

A Beginners Guide to Mindfulness



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Mindfulness explained

Our minds don't work on logic... If they did work on logic, no one would ever get worried, anxious, or stressed. Instead, the mind works on imagination, feelings and emotions.

Imagination can be very powerful... it can cause us to fear the worst and suffer from unbearable depression... but it can also be a powerful resource.

This book is about how you can use your mind to triumph over all sorts of problems, such as negativity, despondency and hopelessness. It's not a cure for all evils, but it will give you some of the tools to heal yourself. All the information is based on the work of some of the world's best and brightest psychologists – and their sometimes surprising experiments.

Now we understand that... we can explore the concept of Mindfulness and hopefully, start discovering ourselves!

Mindfulness is the new buzzword in the 'make your life a better place to live' industry. But is it any good, or just the latest fad in the industrial scale world of self-help? Is mindfulness even healthy? Or are we being hoodwinked into buying into something that's really just common sense?

Mindfulness is promoted as an effective way of dealing with problems, and it seems to work well for people suffering from stress or anxiety. In reality, mindfulness is really just a way of making yourself aware of your own feelings and emotions and taking a few quiet moments to put them in perspective and consider your response. So far, so good!

Psychologists at University of California Berkeley have described more than 30 distinct human emotions and for the sake of completeness, here are the principal ones:

Admiration, Adoration, Aesthetic appreciation, Amusement, Anger, Anxiety, Awe, Awkwardness, Boredom, Calmness, Confusion, Craving, Disgust, Empathetic Pain, Entrancement, Envy, Excitement, Fear, Happiness, Horror, Interest, Joy, Nostalgia, Romance, Sadness, Satisfaction, Sexual Desire, Surprise, Sympathy, Triumph.

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, or MBSR, is another tool in an already overstocked box which includes:

- Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) – mainly rubbish
- Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) – often (but not always) effective over a number of weekly sessions
- Eye Movement Desensitisation and Recovery (EMDR) – complete nonsense (it's the placebo effect at work)
- Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) – very effective, often providing rapid results
- Thought Field Therapy (TFT) – an unnecessarily over-complicated version of EFT.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) claims to have invented MBSR and in the United States (where else?) and there are now over 1,000 registered MBSR instructors. Like all 'new' ways of thinking, it's has spread chain-letter-like through the alternative and complimentary therapy world.

Mindfulness cannot be claimed to be entirely new because by its own admission, much of its techniques are based on good old fashioned meditation.

Mindfulness convinces us to concentrate on one thing at a time – preferably to the exclusion of any other distractions. Mindfulness encourages its adherents to focus on immediate sensations and emotions, to let go of the past *and* the future, and focus not just on the present, but on the *now*. It also teaches practitioners to acknowledge feelings but in a way that is neither judgmental nor self-critical. Participants are also trained to concentrate on, and be aware of their breathing and be conscious of the feelings in their bodies.

An example of how mindfulness works is the ‘raisin test’, which is all about being aware of the history of the solitary raisin, it’s growing on the vine, the ripening of the grape, the weeks of sunshine and goodness in the soil, the drying out process, and finally, the savouring of the taste...slowly... deliberately. Any hypnotherapist worth their salt will get you to use your imagination to literally see the harm cigarettes are doing to your system – the thick grey smoke percolating down the back of your throat, staining your lungs, poisoning your body, followed by how advantageous it will be to give up and how much better it will feel when you stop.

Mindfulness teaches the individual to focus on the good things, to find a quiet and peaceful place in an otherwise hectic mind – another similarity with hypnosis and other talking therapies. It’s a simple and easily available way of dealing with stress. So it’s just like hypnosis – without the hypnosis.

Mindfulness claims to be a panacea for everything! You can live every detail of your life more mindfully – everything in fact, from the way you study, to the way you enjoy your game of tennis, to the way you bring up your children. You really *can* do everything more mindfully. Sounds great. But hold on a minute... doesn’t this just mean that you train yourself to pay more attention to the things in life that are important and enjoy them more? That would certainly be a positive thing to do, it’s just not very ‘new’.

I’m very curious to find out if we’re being sold a line. Already I suspect that the New-Agey types who embrace Mindfulness are going to be irritating. In the US, Chase Manhattan Bank advises customers to spend ‘mindfully.’ Next they’ll be telling customers not to spend more than they can afford!

Whatever the merits or otherwise of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), the average course lasts for eight weeks and immediately, my natural scientific cynicism is exploring the possibility that this might be just another money making scheme, preying on vulnerable people searching for answers. As with meditation, students are instructed to concentrate on their breathing, ridding their consciousness of the travails and tribulations of life.

Mindfulness is starting to look like a mixture Eastern philosophy and Western slick marketing, although it’s proponents studiously avoid any mention of spirituality. Mindfulness teaches you to think of your attention as a muscle – and like any other muscle, it needs to be exercised to be strengthened. (I remember being told something very similar at school – something along the lines of, the more you organise your study, the easier it will be to remember stuff.)

Maybe I am being a little unfair – Mindfulness may not be such a bad thing. One *should* be mindful of the important things in life. It’s healthy to embrace the beauty of life and sensible to give due attention to life’s important things. On the other hand, something that

is touted as a cure-all for everything must be treated with a certain amount of skepticism. We all get stressed, at work and at home, but that's part of life! A little stress from time to time keeps us on our toes, and that's another good thing. It's all about finding a balance.

There's a very credible body of research, which suggests that multitasking lowers overall productivity (Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* explored this idea in the 19th century.) Workers who switch from one task to another have less ability to filter out irrelevant information and are also more likely to make mistakes. Many people today do not avail themselves of the luxury of regular breaks, leading to overwork and tiredness, confusion and burnout. It's a non-stop world in big business – after all, money never sleeps, so why should those who are trying to make more of it?

There are hundreds of Mindfulness and meditation Apps available on the Internet. Meditation can reduce stress and increase focus – just like hypnosis and self-hypnosis. For that matter, so do moments of quiet reflection. The process is remarkably simple and can be learned in minutes – the difficult part is finding the time (and the discipline) – to practice it.

Mindfulness and meditation follow the same route. Step one is to sit upright and concentrate on your breathing, focusing your attention on the air going in and out of your lungs. At the same time, acknowledge thoughts that pop into your mind but try to continue focusing on your breathing. Don't consciously try to ignore distractions, just accept your mind has wandered and then refocus on your breathing. Finally, do this for a few minutes every day for a week. The more you meditate this way – mindfully of course – the easier it becomes. Practice establishes technique, and practice makes perfect!

Some time after Mr Kabat-Zinn got his Ph.D. and started working at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre, he took part in a weekend retreat where he had one of those moments of inspiration that change the world. He immediately started to experiment with the possibility that Buddhist based meditation could help people suffering from chronic pain by refocusing their attention so they could reduce their suffering, which is exactly what hypnotherapists teach their clients to do. Kabat-Zinn's patients experienced significant reductions in pain levels which in turn helped them cope better with their illnesses, which proves what hypnotherapists have been saying for more than a hundred years. A bit of relaxation and focus works wonders! All you have to do, is remember to do it. It's not new, but it is absolutely FREE to anyone who wants to try it.

Mindfulness, or Awareness, or Tibetan Mind Control (Ok, I made that one up) or whatever you want to call it, like anything else in life, just takes a little self discipline. Just take a few moments to focus on your breathing... be aware of your feelings... and imagine a better way of feeling. Meditation and self-hypnosis are so closely related, it's as if they were not just cousins, but mirror images of themselves, except that meditation doesn't come with the dread stigma of hypnosis.

It's common sense that the ability to relax and focus will improve overall mental health. After all, both employ the same techniques of self-awareness, inner focus and quiet contemplation. Both are equally successful when it comes to dealing with pain and anxiety. Many of my hypnotherapist colleagues believe meditation *is* self-hypnosis.

Mindfulness and meditation have been proved beyond any reasonable doubt to have a beneficial effect on clinical depression and can also be a powerful block to prevent relapses. Mindfulness can reduce psychological stress and mindfulness based cognitive therapy includes methods which identify negative and destructive thought patterns which lead to problem behaviour.

Mindfulness exchanges dysfunctional obsessive thoughts for more positive ones, thereby improving behaviour. Both mindfulness and hypnosis take place at the conscious level and the neurological correlates are much the same. But sessions of mindfulness therapy can go on for weeks. With hypnotherapy, the client is able reinforce positive thoughts, feelings and emotions to such a degree that with most individuals, just one session – albeit a lengthy one – can be sufficient.

As with hypnotherapy, mindfulness is designed to stop clients reviewing the past and worrying about the future. Instead, clients are encouraged to live in, and enjoy, the present. Carpe diem – Live for the day!

Mindfulness, like all new fads, has inevitably come under the scrutiny of the academic community. In 2012, Stefan Hofmann, a psychologist at Boston University closely examined studies that tested the efficacy of mindfulness as a remedy for anxiety and depression. Hofmann and his colleagues had relatively few studies to concentrate on – mindfulness is a relatively new tool and so definitive material was hard to come by. What was clear however was that there was a significant trend in improvements to patients, both straight after mindfulness therapy and up to three months later.

In 2013 a review of the study, carried out at the University of Montreal by psychologist Bassam Khoury, confirmed the treatment's effectiveness for depression. Khoury also found that other kinds of cognitive therapies were as effective. Conversely, University of Sussex psychologist, Clara Strauss, whilst praising the efficacy of mindfulness as a treatment for depression, found that mindfulness was not nearly so effective when used to treat anxiety disorders as hypnosis.

There is a big red warning light flashing in the back of my mind – after all, every client is different. Some individuals may have very good reasons to be anxious, for example, someone who has just been diagnosed with a terminal illness or about to lose their job. And there again, we must be mindful that not everyone is as suggestible as some patients who do well with mindfulness. But the good news is there is clear evidence that mindfulness is extremely effective in reducing relapse rates, even more so than hypnotherapy. Combining the two, I usually end up with a winning formula that combines the 'carpe diem' of mindfulness and the reinforcement created by the peak experience of hypnosis.

In a study of mindfulness based cognitive therapy for depression recurrence at the Medical Research Council in Cambridge in 2000, psychologist John Teasdale examined results from individuals receiving treatment (the usual visits to their GP, the inevitable prescription drugs, and visits to the NHS psychologist etc.) He then compared them with results from individuals who had undergone mindfulness therapy. Teasdale found no difference between the two groups except for one startling result... In the group that had undergone mindfulness therapy, the incidence of relapse was far lower.

A repeat of the study in 2004 found that traumatic events – marital break-up, loss of someone close, that sort of thing – were a common cause of relapse, but in those who had relapsed more than two or three times, depression and anxiety became the normal response to even the most trivial problems. In other words, there is an association between the appearance of a problem and the negative emotions that accompany it. So mindfulness may indeed help break that cycle.

Mindfulness may also enable people to understand that unhappy events and unhappy thoughts do not necessarily lead to dreadful emotions. The trick is to get them to apply that principle by practising it.

There has been a huge increase in the number of people practicing mindfulness in Britain. It's the new happy meditation and mainly aimed at those with time on their hands, cash to spare and who like hugging trees. However, claims that by itself, mindfulness can stop harmful behaviours such as smoking or gluttony, are misplaced.

Repetitive mindfulness courses are a waste of money, because mindfulness techniques can be taught in few minutes – and even that's stretching it! It's *practicing* it that takes time and a degree of devotion. In reality, mindfulness was never touted as a 'cure' for anything – mindfulness was designed to create awareness of a problem, isolate it, and put in perspective. On its own, it's a weak force, but it becomes stronger if it's used in the right way and for the right purpose.

Mindfulness is really a pot-pourri of meditation, creative visualisation and relaxation. These easy to master mental gymnastics help you 'ring-fence' negative feelings and emotions and mentally send them away. It can help to create the emotional distance needed to banish thoughts and ideas that are unpleasant or hurtful, and it works particularly well when combined with hypnosis.

Many people claim mindfulness helps them to relax after a long day at work and some experts believe it can even reduce depression, anxiety and stress. But it's the relaxation process and focus on creative visualisation in mindfulness that's the actual magic!

A study at Brown University followed the progress of a group of male and female students as they received mindfulness training. They discovered that the women experienced a significant change in their emotional state, while the changes in men were minimal.

It might be that mindfulness needs to be adapted to the different ways men and women process emotion. A study conducted by Brown University examined how its effects might be different for men and women. Analysing feedback from the volunteers, the researchers claim that mindfulness – as it is currently practiced – is ideal for women. Women are already known to be more likely seek help than men and women also tend to dwell on things more than men, who are generally more focused on the present. Men already have an ability to completely shut off past and future worries and so for most men, mindfulness is surplus to requirements.

There are two more studies in the pipeline that seem set to confirm this, but, the Brown study already shows a clear benefit for women, who can be more vulnerable to emotional problems and depression. Emotional problems in early adulthood, including depression, are linked to a majority of negative behaviours that further disadvantage women, such as poor academic performance, early pregnancy and substance abuse.

Dr Willoughby Britton, assistant professor of psychiatry and human behaviour and of behavioural and social sciences at Brown University, says that mindfulness sessions at college could potentially teach women skills to help them better manage negative feelings and emotions. To be given the opportunity to do so at this early age could have potentially far-reaching beneficial effects on women's lives.

Indeed, mindfulness is becoming more popular on American college campuses as students and administrators alike view it as a way of managing stress and depression. The 77 student volunteers in the Brown study took part in more than 40 hours of training and meditation over 12 weeks. Both male and female students showed progress in practicing the skills that were taught as part of meditation and both gained in several specific mindfulness and self-compassion skills.

Overall, both male and female scores increased significantly. But when the researchers compared the results, they found that it was the women who had benefited the most. The improvement in women was directly related to improved mindfulness and self-compassion skills involving specific techniques dealing with experience and emotions such as being less self-critical, being kinder to themselves, and being less susceptible to their emotions. They also improved their ability to identify, describe and differentiate their emotions.

The research suggests that mindfulness techniques might be adapted to address the ways that men and women typically process emotions. People who naturally tend to confront the difficulties life throws at them will get the most from mindfulness. On the other hand, people who habitually turn their attention away from difficulties and who are then suddenly forced to face them might not get as much benefit. Facing one's difficulties and facing one's emotions may at first seem to be universally beneficial, but it does not take into account the different cultural and emotional expectations of both sexes.

If this is correct, mindfulness strategies might in future be tailored to individual needs – something that hypnotherapy does. There is no 'one-size-fits-all' regime in psychotherapy – where therapists strive to serve the precise needs of the individual. After all, everyone is different and everyone sees the world in different ways – and that is especially true when it comes to gender.

Mindfulness encourages you to be 'in the moment' rather than dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. This can prove quite difficult in our modern, frantic lives where we often operate on auto-pilot, with little awareness of our moment-by-moment experience.

When Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction was first developed to reduce stress, it was delivered as a structured programme usually consisting of eight to 10 weekly sessions, each lasting a ridiculous two-and-a-half hours. These were sometimes followed up with a full-day weekend course as part of a group. Then there's 'homework' – usually consisting of meditation practice, mindfulness-based exercises such as yoga, and finding opportunities to practice mindfulness in everyday and perhaps stressful situations. Then there are myriad books and apps. Like any skill, perfecting mindfulness takes practice and dedication.

It has always been assumed that because mindfulness focuses without judgement on the present moment, people who practice mindfulness are more in tune with the feelings of others. But a study by researchers from the University of Amsterdam, involving 161 people, found that not only did mindfulness prove ineffective in boosting empathy, but in participants who were narcissistic, mindfulness actually made them *less* empathic.

Mindfulness can also cause difficult memories and emotions to resurface. An interview study of 60 Buddhist meditation practitioners found that during meditation – of which mindfulness is a type – 88% had 'difficult' experiences which impacted their life outside meditation. With some people, there does appear to be occasional negative side effects, including a worsening of anxiety and depression, a sense of altered reality, grandiosity, unusual behaviour, euphoria, and even psychosis, though these cases are rare. In short, mindfulness may not be the one-size-fits-all approach it's cracked up to be. Like hypnosis, it needs to be handled properly, and preferably under supervision.

Like any therapeutic technique, mindfulness can be beneficial, but if not used in the right way, in the right circumstances, it could present a risk to a minority of people. For some, trying to be 'in the moment' by constantly monitoring their own thoughts might cause people to focus too much on the internal.

We can improve health and quality of life by *doing* rather than just imagining. When children play games, they are not actively trying to be in the moment – their attention is focussed on enjoying themselves. For adults too, indulging oneself in creative pursuits is a more healthy and constructive way to live. Those that do involve themselves in art or music, or reading or swimming or whatever they enjoy, are actually spending their time ‘in the moment’ – instead of just imagining they’re in it!

A series of studies by Frances Reynolds, a senior academic at Brunel University, London, have confirmed the benefits of involving oneself in constructive activities such as art. In women with depression, needlecraft was found to provide physical, mental and emotional relaxation. It was also found to build self-esteem and even increase energising thoughts and activity. The women in the study found the intense concentration involved in needlework providing distraction from worry and relief from depressive thoughts – as if we didn’t know that already. A lot of people can forget their troubles by immersing themselves in reading or hobbies.

In another study looking at people with long-term mental health problems, a community-based art project led to an increase in self-worth and a meaningful sense of time well-spent. The creative skills learned by the participants were almost certainly the cause of the improvement in the participants' self-management of mental health.

When we're with friends we tend to forget about our problems because our attention is more focussed on smiles, body language and tone of voice. In fact, the ability to connect with others is one of the most important contributions to good mental health.

Social support doesn't just boost mental health – it has an important impact on our immune, cardiovascular and neuroendocrine systems, leading to better physical health. When our focus is on improving the lives of others, even in small ways such as opening a door or saying a warm and genuine 'thank you', we focus outwardly. This kind of pro-social behaviour is linked not only to higher levels of empathy but also our own wellbeing, as for a few brief moments, we put ourselves into someone else’s shoes.

Doing things for other people can also take us outside ourselves, and this often puts life into perspective. Feeling thankful for what we have is a two-way street as gratitude increases pro-social behaviour – and vice versa. So, if you feel you need a bit of a boost, start doing things for others. Write down every day three things that you're grateful for. This positive and grounded piece of advice will help you to help others.

Dancing can lead to healthy feelings of abandon and inhibition as our minds merge with body movement. Research has also shown that dance can have a significant effect on our brains, and more so than other types of exercise.

In a study of older adults, those who took dance classes over an 18 months period saw positive changes in brain areas associated with anti-aging, specifically in the hippocampus, an area of the brain particularly affected by ageing as it plays a major role in vital cognitive process such as memory and learning. Dance and other forms of exercise leads to more neural connections in this area of the brain. Therefore, if you enjoy dance this may be a good option for you to improve both physical and mental health, with the added benefits of the focus being on steps and moves, helping with coordination and balance.

Perfectionism is also known to be linked to rumination, worry, negative self-view, and in extreme cases, depression. This type of negative perfectionism is associated with the

setting of impossibly high standards so that whatever the outcome is, it won't be good enough.

Trying to be perfect can hold us back, so it might be worth following the Japanese art of Wabi Sabi, where the imperfect is embraced. In Wabi Sabi, some cracks, blotches and other imperfections are seen as an integral part of an object's beauty. This approach can be extended to life in general – so instead of expecting everything to be perfect, you could simply throw yourself into the chaotic joy of living. To use mindfulness successfully means finding an activity that you enjoy and that you can become immersed in.

Mindfulness – the dark side

Mindfulness is now booming in popularity. Reconnecting our bodies and minds, the therapy claims to increase understanding of how our thoughts influence our emotions and behaviour, and promotes self-esteem. Dozens of scientific studies have found it can alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety, and millions say the practice has transformed their lives for the better. Studies have shown that mindfulness can improve self-esteem, reduce anxiety and help to manage depression.

One recent analysis of six trials found that individuals who received a mindfulness-based therapy were 43% less likely to experience depressive symptoms than those receiving other therapies. In Britain, the National Health Service (NHS) has recommended Mindfulness for treating anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, depression and phobias.

And you don't need an appointment with a psychotherapist to do it. There are DIY books, apps, and even spa retreats where guests swap their busy lives for intensive, daily mindfulness activities including meditation and yoga. Sessions are carried out alone, or with the help of a therapist or 'guide.'

There is no doubt that mindfulness is a welcome addition to the psychotherapists' toolbox. Yet, amid the enthusiasm, a growing number of psychologists are concerned that there is a risk attached to being alone with your thoughts.

During a typical mindfulness session, individuals sit in silence with their eyes closed for between 10 and 60 minutes and focusing on one thing such as the sensations of breathing in and out. When the mind wanders, patients are advised to return their attention to the thing they were focusing on. Being forced to sit alone with their thoughts can bring out dark thoughts which they can't control.

Leading psychologists are warning there could be a dark side, and the therapy can cause panic attacks and exacerbate or even trigger serious psychiatric illness in some vulnerable individuals. More than 20 studies involving thousands of participants over the past two decades have demonstrated the potentially damaging effect of mindfulness meditation.

A recent study credited mindfulness for reducing war veterans' symptoms of PTSD such as flashbacks, intrusive thoughts and night terrors by 20%. But two months after the intervention, the soldiers' symptoms returned and were just as debilitating. A 2014 study by researchers at the University of Pittsburgh found a daily 25-minute mindfulness exercise, similar to that of a popular phone app, actually increased levels of the stress hormone cortisol in anxious office workers.

Despite that, in 2015, an all-party parliamentary group advocated the use of mindfulness in British educational, healthcare and criminal justice institutions. The Government has also funded mindfulness schemes in 200 British primary schools in an effort to combat the crisis in children's mental health.

Most psychiatric illnesses, diagnosed or undiagnosed, are rooted in trauma. People draw on a wide range of distracting coping mechanisms to deal with these. Mindfulness involves stopping all these mechanisms at once which can become distressing, even inducing

panic and anxiety. It is for this reason the UK's leading venue, The Oxford Mindfulness Centre, exclude those with suicidal thoughts and psychiatric disorders from treatment.

It is logical to assume that many of those taking up mindfulness are more mentally fragile than the general population and by engaging with this therapy, they are seeking a solution to uncomfortable feelings.

There is particular concern about the growing popularity of mindfulness retreats, some of which offer week-long intensive meditation and isolation from the wider world. One study found that half of individuals attending a mindfulness retreat felt more depressed and more anxious and disorientated than before. There has been at least one suicide attempt.

Brain-imaging studies conducted by University of Michigan show mindfulness can reduce connectivity between areas of the brain crucial for emotional processing. This can mean less worry for some, but anxiety and panic for others. It seems mindfulness may not be for everyone.

The human tendency to be overly optimistic has mystified scientists for centuries. Humans are more adept at integrating desirable information than undesirable information, but this asymmetry poses an evolutionary puzzle, because it can lead to an underestimation of risk. People more readily incorporate favourable information into their existing beliefs but ignoring information that doesn't fit a desired narrative can lead to problems, as in the case of mindfulness.

Stress is nothing new – in fact our body's stress response keeps us alert in times of danger by activating the fight or flight response. This physiological and psychological response to stress is the same now as it was when our ancestors were hunting and gathering and it has helped us survive as a species. But hours of rumination on negativity can also drive us into madness as this same cascade of hormones, adrenaline and cortisol flood our bodies as we try to think pleasant thoughts while at the same time trying to banish difficult ones. Trying *not* to think a negative thought just makes you think of it more, in the same way as you can't stop yourself visualising a pink elephant when you're told not to!

One obvious problem is that mindfulness is unregulated. Something which was intended to improve wellbeing has been hijacked by untrained, even incompetent amateurs who saw it as a way of making a fast buck. The same happened with stage hypnosis in Britain in the early 1990s after it made it to television for the first time – untrained and unregulated copycat hypnosis acts suddenly flooded the market and people were harmed.

While many swear by calm, relaxing and focussed meditation, some warn it can produce unpleasant side-effects, ranging from twitching and trembling to hallucinations, depression and even breakdowns. Overall, meditation can be therapeutic, but it can also cause hitherto undetected problems to rise to the surface. There are echos here of bad practice in other types of mind therapies, where sometimes strange, imagined, invented or implanted false memories can result.

The most likely explanation for this kind of abreaction is that people who partake in meditation can sometimes be over-imaginative or more susceptible to suggestion (or self-suggestion) and enter a nightmare over which they have no control. These kind of reactions are extremely rare but not unknown, and again, the same thing can happen in hypnotherapy. Hypnotherapists sometimes can fall into the trap of looking for something that isn't there and in the process accidentally suggest something which enters the client's imagination and opens the door to a series of nightmarish, though false, memories – and then everyone's in trouble!

In a study by the University of California, researchers found that 63% of people who had been on intensive meditation retreats suffered at least one side-effect, ranging from confusion to panic and depression. There is a glaringly obvious reason for this and after carefully examining some of the antics of intense meditation weekends, it is hardly surprising that some people abreact.

For reasons that must be obvious, it is inadvisable to get people to meditate almost non-stop for an entire weekend. Quite apart from the fact that meditating for 10 hours a day actually has the opposite effect to that desired, the brain can become confused and weary. Hardly surprising then that some individuals begin to hallucinate. These are the same kind of techniques used by dangerous religious cults on unsuspecting recruits.

Other research has flagged up different issues from twitches to flapping arms and fits of euphoria. Again, unsurprising, given that when people get together in groups, there can be outbreaks of mass hysteria, even though they may be mild in nature. Hysteria is a phenomenon that is well known and understood – perhaps a little too well understood by the gurus whose purpose it is to achieve that end... and keep the money flowing in.

Add to that another well understood ingredient – suggestibility – and you have the recipe for a perfect storm. Sometimes, though rarely, problems can last for years and affect work and relationships.

Overall, meditation is a worthwhile pursuit and generally harmless. Its benefits outweigh any risks – if done properly, there is no more risk to mental health than listening to music or regularly taking part in sports or binge-watching box sets! The benefits of meditation are recognised and the vast majority of experts consider it to be a healthy pursuit.

Meditation and mindfulness in small doses, especially when used alongside or in conjunction with tried and tested therapies, can be beneficial... but in large doses and for excessive periods of time, I'm afraid it's a big NO from me!

The negative side of positive thinking

Being a pessimist has made me happier because I am never disappointed. Whenever I experience feelings of optimism I push them to the back of my mind, and when things turn out better than I expected, I feel happier.

We are constantly being told to think positively. There is a mountain of books on how to achieve this, some with ridiculous titles like *I Can Change Your Life*. The truth is, no one can change your life – except you! Buying the book will certainly change the life of the snake-oil salesman who wrote it and filled its pages with meaningless platitudes.

So... is the glass half full, or is the glass half empty? The answer is... the glass was twice as big as it needed to be. Ask a republican the same question and they will reply the glass is half full – a democrat will say it's half empty, and a liberal will say it's because the glass is racist. In any event, it doesn't matter what you think, you still have to wash it!

Merely thinking positively is futile and a waste of time. This is because of the very great danger you will neglect the practical issues associated with achieving goals, such as effort and application. Thinking too positively can actually prevent you from reaching your goals and in extreme cases lead to bankruptcy.

Positive thinking can make you lazy and complacent! Positive thinking is no good if you neglect the practicalities needed to make your dreams come true. Positively thinking you *will* succeed is no good if you don't have the awareness and the drive to get up early and *make* it happen. Success in life is about working hard and making your own luck. Bill Gates didn't start with a hundred billion, he started by working 18 hours a day.

Imagining the worst is a survival too, because imagining the worst case scenario forces us to formulate alternative plans – in times of crisis, having a plan B can be useful! The ancient Greeks practised negative visualisation three centuries before the birth of Christ. This helped them – like Lemony Snicket – prepare for a series of unfortunate events. These ancient Greeks were called the Stoics, and stoicism is still practised today by those whose feet are placed firmly on the ground. The Stoics mentally prepared themselves for things going wrong and practised dealing with them in a positive, practical way!

I am a stoic because I have no illusions about guardian angels, fate, or a universe that will provide. I make my own luck and I succeed by applying myself 100% to the task in hand. I don't have time for fantasy. I know what is achievable and what is not. An elementary knowledge of maths comes in handy.

The Roman Emperor Claudius began each day expecting interference, ingratitude, insolence, deceit, disloyalty, ill will and self-interest. This simplistic view of positive thinking encourages you to be lazy. Positive thinking is too easily confused with imagined success and can lead to complacency. When life doesn't pan out the way you expected, the shock of the disappointment of having to shop at Lidl can be devastating, particularly in those who really do believe the universe will provide'. In other words, it's always a mistake to put all your eggs in the one fantasy basket.

Maybe a little negative thinking mixed in with the positive would be better. This more balanced way of thinking is more likely to prepare one for the inevitable slings and arrows of outrageous fortune – the bumps along the road. Better to spend time thinking about

how to overcome obstacles and recover from disappointments. That way, when you encounter them, you will be better prepared to deal with them.

There is – apparently – a technique called ‘mental contrasting’. It involves imagining yourself achieving a task but also thinking about the obstacles and how to get round them. It has been around for thousands of years, even before the time of the ancient philosophers. Getting a grip of both worlds can help you find a more healthy balance between optimism and reality.

Positive thinking is all right in its own limited way, but it’s no good by itself – to succeed, you must have all the information. That way you will be more resilient, better prepared and better equipped to respond in a more constructive and reasoned way. It’s all about being able to weigh the positive *and* the negative before taking important decisions. That is in essence, what positive thinking is about!

Manifestly Ridiculous

There's a new fad in town! And all the 'wellness' experts are ecstatic – thrilled to bits at all the miraculous things it will help people to achieve, and all the money they're going to make! Roll up, roll up...! The new buzzword is... Manifestation! And it's set to take over the world... possibly.

Manifestation is strikingly similar to the last great fad, the magic book that sold in its millions, *The Secret*, the biggest pile of baloney since *I Can Make You Rich*, which made its author even richer. Manifestation is the same sort of vapid quackery guaranteed to relieve the gullible of their cash.

The principle is straightforward. All you have to do is visualise whatever it is you desire, and hey presto! your fantasy will turn to reality as if by magic. Want a new car? It will be yours before you know it. Want more romance in your life? Just visualise your heart's desire and they will be yours. Yes folks, eternal happiness can be yours for the imagining.

The process starts with a little meditation – the key that supposedly opens the door to manifestation. Meditation relieves you of all your emotional baggage and teaches you to be a happy person, content as can be with your lot. Interesting is that most of the followers of manifestation seem to be middle class women with above average disposable income and few financial worries.

Manifestation is made possible simply by strengthening your energy field. The scientific basis for this claim is – perhaps unsurprisingly – a closely guarded secret, but I suspect it's got something to do with allowing oneself to become delusional.

Here's another coincidence – the people who indulge themselves in this twaddle are the same people who immersed themselves the last fantasy pastime, convinced of its success by the fact they already had money before they started wishing for it. They have an uncanny ability to ignore the real world, preferring to immerse themselves in a self-indulgent fantasy existence where everything is wonderful all the time. The advantage for husbands is that whilst they are the ones paying the bills, at least they don't have to worry about their wives running off with the tennis coach. Satisfied with her Mercedes Convertible and long lunches with her vacuous friends, all will be peace at the golf club.

One of the reasons Manifestation is more than just the new 'in thing' – apart from the obvious fact that the old thing is now so last year – is because its accompanying commandments are ludicrously simple. One must first learn how to breathe and be patient. Ker-ching!!! That will be fifty quid please! Followed by the absolutely unmissable – and inevitable – invitation to the weekend retreats, the seminars with 'star' speakers and teachers who regale their enthralled audience with tales of their own success before selling the assembled suckers (there really is one born every minute) a plethora of overpriced, non-peer reviewed special diets, books, CD's, beads, meditation mats and related trinkets.

If this sort of s**t really worked, there wouldn't be lines of half-starving refugees trudging through Europe or any babies dying from AIDS in Africa. Like *The Secret*, Manifestation is exclusively for the wealthy – the poor don't get a look in. Maybe it's also a way of insulating from the horrors of the modern world, the drudgery of having to get up in the morning and get the kids to school, and making sure there's something on the table when they get home.

Life isn't fair. In the long run, acceptance of this one true fact is the real road to happiness. Only once one has recognised that life can rarely be perfect can one recognise the things that make it worth living. That must be manifestly obvious.

The benefits of meditation

Meditation can free the mind – and also keep it young. Regular meditation can knock seven and a half years off the middle-aged brain.

I use the techniques of relaxation and guided imagery – all constituent parts of hypnosis and self hypnosis – to help clients manage physical pain. A study undertaken by researchers at Wake Forest Baptist Medical Centre in North Carolina, discovered that meditating for just 20 minutes a day reduced pain more effectively than powerful drugs like morphine. [I have to at least mention the irony of a middle-American religion-based educational establishment claiming that meditation (aka hypnosis) is actually a good thing].

To all intents and purposes, both hypnosis and meditation (directed or otherwise) are really the same dance, albeit to a different tune. The techniques are almost the same, as are the desired results. In hypnotherapy, clients seeking pain relief – or to be more precise pain management – are taught self hypnosis to manage and control aches and pains as and when the need arises.

The study recruited 75 healthy and pain-free people and divided them into three groups before testing their pain responses. One group of volunteers underwent meditation and mindfulness training while the second group were given a placebo cream. The third group were given nothing. All the groups underwent a series of brain scans during which a heated probe was pressed against their skin until it reached a 'pain threshold' heat of 49 degrees celsius. The volunteers were then asked to rate the intensity of the pain, the level of unpleasantness of the pain, and their emotional response to the pain.

Scans made after the procedure on those who had been taught the breathing and relaxation techniques of meditation showed a calming of the same regions of the brain as when hypnosis was used.

Previous peer reviewed research has shown that morphine reduced physical pain by about 22%. The mindfulness meditation group reported that pain intensity was reduced by around 27% but the emotional toll of the pain was reduced by around 44%. The placebo group didn't fare too badly either – the placebo reduced the sensation of pain by 11% and the emotional aspect by 13%, but the patterns of brain activity were different.

This is obviously an important study and proves once again that you are a mind with a body, and not a body with a mind. The results of the Wake Forest study were reported in the *Journal of Neuroscience*.

Researchers at Jena University Hospital in Germany claim that the combination of intense concentration and relaxation trigger the growth of new brain cells. This is a significant discovery because Alzheimer's and other memory related malfunctions are symptoms of brain shrinkage, which in turn is due to neurons dying off as a result of old age. The Jena scientists scanned the brains of 50 men and women who regularly practised meditation and 50 men and women who didn't. When the scans were analysed, the images provided an age for each brain based on its physical condition – and the results were striking...

In general, the non-meditators' brain age and actual age were about the same, so a 55 year old's brain looked like it was 55. But... the meditators' brains were younger than their

years, with the average 50-year-old having a brain that belonged in a 42 or 43 year-old head!

The differences were particularly conspicuous in the older meditators – for every extra year spent meditating in youth, once the owner passed the age of 50, an extra year was knocked off brain age. If this research is accurate, then the results suggest that meditation is beneficial for brain preservation, with a slower rate of brain ageing throughout life.

This is a discovery I find exciting, because meditation involves relaxation, awareness and positive thinking – and no pills or potions!

Dr Christian Gaser, who collaborated with US and Australian scientists in the study – published in the journal *NeuroImage*, admits that it isn't absolutely clear *how* meditation protects the brain. It might just be that the mental processes involved in meditation really do trigger the growth of new cells and connections. The natural brain chemicals responsible for feelings of calm and well-being produced by meditation may also help.

However, before we get too excited about this research, it is only scientifically correct to include a note of caution. It could be that those who meditate may lead healthier lifestyles anyway. It's also possible that some inherent difference in brain structure makes particular people more likely to take up meditating. The participants in the study had all practised various types of traditional meditation for an average of 20 years, and some practiced as many as seven times a week. Some had more than 40 years' experience.

The results give no clue as to whether shorter periods of meditation would be of benefit, or if mindfulness would have the same effect. But the scans revealed that meditation isn't the only way to keep the mind youthful – being female also helps. Apparently, the brains of the women volunteers were, on average, three years younger than the men's, whether they meditated or not.

Nonetheless, meditation is credited with boosting health in numerous other ways, from boosting the immune system to easing loneliness. Meditation apart, human beings experience many and diverse states of happiness and experiencing any of them reduces our vulnerability to illness.

It has long been understood that emotions affect health. Emotions help you to prioritise and regulate your behaviour in ways that help you adjust to situational demands. Of the literally hundreds of studies investigating the association between a sunny disposition and improved health, 65% showed a link. For instance, researchers from the Universities of Utah and Virginia believe that happier people are more inclined to live a healthy lifestyle and that being happy and content may directly benefit the health of the heart and immune system.

The researchers admit that the real extent of the benefits of being cheerful on our health is unclear. That is almost certainly because all human beings are different – both physically and mentally. Bodies age at different rates and have different susceptibilities to disease and illness. They experienced different lifestyles, with all their ups and downs and of course individuals have different expectations of life. Add to that, the daily practice of identifying and categorising feelings in specific terms may also help us experience different emotions in varying contexts.

Mindfulness has never been touted as a 'cure' for anything. All mindfulness claims is to create awareness of a problem and isolate it so that the client can put things in

perspective. The easy mental gymnastics help clients 'ring-fence' negative feelings and emotions and mentally send them away – as with hypnosis.

However, researchers are now claiming that mindfulness [by itself] is no better at reducing stress than watching TV. I am also blessed with a thinking brain, so I agree. The notion that simply understanding you are doing something wrong will stop you doing it – for example smoking cigarettes – is clearly ludicrous. In that respect, mindfulness is no different than decision making and willpower.

In fairness, Mindfulness was never meant to be about massive change – mindfulness is simply about *awareness*. Part of the problem is that mindfulness has been hijacked by the tree-huggers. That aside, researchers at the University of Edinburgh, led by Yonas Alem, put 139 students on a six-week online 'mindfulness-based stress reduction course' with the catchy title *Be Mindful*.

All the students were at least 18 year old and did not have any medical conditions. At the same time, a second group were told to watch weekly episodes of the 2011 BBC documentary *Ancient Worlds*. Both groups were then tested regularly for stress, risk-taking and time preferences as well as health-related behaviours, and the results were assessed at the end of a six-month period.

The study found no significant changes in sleeping, smoking, drinking or binge-eating habits between those who practiced concentration and calmness-based mindfulness and those who simply relaxed in front of the TV. However, the study did find that mindfulness practice significantly reduced *perceived* stress and anxiety, even though the effect on decision-making and health-related behaviours was negligible.

This research notwithstanding, many people claim mindfulness helps them to relax after a long day at work. There's a very good reason for this – it's the relaxation process working its magic! Obvious when you think about it – or apply a little er... mindfulness!

Like hypnotherapy, mindfulness is supposed to help clients feel more calm and content and stop them dwelling so much on the past. Hypnotherapy does the same and it's much more powerful. In comparison, mindfulness seems a bit wishy-washy. In short, focus on your breathing, be aware of your feelings, then imagine a better way of feeling. It's just a matter of common sense that the relaxation and focus of hypnosis is just as effective.

Mindfulness meditation has been found to be beneficial for pain management and more recently, depression. Not only does it reduce clinical depression but it's also a powerful block preventing relapses. Mindfulness can reduce psychological stress and mindfulness based cognitive therapy includes methods which identify negative and destructive thought patterns which lead to problem behaviour.

Mindfulness exchanges dysfunctional obsessive thoughts for more positive ones, thereby improving mental health. Both mindfulness and hypnosis take place at the conscious level and the neurological correlates are likely to be about the same. But sessions of mindfulness therapy can go on for weeks, whereas with hypnosis, the client is able reinforce positive thoughts, feelings and emotions to such a degree that with some individuals, one session may be sufficient. As with hypnotherapy, mindfulness is designed to stop clients reviewing the past and worrying about the future – instead, clients are encouraged to live in, and enjoy, the present.