

How mindfulness helps mental wellbeing

Becoming more aware of the present moment can help us enjoy the world around us more and understand ourselves better.

When we become more aware of the present moment, we begin to experience afresh things that we have been taking for granted.

"Mindfulness also allows us to become more aware of the stream of thoughts and feelings that we experience," says Professor Williams, "and to see how we can become entangled in that stream in ways that are not helpful.

"This lets us stand back from our thoughts and start to see their patterns. Gradually, we can train ourselves to notice when our thoughts are taking over and realise that thoughts are simply 'mental events' that do not have to control us.

"Most of us have issues that we find hard to let go and mindfulness can help us deal with them more productively. We can ask: 'Is trying to solve this by brooding about it helpful, or am I just getting caught up in my thoughts?'

"Awareness of this kind also helps us notice signs of stress or anxiety earlier and helps us deal with them better."

Mindfulness is recommended by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) as a way to prevent depression in people who have had 3 or more bouts of depression in the past.

www. NHS.uk (August 2019)

Some ideas to do as a whole family

Mindful Posing

Simple yoga poses and stretches can help children to feel better and start to focus on their body. Tell the children the fun poses help them to feel brave and strong and happy. Some ideas for poses are:

1. The Superman: this pose is practiced by standing with the feet just wider than the hips, fists clenched, and arms reached out to the sky, stretching the body as tall as possible.
2. Cobra pose: lay flat on the floor on your front and push your torso off the floor using your hands.
3. Easy pose: sit up tall with your legs folded and hands on your knees. Breathe deeply.
4. Lion pose: Either on all fours or with your bottom sat on your feet and hands on the floor in front of you. Stick out your tongue and let out a loud 'haaa' sound
5. The Wonder Woman: this pose is struck by standing tall with legs wider than hip-width apart and hands or fists placed on the hips (Karen Young, 2017).

Ask the kids how they feel after a few rounds of trying either of these poses. You may be surprised.

Make sure you don't stretch too far or can fall on anything dangerous so they don't get injured.

The Mindful Jar

This activity can teach children how strong emotions can take hold, and how to find peace when these **strong emotions** feel overwhelming.

- First, get a clear jar and fill it almost all the way with water. Next, add a big spoonful of glitter glue or glue and dry glitter to the jar. Put the lid back on the jar and shake it to make the glitter swirl.
- Finally, use the following script or take inspiration from it to form your own mini-lesson:

"Imagine that the glitter is like your thoughts when you're stressed, mad or upset. See how they whirl around and make it really hard to see clearly? That's why it's so easy to make silly decisions when you're upset – because you're not thinking clearly. Don't worry this is normal and it happens in all of us (adults too).

[Now put the jar down in front of them.]

Now watch what happens when you're still for a couple of moments. Keep watching. See how the glitter starts to settle and the water clears? Your mind works the same way. When you're calm for a little while, your thoughts start to settle and you start to see things much clearer. Deep breaths during this calming process can help us settle when we feel a lot of emotions" (Karen Young, 2017).

This exercise not only helps children learn about how their emotions can cloud their thoughts, but it also facilitates the practice of mindfulness while focusing on the swirling glitter in the jar.

Try having the kids focus on one emotion at a time, such as anger, and discuss how the shaken verse settling glitter is like that emotion

Mindfulness Games for Kids

1. Blowing bubbles. Have your kids focus on taking in a deep, slow breath, and exhaling steadily to fill the bubble. Encourage them to pay close attention to the bubbles as they form, detach, and pop or float away.
2. Pinwheels. Use the same tactics from blowing bubbles to encourage mindful attention on the pinwheels.
3. Playing with balloons. Tell your kids that the aim of this game is to keep the balloon off the ground, but have them move slowly and gently. You can tell them to pretend the balloon is very fragile if that helps. You can also get them to blow anger or negative thoughts into a balloon and let them go. The noise of the balloon will get them laughing and the action of watching the balloon fly away with their worries can be very helpful.
4. Texture bag. Place several small, interestingly shaped or textured objects in a bag. Have each child reach in and touch an object, one at a time, and describe what they are touching. Make sure they don't take the object out of the bag, forcing them to use only their sense of touch to explore the object.

Mindfulness eating

Experience your food using all of your senses. For example spend at least 10 minutes eating one strawberry, what does it look like, feel like, smell like, taste like on different parts of the tongue. Have a conversation about this. It's a great distraction.

Body Scan

The body scan is a key practice in mindfulness, and an easy one to teach to children.

- Have your kids lie down on their back on a comfortable surface and close their eyes;
- Then tell them to squeeze every muscle in their body as tight as they can. Tell them to squish their toes and feet, squeeze their hands into fists, and make their legs and arms as hard as stone;
- After a few seconds, have them release all their muscles and relax for a few minutes;
- Encourage them to think about how their body is feeling throughout the activity (Roman, 2015).

This simple exercise gets kids to be more aware of their bodies and helps them find a way to be present in the moment.

Heartbeat Exercise

Paying attention to one's heartbeat has a role in many mindfulness exercises and activities. To begin, tell your kids to jump up and down in place or do jumping jacks for one minute.

When they have finished, have them sit down and put a hand over their heart. Instruct them to close their eyes and pay attention only to their heartbeat and, perhaps, their breath as well (Roman, 2015).

This exercise teaches children to notice their heartbeat, and use it as a tool to help their focus. These skills will come in handy as they start engaging in more advanced mindfulness activities

Safari

The Safari exercise is another fun way to help kids learn mindfulness. This activity turns an average, everyday walk outside into an exciting new adventure.

Tell your kids that you will be going on a safari, and their goal is to notice as many birds, bugs, creepy-crawlies, and any other animals as they can. Anything that walks, crawls, swims, or flies is of interest, and they'll need to focus all of their senses to find them, especially the little ones (Karen Young, 2017).

A similar exercise for adults is the mindfulness walk. This exercise provokes the same response in children that the mindful walk brings out in adults: a state of awareness and grounding in the present.

Take a listening/ mindfulness walk

Go somewhere, even the garden and walk together in silence listening for all of the sounds you normally overlook. Leaves rustling, birds singing, things falling from trees, your own breath. Listening walks are usually quiet but you can do them anywhere even at the supermarket.

