

Q&A: Stressed out? Why mindfulness and meditation help us cope with the world

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In a world fraught with anxiety, stress, and environmental and humanitarian disasters, people are looking for ways to cope. Many have turned to practices originating in ancient eastern philosophies for

guidance. Among these is [mindfulness](#), which is linked to [meditation](#).

Lucy Draper-Clarke, [researcher](#) and author of [The Compassionate Activist](#), spoke to health & medicine editor Nadine Dreyer about looking inwards and cultivating compassion, awareness and gratitude.

What does mindfulness actually mean?

The original translation of the Pali word *sati* is "remembering". It was about remembering your ethics, the right way to behave in each moment.

It's shifted within the modern context and is usually translated as "being conscious and aware of the present moment".

The word I prefer to use is "awareness".

A [mindfulness practice](#) would be a way to bring you back to the present. You'd use your senses, your breath, or your body as in a [yoga practice](#).

To be mindful is to be present, to be open. You're not trapped in the past or in the future.

And that helps to calm you down because a lot of depression or depressive thoughts are linked to the past and things that we regret.

A lot of anxiety is linked to the future.

There is [research](#) on these particular tendencies. If people experience a lot of anxiety, it's often that their [mind](#) is in the future, worrying about what will happen next.

And the same thing for [depression](#). The mind goes back into the past and goes into ruminating cycles of things that have happened or that we've

done wrong, or what we perceive as wrong.

The present moment frees you from those aspects. Your attention is focused on exactly what's here and now. Within that you can bring a sense of discernment.

My work is also linking it to [compassion](#). So if the present moment is uncomfortable— experiencing a friend suffering or our own suffering—you bring compassion to that. I find mindfulness and compassion go together.

How do we include meditation in our daily lives?

Mindfulness is often achieved through meditation, a practice of sitting still and focusing the mind on the senses or the breath, but we can also remain mindful throughout the day.

I think the word "habit" is a really good one. To make your meditation as familiar a practice as brushing your teeth or having a shower. It's mental hygiene.

Making it a [daily practice](#), at a particular time of the day, helps people: it's less negotiable. As soon as we start negotiating with ourselves— should I practice, shouldn't I practice— we often default to the less healthy habits like scrolling the internet or watching repetitive news stories.

In [The Compassionate Activist](#) I distinguish between five categories of contemplative practices: calming, insight, positive qualities, engagement and shadow integration.

The soothing practices are ones that calm us down. For most people a deep abdominal breath can be like a switch that shifts them from chaos

to calm. It can really help. Not everyone. If you've had asthma, if you've had trauma associated with your breath, then that's not always the best method to use.

Moving practices also help activate and then quieten the body, which in turn calms down the heart and mind. When expressive movement (a form of dance) or [yoga](#) are carried out with a real conscious awareness of the body, they can be very useful to prepare the mind for meditation.

How important are insight and self-awareness?

Insight practices help us gain an understanding of our own habits. If you tend to find yourself in a state of depression or anxiety, just bringing your mind back to the present again and again can shift you out of those tendencies. We often don't believe it's as simple as that, but it's amazing how much support we can give ourselves just by coming back to the [present moment](#). Of course, if we have experienced traumatic incidents, then these practices are best done in parallel with psychotherapy.

There are also practices for cultivating positive, pro-social qualities such as curiosity, wonder, compassion, joy and gratitude, which are innate aspects of being human.

The mind has a [negativity bias](#). The [brain](#) likes to learn quickly, so it tends to learn from negative experiences, but we have many wonderful experiences as well.

Training the mind to focus on gestures of care that people show us every day, even if it's just being let into the traffic, or someone making you a cup of tea, opens the mind to gratitude, appreciation and wonder.

Anger is often a result of fear. We go into fight and flight mode. Hurt is a result of sadness. So we don't need to demonize any of our difficult

emotions. We use them to gather information. What am I feeling in this moment? And what do I need?

We learn to look at our experience rather than being swamped by it.

What is your advice for people wanting to refocus their lives?

There's a lovely saying, that there are [84,000 Dharma doors](#). Dharma means the truth. So 84,000 different ways to find the truth. Your own truth.

But the reason that number is given is that apparently in the audience where the Buddha spoke, there were 84,000 people. So what it's saying is: find your own way.

When do I feel content? When do I feel at ease? When do I feel joy? Use those [positive emotions](#) as a way to reassure you that you're on the right track.

Be tuned into your own happiness, your own joy, your own contentment and ease, and let them guide you to the type of practices that are going to bring you the most benefit at different stages in your life.

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