of your own research into the many benefits and practices of Mindfulness.

There is a wealth of information on Mindfulness out there – Below is a short list of some of the resources where you can get further information.

Apps

<https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>

<https://www.headspace.com/mindfulness>

<https://www.abc.net.au/radio/programs/mindfully/>

<https://insighttimer.com/>

Books

Hassed C and Chambers R, (2014) Mindful Learning, Exisle Publishing

Huxter M (2016) Healing the heart and mind with mindfulness Routledge

On Campus

Oasis wellbeing programs : <https://oasis.flinders.edu.au/programs-events/>

TV shows

The Science of Meditation - can it really change you?

<https://www.abc.net.au/catalyst/meditation/11016548>

Videos

A mindful choice <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Byk3YkhKNsl>

May I be happy <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IExJOaSBEqE>

The power of meditation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QYOiRsKAyg>

The art of mindful living <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6M6Npkqxr8>

Thich Nhat Hanh-the art of mindful living <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p6M6Npkqxr8>

Walk with me <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u9V4cKTffLU>

Just breathe <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVA2N6tX2cg>

The power of meditation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7QYOiRsKAyg>

Free the mind <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GkTQemr26xg>

Websites

<https://self-compassion.org/>

<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/mindfulness-wellbeing-performance>

Acknowledgements

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Reflection:

How will I use mindfulness to help with my studies?

A series of 18 horizontal dashed lines providing space for writing a response to the reflection question.