

What brought me to mindfulness

by Barry Lee

Most people who practice mindfulness are initially drawn to it because of stress or suffering in their lives.

I was no different. Thirteen years ago, when I was working as a newly qualified solicitor, I experienced burn out. I didn't realise that I was suffering from chronic stress or that I was on the verge of burn out at the time. Chronic stress can be quite insidious in that way.

Then one afternoon in my parent's house I had a panic attack. I was 25 and had only recently qualified. It was a horrible experience. My face felt hot. My breathing was shallow and rapid. I couldn't get enough air. Everything seemed strange. Sounds echoed around me. I was dizzy and I felt like I was going to pass out. I thought I was having a heart attack and went straight to hospital. The doctors kept me in for a short while for observation and sent me home telling me that I was physically fine.

I didn't feel fine and took a week off work. I knew that something serious had happened to me and I was convinced that the doctors had made a mistake. I went for a cardiac ultrasound scan and another doctor told me that he could find no physical abnormalities. He said that I might be suffering from stress and that the symptoms I experienced were consistent with acute anxiety. Knowing that I was ok physically helped a bit at the start but after a while the initial relief wore off. This was all in my head... which in a way is worse.

In the weeks and months that followed, I tried to manage my anxiety in lots of different ways. I exercised. I was careful about the food I ate. I cut out coffee. I tried to get more sleep which is very difficult when you are anxious. I soon discovered that alcohol was a temporary balm. If I had a few drinks with my friends, I relaxed but the next day tended

to be much worse. It's easy for me to understand why many people turn to self-medicating with alcohol.

I had some good days, but the fear of another attack always hung over me. I was less inclined to go to social functions which could trigger anxiety. I had trouble sleeping. I'm sure that the quality of my work suffered.

I didn't tell anyone in work what I was going through. I didn't tell my girlfriend. I was embarrassed and I didn't want my colleagues and the people close to me to look at me different - as if I was more fragile than everyone else and unable to cope with the normal stresses of life. Luckily, I did confide in a few close friends. One of my friends told me about a colleague who used mindfulness (a form of meditation) as a way of coping with anxiety. In hindsight I'm very lucky that I had that particular conversation. Another friend could just as easily have suggested Valium (there is obviously a time and a place for medication but it's probably not the best way to deal with anxiety in the long run).

At the time I was sceptical. Under normal circumstances I would never have been drawn to this sort of thing. If someone had suggested mindfulness to me a year ago, I might have rolled my eyes, but when you are suffering you tend to be a bit more receptive. So, I decided to sign up for a course.

I arrived for my first class straight from work and was relieved when I wasn't the only person wearing a suit. I remember praying that no one I knew would see me entering or leaving the building. Thirteen years ago, mindfulness wasn't nearly as popular as it is now. There wasn't the same abundance of articles in the newspapers.



"Mindfulness" and "resilience" weren't the buzzwords they are today. There was no talk of neuroscience or neuroplasticity. There were no mindfulness apps. Workplaces didn't have a "wellness week". There was definitely a stigma around mental health. There is no way you would find an article like this in a journal for the accounting profession!

Luckily, I stumbled upon a good teacher. He was kind and softly spoken. He explained a little bit about the concept, and we spent most of the evening practicing some of the techniques. It takes a lifetime to master meditation but something in the class resonated with me. I had the sense that this was something which could really help me. I left feeling a little bit lighter.



The teacher told us that in order for us to benefit we needed to practice regularly and so I did. Every morning I woke an hour earlier than usual and listened to the guided practices on a CD. Sitting quietly, gently resting my attention on the sensations of breathing, the mind naturally started to settle. There was a feeling of space. Tension in the body could release.

I found myself enjoying my walk to work. I was better able to concentrate during the day. I wasn't consumed with thoughts about the future and the past in the same way I had been. I wasn't lying awake in bed at 3.00am ruminating about potential mistakes I might have made during the day or what my "to do" list was for tomorrow. That course lasted 6 weeks and by the end of it I felt like a different person.

In the thirteen years that followed I came to see my morning meditation practice as a normal part of my daily routine, just the same as brushing my teeth. It was something I did every day in order to be calm and happy. It helped me perform better in work and it also helped me immensely in my personal life.

So, what exactly is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is best understood as an experience. You can't read a book or a definition and really know what it is in the same way that you can't read a recipe in a cookbook and know what the meal tastes like.

In very simple terms, the practice of mindfulness involves paying attention

to exactly what is happening in the present moment, in a gentle and non-judgmental way.

As anyone who has practiced for any length of time will tell you, although this sounds simple it is far from easy. The mind is conditioned to be restless and is very easily distracted. We much rather relive moments from the past or anticipate what will happen in the future instead of bringing our full attention to the present moment. For many of us, this natural tendency of the mind means a LOT of time spent ruminating, worrying and planning which can be a source of unhappiness and can exacerbate stress and anxiety. Mindfulness trains us to be present. It allows us to respond creatively to what happens instead of being stuck in habitual and automatic patterns of behaviour which may not serve us.

How do I practice it?

In a sense, the formal practice of mindfulness entails simply training attention. We are practicing being present.

When you practice, it can help to find an "anchor" for your attention to help give the mind some stability.

There are different anchors which you can experiment with:

- The physical body - Maybe noticing different sensations coming and going, moment by moment. The weight of the body or the simple, tangible feeling of your feet on the floor.
- The feeling of the breath moving in the body... rising and falling by itself... "Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out."
- Witnessing different sounds coming and going.
- Or you can pick something else. As long as it is actually here, in this moment.

If you would like to try it, look away from the screen or the page for a few moments or close your eyes and see if it is possible for you to gently rest your attention on an anchor.

After a short while, you will probably notice that the mind has drifted.

Perhaps you notice that you are lost in a stream of thought... planning, worrying, daydreaming. Left to its own devices, that's what the mind tends to do.

The formal practice entails noticing when the mind has wandered and gently, intentionally coming back to the present moment over and over again.

We are training our muscle of attention and learning to notice when the mind has wandered.

It takes a lifetime to master mindfulness but in a sense, that's it! It's simple but it's far from easy.

So where should you start?

Find an experienced and qualified teacher. It's very different to learning about mindfulness from a book or an app. In Ireland, there is now a professional body for mindfulness teachers (the Mindfulness Teachers Association of Ireland) so you can easily find a teacher who has been properly trained and who receives ongoing regular supervision.

Two courses stand out in terms of having a very extensive and well documented evidence base:

- Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), an eight-week course developed by Jon Kabat Zinn in the University of Massachusetts Medical School 40 years ago; and
- Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), an eight-week course developed by professors Williams, Segal and Teasdale at Oxford University.

The reason these two courses are so effective is because they are quite long and rigorous. Each class is 2.5 hours and there is also a full day retreat after week six. That kind of commitment might not suit everyone. A shorter course might serve as an easier introduction. I have found that six-week courses (an hour a week) work well for in house courses.

Bio: Barry is chair of the Mindfulness Teachers Association of Ireland. He currently works with a variety of different groups including organisations in the corporate sector, universities, (staff and students), not for profit organisations and schools. He is the founder of Mindfulness for Law and had facilitated courses and workshops for many of the largest law firms in Ireland.

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