

Mindfulness – what’s this all about?

The aim of this booklet is to offer an alternative approach to managing migraine - quite literally using the power of mind over matter. It doesn't necessarily replace medication but can work together with it.

It is based on the observation that sufferers of migraine have brains that respond more rapidly to changes around them both within and outside the body. This can cause instability that leads to a migraine attack. The approach aims to reduce this over-activity and hence help the migraine.

Mindfulness is based on a meditation technique that is already in widespread use for the treatment of depression in the NHS. It helps us to take control of the mental treadmill of chains of thought that link the past to our anticipation of the future and in doing so reduces the over-activity of the brain.

The scientific theory that supports this approach is included at the end of the booklet.
(need to do)

Mindfulness – mind over matter

There have been an overwhelming number of treatments aimed at alleviating the impact of migraine. Despite the undoubted successes of medicines, exploration of the resources of mind has been largely overlooked.

This is surprising as the phenomenon is well recognised by the scientific community. For every two sufferers responding to an active migraine drug, one will respond to a similar tablet without the active ingredient. This is known as the placebo effect and is widespread in medicine.

The aim of this booklet is to suggest an approach where the mind can modify the basic mechanisms that are important for the production of migraine. It is not proposed as an alternative for drug treatment but hopefully may reduce the impact of migraine on the quality of life of sufferers and enable them to obtain more control over their problem.

Although the techniques outlined in this booklet may help during the migraine attack, the focus of attention is on changing the way the brain deals with information in order to prevent attacks from happening.

The brains of people with migraine are different

The brains of migraine sufferers are different to those who don't get headache - they are more sensitive to changes around them. This can be changes either in the internal body environment such as changes in blood sugar, levels of fluid intake, hormone levels; or the external environment such as changes in noise, lighting or stress levels. These fluctuations do not bother non-sufferers to such an extent.

The brain is a highly complex network of interconnected units known as brain cells or neurones. In the brain of migraine sufferers these connections will be overactive and can lead to an instability that results in the migraine attack. This instability can be triggered by a number of changes that can act at many parts of the nerve network. As the network is continually fluctuating, the triggers may not always be consistent.

Preventative migraine drugs act by stabilising the over-activity of this nerve network. Is there a way that the brain can do this itself?

The aim of mindfulness - reducing the activity of the conscious brain

How can we use the mind to reduce the brain's over-activity and in turn, its susceptibility to migraine? We need to start by exploring the thought process itself and to do so we simplify the network of brain cells into two compartments:

The conscious or outer brain

As humans we have a recollection of the past and an anticipation of the future. Conscious thought processes in the outer-brain make the connection between the two and allow us to act. We do this in a number of stages:

- We sense the world around us and decide where our focus of attention will be.
- We categorise our experience into symbols (pictures or words).
- We undertake a silent conversation with ourselves that is constructed in a chain of thought. These range from thoughts from the past to anticipations of the future.
- We allocate an emotion to each link in the chain and judge it as good or bad.

This mental treadmill forms our reality. In the brains of migraine sufferers the treadmill needs to be slowed down.

The sub-conscious or inner brain.

The sub-conscious or inner-brain monitors these processes but does not contribute directly to them. It collates and co-ordinates information at a much deeper level that is not so readily accessible.

The aim of "mindfulness" is to allow the inner brain to pay more attention to what is going on in the outer brain and to disrupt the chains of thought that can lead to the over-activity that causes migraine.

Of course rapid chains of thought can be essential for our well being. We need to anticipate that a car may be coming around the corner as we step off the pavement based on our previous experience. The object is not to abolish these chains of thought but to be able to exercise the ability to reduce them particularly when they are inappropriate. By doing so we can reduce the over-activity and over-sensitivity of the brain that leads to a migraine attack.

The theory of mindfulness – from doing to being

Mindfulness is based on a type of meditation of which there are many different forms and traditions. The aim is to escape from our trains of thought of desire and aversion as our mind plays back and forth between the past and future. “*What if I did this, if only I had done that, I wish I could be like.....*” Almost everything we see is labelled and categorised by the mind, locking us into mechanical reactions of which we are not even aware.

In our attempts to mull over the past and play out the future, we overlook reality as it flows by us. Mindfulness seeks to live in the moment rather than ahead or in the past of each day.

Mindfulness pays attention to what is happening in the conscious brain. It listens to our thoughts and their corresponding emotions without being attached to them. To do so you must be aware of the constant stream of judging and reacting to inner and outer experience that we are all caught up in and learn to step back from it. In its purest form, it is a level of experience beyond good and bad, beyond pleasure and pain.

Chains of thought are cut and each link is seen alone, in a non-judgemental way. There is no judgement whether they are good or bad, right or wrong. The aim is an immersion in what is happening in the present moment without setting up chains of thought into the past or future. It is a cultivation of an awareness that exists independent of our chains of conscious thought.

How to be mindful – the breathing as an anchor

Mindfulness is based on meditation but there is no one correct approach. Meditation techniques are overlaid with tradition and convention. Take a pragmatic approach and do what works best for you. We are seeking to create a clear awareness of exactly what is happening as it happens without the mind wandering off. How can we accept each moment as it comes and be fully with it rather than chasing our thoughts from the past into the future? Breathing holds the key.

Our breathing provides a very convenient process to support ongoing awareness in our daily lives. Focussing on the breathing doesn't mean you should think about it but be aware of it and feel the sensations associated with it. The breath functions as an anchor for our attention and affects a peaceful centre. It tunes into the present and orientates the body. It acts as a focal point, an anchor to which we can return if the mental treadmill starts rolling.

Keep your mind focused on the rims of your nostrils, and pay attention to your feelings there as you inhale and exhale. What you are looking for is the sensation of the air that passes in and out of the nostrils. This is usually just inside the tip of the nose. To find your own point, take a quick deep breath and notice the point just inside the nose (or on the upper lip if nose breathing is a problem) where you have the most distinct sensation of passing air. Now exhale and notice the sensation at the same point. It is from this point that you will follow the whole passage of breath.

This doesn't mean you should think about or control your breathing – just be aware of it. Use it for an anchor of your thoughts in the presence. If your mind wanders off the breath, notice what it was that took you away and gently bring your attention back to it. Once you have mastered that you are ready to move on.

Mindfulness – living in the moment

Mindfulness is a process of retraining the mind so you can take control of what happens to your thoughts when you choose to. The state you are aiming for is one in which you are totally aware of everything that is happening, exactly the way it happens, without the treadmill of thoughts from the past or into the future. Focusing on the breathing helps to anchor this state.

- Mindfulness is cultivated by assuming the stance of an impartial witness to your own experience and stepping back from the constant stream of judging and reacting. There is a difference between being aware of a thought and thinking a thought. When we are aware of a thought it arises lightly like a bubble, and it passes away without necessarily giving rise to the next thought in that chain. In contrast, conscious thought grabs control of consciousness. By its nature it is obsessive, and it leads straight to the next thought in the chain.
- Mindfulness takes place in the here and now and is always in the present. If you are remembering what you did yesterday, that is memory and a conscious thought. When you then become aware that you are remembering without following the chain of thoughts that goes with it, that is mindfulness.
- Mindfulness one sees all phenomena without references to concepts like 'me', 'my' or 'mine'. For example, suppose you have a headache. Ordinary consciousness would say, "I have a pain." Using Mindfulness, one would simply note the sensation as a sensation. One would not tack on that extra concept 'I'. One just observes exactly what is there without distortion.
- In Mindfulness, one does not strain for results. One does not try to accomplish anything or achieve any goals. There is only observation and awareness of continual change. It is observing the passing flow of experience.

Practicing mindfulness to control migraine

Ideally you should set aside 30-45 minutes each day to practice the state of mindfulness. Ensure you are in a comfortable position. It is usually helpful to gaze at an object in the mid distance without focussing on it but the eyes can be open or closed.

Focus on the breathing as before. If a thought comes into your mind just observe it. Don't categorise it, judge it or react to it. You have the power to choose how to relate to your thought. What matters is how you handle it. Just let it float downstream until the next thought comes along. Take each thought and each moment as it comes and be with it fully as it comes without reacting to it. If you find yourself chasing off downstream with the thought, return to your anchor of your breathing. With time, the heightened way your mind reacts will settle down and be less susceptible to the migraine attack. A word of warning - some people find that things actually get worse before they get better as the mind reacts to this new approach to what is going on inside it.

Many people find it difficult to commit this time to their daily practice. An alternative approach is to practice mindfulness at every opportunity during the day wherever you are. It could be a quiet moment while you are watching TV or waiting in the supermarket queue. As you become more adept at dampening down the activity of your brain, so your migraines will decrease as you train your mind to be more stable and less reactive.

The main focus of mindfulness is to reduce the frequency of migraine but can it help during an attack?

Coping with pain and tension

Using mindfulness to deal with pain is also possible but demands a much greater degree of practice. The aim is to be aware of the reactions to the pain – “this is killing me”, “I can’t stand it any longer”, “how long will this go on” and recognise these as just thoughts, understandable reactions of your own mind. When you feel the sensations you are experiencing as pure and simple sensations, at that moment it becomes easier to accept the sensations simply for what they are – taking each moment as it comes. By sitting with the discomfort and accepting it as part of our experience in the moment, it is possible to relax into physical discomfort. This does sound far fetched but with practice and using your breathing as an anchor it can be achieved.

Mindfulness can also be used to alleviate stress and tension throughout the body. Start with using your breathing as an anchor. Then focus in turn on each part of the body starting with the feet and then moving up towards the head. Create an awareness of each part as you focus on it and imagine you are breathing in and out through that part. As you breathe in imagine you are invigorating that part and as you breathe out the tension is moving out with the exhaled breath. When you feel you have relaxed one part move on to the next.

Other things to try

An exercise in mindfulness

When we first become aware of something there is a fleeting instance of pure awareness. Then the conscious mind takes over and clamps down on it – labelling it and applying a symbol to it. This sets off a whole train of thought about it. The original moment of pure awareness is mindfulness. Try and practice extending that moment before the outer brain takes over.

For example, look at a cup. Immediately a whole stream of thoughts past and future will start – I like the blue colour, this is my favourite mug, its time for another coffee.....Now just look at it without any labels or judgements. The aim is to promote the awareness that exists independent of our usual trains of thought.

Universal Loving-Kindness

This idea sounds a bit wacky and will not be for everyone. It is part of the Buddhist meditation philosophy and aims to weaken those aspects of ego which do the most harm so that mindfulness will have less resistance to overcome. At the beginning of each mindfulness session, say the following sentences to yourself that you can modify accordingly. Really feel the intention.

May I be well, happy and peaceful. May no harm come to me. May no difficulties come to me. May I have patience, courage, understanding, and determination to meet and overcome inevitable difficulties, problems, and failures in life. Repeat this and direct it towards family, friends and even enemies.