

We don't yet fully understand what mindfulness is, but this is what it's not

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Mindfulness can refer to a specific set of meditation practices, but its precise definition isn't clear. Credit: shutterstock.com

Last night's episode of ABC's Catalyst, "[The Mindfulness Experiment](#)", offered a unique glimpse into what happens to people during [Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction](#), an eight-week structured training program in mindfulness meditation.

The program followed 15 ordinary Australians who were seeking to deal with conditions including chronic pain, stress and anxiety. At the end of the experiment, many of the participants had shown improvement.

But if you're considering dipping a toe into practising mindfulness, or taking the full plunge, there are several things you should consider first.

Clarifying misconceptions

Mindfulness is not relaxation

The origins of mindfulness can be found in Eastern traditions. [One definition](#) suggests it's a way of orienting attention and awareness to the present, reminding oneself to stay present when the mind wanders, and carefully discerning those behaviours that are helpful from those that are not.

Contrary to popular belief, mindfulness is not a way to relax or manage emotions. During practice, you will most likely experience unrest, have unpleasant thoughts and feelings, and learn unexpected and unsettling things about yourself.

While relaxation can and does occur, it's not always as expected and it's not really the [goal](#).

Mindfulness is not a quick fix

Problems that have developed over weeks, months, or years cannot be fixed overnight. Behaviour change is [hard](#). The patterns we most want to change (such as addictive behaviours, dysfunctional relationships, anxious thinking) require the investment of serious time and effort.

Instructor [Timothea Goddard](#) championed the practice of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction in Australia and facilitated the Catalyst participants' mindfulness journey. She acknowledges doing up to an hour of practice a day can seem demanding. But if the challenges a person is dealing with are significant, this may be what's required.

She adds that just like [physical fitness](#), courses offering sustained daily practice may be more likely to offer greater transformation experiences.

While we have [little data](#) on the frequency or length of practice necessary, [decades of research in psychotherapy](#) and [behaviour change](#) suggest there is no such thing as a quick fix.

Mindfulness is not an escape

You may imagine mindfulness to be like a beach holiday where you leave all the stress, pressure, and deadlines behind. It's not.

Mindfulness practice creates awareness around the issues that most need our attention. Often we're drawn to emotional and physical pain we've been

avoiding.

One participant in The Mindfulness Experiment, Sam, found this difficult. "I want to forget about the areas that are painful, not concentrate on them," she said.

Mindfulness provides a [method](#), not to escape, but to explore pain or hardship with acceptance, curiosity, and emotional balance.

Mindfulness is not a panacea

Despite suggestions it will fix everything, there are many circumstances and conditions for which mindfulness is simply [not effective or appropriate](#).

If your main reason for seeking out mindfulness is for mental illness or another medical condition, speak first to a medical professional. Meditation is not meant as a [replacement](#) for traditional medicine.

Questions to ask before you start

Is mindfulness for you?

An individual session with a skilled instructor can help you work out whether mindfulness is going to be right for you generally, and which approach specifically might help you.

Mindfulness is not one size fits all. Personal attention before and during practice can make a huge difference, especially in a group. We know from [psychotherapy research](#) individual adjustments must be made.

Who created the program?

Perhaps this seems like a strange question; few therapy clients or surgery patients know who created the method being used and they often get better. But unlike therapy or medical procedures, meditation is not overseen by any regulatory agency.

Consider what you want to get from the program and whether there is evidence the program and instructor can help you to achieve those goals.

This advice is especially important when considering apps. Few have been [examined scientifically](#).

Does the instructor have a personal practice?

Those who do not have a regular mindfulness practice themselves may struggle to [teach others](#) to cultivate a practice effectively.

Programs that train people to provide structured meditation programs (such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy) [require](#) professional training, supervision, and extensive personal practice. While we don't know if personal practice is necessary, it seems likely it is helpful in guiding others.

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