



## Mindfulness

This factsheet aims to give an overview of the therapy of mindfulness, to detail its main components and evaluate the therapy. Words in bold are defined in the glossary and the worksheet allows the opportunity to practice what you have learned.

The examiner expects you to be able to:

- Explain how the therapy of mindfulness links to the assumptions of the positive approach.
- Describe the main components of mindfulness.
- Evaluate the therapy in terms of its effectiveness.
- Evaluate the therapy in terms of the ethical issues it may present.

*Exam Hint: Make sure to check the specification of the exam board you are studying to know exactly what you are expected to learn. Mindfulness is stated as a therapy specifically on the WJEC/Eduqas specification, but it could also be included in a discussion or evaluation of therapy in general.*

### A. Introduction

Mindfulness is not only concerned with alleviating mental illnesses, but also in improving the general wellbeing of healthy individuals. For example, **chemotherapy** and **psychosurgery**, which originate from the **biological approach** can be used to alleviate the symptoms of disorders such as **schizophrenia**, depression, or **OCD**. Likewise, **systematic desensitisation**, which grew out of the behaviourist approach, can be used to treat phobias. While these therapies have had a good deal of success in treating mental illness, they are not appropriate for use with people who are not mentally ill. They can reduce suffering, but they cannot enhance and enrich the lives of people who are mentally healthy.



Mindfulness is different. While it can be used in the same way as traditional therapies in the treatment of mental illnesses, it has a much larger aim. Mindfulness is for all. Mindfulness techniques can be used by anyone, at any time, regardless of the status of an individual's mental health.



The key aim of mindfulness is to improve the wellbeing of an individual by helping them to be present in the here and now, and to have an increasing, non-judgemental awareness of their own thoughts. This can be done through several techniques, one in particular being **meditation**. Buddhists have practiced mindfulness for centuries but it is only in the last decade or so that psychologists have realised the potential benefits it offers. While it may have its roots in religion, modern mindfulness requires no religious belief, and is therefore accessible to all.



*Exam Hint: The fact that mindfulness can be used to improve the wellbeing of all individuals, not just the mentally ill, is a key difference that makes this therapy stand apart from others. If asked in the exam to compare between mindfulness and another therapy, this would be a good point to make.*

### B. How mindfulness links to the assumptions of the positive approach

While mindfulness techniques have been around for centuries, as a therapy it has only existed for a short while. It was the **positive approach** to psychology that embraced mindful ideas as the aims of the therapy link closely with the assumptions of the approach.



1. One of the key assumptions of positive psychology is to find ways to improve the wellbeing of all people, not just those who are mentally ill or suffering. Mindfulness shares this aim, and could therefore be said to typify the positive assumption of a focus on the **good life**.
2. Both the positive approach and mindfulness aim to nurture positive emotions, and to enable people to develop their strengths and virtues. The positive approach argues for the **authenticity of goodness and excellence** as a key assumption, meaning that positive emotions and human potential are seen as just as valid a study as negative emotion and suffering.
3. Mindfulness aims to empower people to take control over their thoughts and emotions, and embraces the concept of **free will**. The positive approach argues strongly the people have free will, and that a belief in **determinism** is detrimental to human flourishing.

*Exam Hint: If an exam question asks how the assumptions of the positive approach have been applied in mindfulness, just describing the therapy will gain you limited marks. You must make clear the link between the approach and the therapy; in other words, how are the key ideas of positive psychology integral to mindfulness?*

### C. Main components of mindfulness

The key aim of mindfulness is to increase an individual's awareness, and so help them to connect with and fully experience the present moment. People might spend much of their day worrying about the future or fretting over the past, so that they fail to notice the present. Often people may feel that their minds are full of thoughts that they feel they have little control over. Mindfulness techniques train an individual to first become aware of their thoughts in a non-judgemental way, and then through regular practice, learn to control these thoughts. Unlike other therapies that may last for a set amount of time, it is argued that mindfulness should be seen as a journey. It is about training the mind to think and act in a different way. It requires motivation and practice to create the necessary shift in perception. By engaging with the world in a mindful way, it is argued that an individual will experience less stress and anxiety, and this can lead to a happier, more engaging life.

Mindfulness can be taught in a number of ways. It can be delivered one-on-one, in groups, online, or through self-directed practice using

audio recordings, books, or mindfulness apps. Increasingly, schools, businesses, and other workplaces are implementing mindfulness classes for their students/workers.



There is a great variety in the methods used in mindfulness training. Many mindfulness courses will use some or all of the techniques described below.

### 1. Gaining control of thoughts

An individual may feel that their thoughts are out of their control. This can mean that negative thoughts can dominate their attention, leading to stress or anxiety. Mindfulness teaches techniques that allow people to achieve a state of alert, focused relaxation. Individuals are taught to pay attention to thoughts and sensations without judgement. They should not try to block the negative thoughts, or to try and alter them. They acknowledge the thought and let it pass. An important part of this is learning how to be present in the moment. Ways in which this can be done are:

- Sitting quietly and focusing on breathing, allowing thoughts and emotions to come and go. When your attention strays, focus again on your breathing. Acknowledge any thoughts and emotions, but don't focus on them. Allow them to pass.
- Shifting your attention from one part of the body to the next. For each body part, focus on the sensations you can feel, such as the clothes touching your skin, an itch on your hand, etc. Notice but don't engage with these sensations. Acknowledge them and move on.
- Engage with each of your senses in turn. For example, close your eyes and notice all the sounds that you would usually tune out. Again, you should notice but not engage with this sensory information.

### 2. Meditation

A large part of mindfulness training is meditation (in fact, all the mindful techniques described here can be seen as forms of meditation). Meditation is an ancient ritual, practiced to varying degrees in many cultures. Meditation is much more than just relaxation, although relaxation is a part of it. It is learning to focus on the sensations from the body, to tune out distractions from the world, and to allow thoughts to come and go in a detached way. Mindfulness meditation is not necessarily about making the mind go "blank"; it is about training the mind to focus on the body and not to wander.

Meditation can take a while to master effectively. There are many ways in which a person can meditate, and to an extent, the methods used will depend upon the individual. Some practitioners prefer to sit on the floor or a chair, others lie down. Some people find that focusing on a stationary point such as a candle helps them meditate, while others prefer to have their eyes closed. Some people meditate best in silence, others prefer gentle background noise.

One possible procedure for meditation, and one that is often recommended for beginners is the following:

- Sit in a comfortable position either on a straight-backed chair or a comfortable cushion on the floor.
- Close your eyes and focus on your breathing. For example, the feel of the air moving through your nose, or the sensation of your chest rising and falling. Try counting your breaths slowly to help your focus.
- Once your focus has been successfully narrowed in this way, begin slowly to widen it. Focus on the sounds around you.
- If thoughts or emotions appear, accept them without judgement and allow them to pass. This allows a person to understand that negative thoughts and feelings are impermanent.

- Throughout the meditation session, try to focus solely on the here and now. If your mind starts to wander, gently redirect it back to the sensations in the present.

It is recommended that beginners should start with five or ten minutes each day, increasing the time of each session as they become more proficient.

### 3. Informal practice

Mindfulness should not be limited to breathing exercises and meditation for a few minutes each day. Mindfulness can be seen as a way of living that can bring improvements in happiness and fulfilment. Therefore, an individual can be mindful when they are going about their day-to-day lives. Whatever task a person is engaged in, they can do it in a mindful way. This is done by focusing on the sensations generated by the task they are doing by slowing the process down and being fully present in the moment.



For example, if you were eating a meal, you would get yourself into a mindful frame of mind by stopping, focusing on your breathing, and bringing your awareness to the sensations in your body (if you are practising meditation regularly, these skills will become easier). Once in this relaxed, focused state, you would start eating, but rather than mindlessly taking bite after bite, you would focus on each mouthful, feeling the taste and texture. As with meditation, if your mind starts to wander, gently bring it back to the sensations in the moment. In this way, you are fully engaged in the moment, and this will generate more satisfaction and happiness.

### D. Evaluation: Effectiveness

Mindfulness is somewhat of a new buzzword that is espoused as the new cure all therapy. But how effective is it really? There is a growing body of research that suggests that mindfulness (either used in isolation or as part of another therapy) can be effective at improving mental wellbeing.



- Crane et al (2014): Investigated the effectiveness of Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), a type of mindfulness that incorporates ideas from the cognitive approach and has been used to treat depression. He found that MBCT reduced the recurrence rate over 12 months by 40-50% when compared with the patient's usual care.
- Williams et al (2013): Found that MBCT is as effective at reducing the recurrence of depression as antidepressant medication.
- Teasdale et al (2000): Found MBCT worked well to prevent the recurrence of depression in patients who had experienced three or more episodes of depression previously, but had little effect on patients who has suffered one or two episodes.
- Reibel et al (2001): Investigated the effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). This is a type of therapy given to patients suffering from long-term chronic, painful, or terminal illnesses. MBSR was shown to successfully reduce anxiety and depression in patients who underwent an 8-week MBSR course.

Mindfulness techniques have been adapted for a variety of settings such as the workplace, prisons, and to help pregnant women. Research suggests that mindfulness is adaptable enough to be applied in all aspects of life. One such scheme that has shown some success is mindfulness for schools. A successful Mindfulness in Schools project was set up in 2007 and is now being taught in 12 different countries.



This nine-week course is especially designed for school students, whether they are dealing with exam stress, bullying, or seeking to enhance study skills. It's being used to improve students' wellbeing as well as helping them to learn and concentrate better. Schemes such as this have been demonstrated to have positive outcomes with regards to reducing anxiety and distress as well as improving behaviour (Weare, 2013). Evidence also suggests that children who used mindfulness practices more frequently reported higher wellbeing and lower stress scores (Kuyken, 2013).

Studies into the effectiveness of mindfulness are not without their critics. Many of the studies have been criticised due to their small sample sizes. Also, mindfulness is not always deemed appropriate for the most serious of patients. People who are referred to mindfulness therapy are often those who are less ill, and this may skew the results as to showing greater improvements than may be seen in a more representative sample.



**Exam Hint:** Ensure that you go into the exam knowing the specific findings of studies into the effectiveness of mindfulness. Writing "Research has found mindfulness is effective" will gain few marks. Writing "One study found that mindfulness reduced the recurrence of depression over 12 months by 40-50%." will gain much higher marks.

### E: Evaluation: Ethics

When compared to more traditional therapies, mindfulness is often argued to be a more ethical alternative. There are a few side effects, especially when compared to biological therapies such as drugs or psychosurgery. It takes a highly positive attitude towards individual wellbeing. It promotes free will, empowering people to make changes in their own lives.

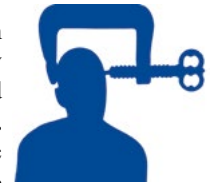
Even when compared to other psychological treatments, mindfulness could be argued to be more ethical. **Psychoanalysis**, for example focuses on a thorough analysis of a patient's childhood, which may be a stressful experience. **CBT**, which seeks to change the thought process, could prove frustrating for the patient. Mindfulness on the other hand is about the here and now, and to accept thoughts without judgement. There is no pressure on the client to dig up and relive painful memories, or to force a change in their thinking. On the other hand, mindfulness may not be appropriate for everyone. Many people who attempt mindfulness find it infuriating, and it may actually cause them more stress and anxiety. The skill of controlling your thoughts may be more difficult for some than others and people who struggle to be mindful may feel like they have failed, further fuelling their difficulties.

It could be argued that mindfulness does not get to the root cause of a psychological disorder. If mental illness is being caused by traumatic childhood memories, faulty thinking or current life stressors for example, mindfulness is of limited use in addressing these issues. During mindfulness, an individual is taught to accept their thoughts without judgement and without dwelling on them. However, this does nothing to address the issues that caused the thoughts in the first place. This means these thoughts could keep reoccurring if left unexamined. Therefore, mindfulness may not be appropriate for disorders such as **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)**, anxiety, and Schizophrenia, which are characterised by intrusive (uncontrollable) thoughts. However, while mindfulness may not get to the root cause of these thoughts, it could help an individual cope with them.



Another strength of mindfulness is that it is reasonably accessible. There are thousands of mindfulness courses run all over the country. Attendees are taught the basics of mindfulness and meditation, usually in a group setting. For those who cannot afford to pay for a mindfulness course, there are online resources. This is a strength for people who may be reluctant to visit a traditional psychologist, or who would prefer to undergo therapy without having to disclose their issues face-to-face. In this way, mental health relief can be accessed by people who would otherwise receive no support.

Meditation as a mindfulness practice is often argued to be harmless. However, a recently discovered, but rare, side effect of prolonged meditation is the **dark night phenomenon**. Prolonged deep meditation can trigger traumatic memories for some people, leading to cognitive and perceptual abnormalities, a loss of a sense of self, and an impairment of social relationships. While rare, and unlikely to be triggered by the mild meditation used in mindfulness, this is nevertheless an issue that needs further investigation, and something that mindfulness practitioners need to be aware of.



**Exam Hint:** If asked to evaluate the ethical issues of mindfulness, it is important that you include both ethical strengths and weaknesses. This will add the required range to your answer.

### Glossary

**Authenticity of goodness and excellence:** an assumption of the positive approach arguing that positive emotions are just as important as negative emotions.

**Behaviourist approach:** an approach in psychology that uses environmental explanations, such as conditioning, to explain behaviour.

**Biological approach:** an approach in psychology that uses biological explanations, such as genes, to explain behaviour

**CBT:** Cognitive Behavioural Therapy; therapy that aims to change both the thinking patterns and behaviour of a patient.

**Chemotherapy:** The use of drugs (e.g., antipsychotics) to treat mental illness

**Cognitive approach:** an approach in psychology that explains behaviour as being due to internal mental processes.

**Dark night phenomenon:** a rare side effect of prolonged meditation.

**Determinism:** states that our behaviour is due to forces beyond our control, and not our own free will.

**Free will:** the opposite to determinism. The idea that we have control over our own behaviour free of external influences.

**Good Life:** an assumption of the positive approach that argues that the aim of life should be to identify and nurture your strengths. **Meditation:** an ancient practice focused on relaxation and the clearing of the mind.

**Mindfulness:** a therapy and a way of life that aims to help people cope with stress and anxiety by focusing on the here and now.

**OCD:** Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. A mental illness characterised by obsessive behaviour and intrusive thoughts

**Positive approach:** An approach in psychology that focuses on improving human happiness and potential.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):** A mental illness that can occur after a traumatic event where an individual may relive the trauma.

**Psychoanalysis:** A therapy that focuses on events in childhood and thoughts and emotions in the unconscious.

**Psychosurgery:** A treatment for mental illness where parts of the brain are destroyed or severed to bring about a change in behaviour.

**Schizophrenia:** A psychotic mental illness characterised by irrational thinking, delusions, and hallucination

**Systematic desensitisation:** A therapy for phobias where a patient is slowly introduced to the feared stimulus in stages.

	Image	Caption	URL
1		Mindfulness is all about learning to control your mind	<a href="https://pixabay.com/en/face-soul-head-smoke-light-sad-636095/">https://pixabay.com/en/face-soul-head-smoke-light-sad-636095/</a>
2		Unlike medication, mindfulness is for everyone, even if not mentally ill	<a href="https://pixabay.com/en/thermometer-temperature-fever-flu-833085/">https://pixabay.com/en/thermometer-temperature-fever-flu-833085/</a>
3		Mindfulness was originally a Buddhist practice	<a href="https://pixabay.com/en/buddha-stone-figure-religion-1290449/">https://pixabay.com/en/buddha-stone-figure-religion-1290449/</a>
4		Positive psychology aims to improve the happiness of all people	<a href="https://pixabay.com/en/approval-female-gesture-hand-happy-15914/">https://pixabay.com/en/approval-female-gesture-hand-happy-15914/</a>
5		Mindfulness teaches people to live in the here and now	<a href="https://pixabay.com/en/alarm-clock-stand-up-time-of-sleep-1193291/">https://pixabay.com/en/alarm-clock-stand-up-time-of-sleep-1193291/</a>
6		Meditation is an integral part of mindfulness	<a href="https://pixabay.com/en/girl-sunset-meditation-relaxation-1705935/">https://pixabay.com/en/girl-sunset-meditation-relaxation-1705935/</a>
7		Being mindful means focusing on the sensations of the current moment	<a href="https://pixabay.com/en/spring-asia-wheat-calm-peaceful-1209715/">https://pixabay.com/en/spring-asia-wheat-calm-peaceful-1209715/</a>
8		Many studies into the effectiveness of mindfulness have been carried out	<a href="https://pixabay.com/en/scientist-with-microscope-silhouettes-996187/">https://pixabay.com/en/scientist-with-microscope-silhouettes-996187/</a>
9		Mindfulness schemes have been implemented in some schools	<a href="https://pixabay.com/en/school-boys-girls-buddhists-481661/">https://pixabay.com/en/school-boys-girls-buddhists-481661/</a>
10		With its focus on the here and now, mindfulness may be less stressful than other therapies	<a href="https://pixabay.com/en/headache-pain-stress-health-sick-1472830/">https://pixabay.com/en/headache-pain-stress-health-sick-1472830/</a>
11		Many people who teach mindfulness have little training, meaning they may be causing damage	<a href="https://pixabay.com/en/ache-head-human-male-man-pain-1297598/">https://pixabay.com/en/ache-head-human-male-man-pain-1297598/</a>

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**Worksheet: Mindfulness**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. “Mindfulness is not just for the mentally ill.” Explain what is meant by this statement.

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2. Explain how one assumption of the positive approach has been applied in mindfulness.

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3. Describe how a man could practice mindfulness when he is walking his dog.

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4. How effective is mindfulness as a therapy? Use research evidence to support your answer

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