

Learning to let worries go



What strategies have you been using to deal with worrying or upsetting thoughts in the past?

Have people been telling you to 'be positive' or remember that you 'are lucky'?

How easy has this been for you?

As you've probably found, it's very difficult to try to control or avoid worrying and to block negative thoughts out of your mind. In fact, sometimes when you try to do this you end up directing more attention towards these negative thoughts and struggling with them even more. That is, the more you try not to 'be negative' or worry, the more you will be.

Fortunately there is an alternative. While you can't choose not to have negative or worrying thoughts, you can choose how you respond to them. One way to respond is by being 'mindful'.

Being mindful involves noticing when your mind is drifting off into unhelpful or negative thoughts and, instead of buying into or chasing them, trying to turn your attention back to what is happening in the 'here and now'. This might sound a bit complicated at first, but trust us on this one and read on!

When you are being 'mindful' you are aiming to:

- Notice what you are experiencing without judging or trying to avoid it
- Be open to the variety of experiences (internal and external) that you have
- Control your attention (but not what you see or think)
- Stay in the present moment

Busy lifestyles generally mean that people rarely do things 'mindfully' or stay entirely in the present moment.

How often do you plan what you are going to wear for the day while you are having a shower or, listen to music while going for a walk?

When you are doing these sorts of things you are not bringing your attention to one thing at a time and are not being mindful.

While learning to go about life mindfully is a difficult skill to learn, it has been proven to be a very useful strategy for many people, so it's certainly worth a go. The following exercise might help you get started.

- 1. Sit in a chair with your feet on the ground.**
- 2. Close your eyes and ask yourself “What thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations can I feel right now?” Spend at least 30 seconds acknowledging, observing and describing these thoughts to yourself without passing any judgements, trying to answer, avoid or change them.**
- 3. Once you’ve noticed these thoughts, then you can choose to let them go. Your only response might be something like, “Oh here comes a worry, thank you mind”. You may like to visualise your worries as written words, clouds floating by or leaves in a stream, say to yourself “these are not facts, they are just thoughts” and watch them move or wash away.**
- 4. Now for the next three minutes or so, focus your attention on your breathing. Notice your chest and stomach rising and falling. When you find you are distracted by a thought, label it as “a thought” and gently return your attention back to your breathing.**
- 5. Finally direct your attention towards the sensations being experienced throughout your whole body while you breathe. Notice the chair you are sitting in, the temperature of the air around you and the sounds you can hear. Wiggle your fingers and toes and notice how it feels. Then again, focus back on your breathing.**

What most people find when they do this exercise is that when they are concentrating on what is happening in the immediate moment, there is less room in their mind for unhelpful emotions such as worry or fear and when worries do come up, it’s easier not to get caught up in them.

You can do exercises like this anywhere. For example while walking in a garden you could notice the feel of the lawn on your feet, the sun on your skin and the smell and colour of the flowers and trees.

Most people find this difficult to do at first because our minds have a tendency to wander off from the present moment. Rest assured this happens to almost everyone. Try not to pass judgement and get frustrated – instead, just congratulate yourself for noticing what your mind is doing and then focus back on the present.

To have someone talk you through this sort of process (by downloading a free mp3), visit http://contextualpsychology.org/free_audio The ‘leaves on a stream exercise’ might be a good place to start. Alternatively, try ‘mindful breathing’ by visiting http://emedia.rmit.edu.au/communication/media/audio/sec4Segments/SixACT_Conv4Part2.mp3 or ‘mindfulness of thoughts’ http://emedia.rmit.edu.au/communication/media/audio/sec4Segments/SixACT_Conv4Part3.mp3