

MINDFULNESS AND MANAGING ANXIETY

INTRODUCTION.

With long term practice mindfulness has been shown to have a significant effect on the management of anxiety but what might it have to offer those of us who may be just starting out or have not yet developed a steady daily practice? These pages offer some basic guidelines and resources.

THE BASIC IDEA

- i. Your attention is always somewhere
- ii. Where it is will affect your mood and your sense of well-being
- iii. So bringing greater *intention* to where you place your *attention* can have a real effect on the levels of anxiety you experience

But there are several levels to our response to this and it is best to start with level 1 and work up only when you feel ready and able.

LEVEL 1: 'WISE DISTRACTION'

Level 1 is less to do with meditation practice and more to do with how you organise your day - which will have an effect on where your attention is.

It is a good thing, then to plan your day thoughtfully even with something of a timetable for yourself – especially if you are home alone or not able to do your normal work. Without a plan like this we can end up drifting and then our attention will quite likely drift towards things that are fuelling our anxiety.

But even with a plan it is helpful to notice that each activity you engage in will involve your attention being placed somewhere. And if you choose too many activities which lead you to focus on things which add to your anxiety then you may need to shift the balance.

For instance a key question might be when and how often you check on the news. Yes, it is important for us to keep informed but once or maximum twice a day may well be enough. Keeping checking in with the latest stories may be a pull for us – with the sense that I mustn't miss out on something important – but the important things will still be there at the start/end of the day. Also there may be other things which fuel our anxiety like conversations with family or with vulnerable people.

So, what we may need is a good dose each day of what we might call 'wise distraction'. This involves deliberately choosing to engage in some simple activities which absorb our attention and draw us away from anxious things. Simple chores & tasks can be good, done with real devotion and attention to detail. Work in the garden or anything creative will be

helpful. Reading something that has nothing to do with the anxiety (and preferably not something that will provoke new anxieties!) is also good. And finally exercise and time in nature is also good.

So, remain engaged with all that is going on, of course, but perhaps more briefly with lots of time focused on other things. Then notice the effect this is having on your mood and anxiety levels.

LEVEL 2: 'FOCUSED ATTENTION'

Level 1 may be all you can manage or even, you sense, quite enough for you. But if you want to go a bit further then time spent practicing focused attention can be really helpful to counteract the mind's tendency to drift. This is because, as I say, when the mind drifts it will very often tend to drift towards the negative things in life.

There are a number of meditations which can help with this but it is probably best to stay with body and breath focused meditations. On the 'Finding Peace' meditation link (see 'resources') these are called: 'the body scan', 'mindful movement', 'body and breath' and 'breath and body'.

It will be best to use these in conjunction with the book which goes with it (also noted in 'resources') but if you want to explore them anyway it will be best to try them out and see what works best for you since we are all different. They will all be helpful in different ways and worth trying in time but when dealing with anxiety it is better to start with what seems supportive than what might feel challenging. If you can find one that works for you then stick with it, daily if possible.

LEVEL 3: 'INVESTIGATION'

Interestingly this is probably the one to know about in order to avoid – until such a time as when you feel stable and resourced enough to explore further.

By 'investigation' I mean looking to uncover the roots of our anxiety in order gradually to dismantle the thought patterns and habits which maintain anxious mood.

This can be helpful but it comes with the danger of being sucked into a whirlpool or circular anxious thinking which can make things worse if we do not know how to approach it skilfully.

So, first, especially while we are working at levels 1 & 2 it might just be worth noting that this could be a trap we can get caught up in unhelpfully. And if we notice the mind starting to ruminate on the causes of or the reasons for our anxiety we might decide that this is unhelpful and go back to wise distraction. In time, yes of course, investigation can be part of the picture and there are meditations which can help with this. But maybe not yet!

RESOURCES

The 'Finding Peace' book.

This is a very helpful book/course which you can work through at home but it is worth noting that the most useful chapters will be 'Weeks 1-3' of the actual course:

MINDFULNESS – A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO FINDING PEACE IN A FRANTIC WORLD by
MARK WILLIAMS AND DANNY PENMAN (Piatkus)

The 'Finding Peace' meditations audio.

The link to the audio meditations for this book is here but, as suggested, probably best to stick with meditations 1-4 to start with:

<https://m.soundcloud.com/calculus8/sets/mindfulness-mark-williams-and-danny-penman>

Mindfulness and anxiety.

A book (though not a course) focused more specifically on Mindfulness and anxiety:

MINDFULNESS FOR UNRAVELLING ANXIETY by RICHARD GILPIN (Leaping Hare press)

Weekly on-line sessions.

The Oxford Mindfulness Centre's weekly on-line mindfulness sessions starting 25th March with 'Finding steadiness in troubled times':

<https://oxfordmindfulness.org/online-sessions-podcasts/>

The Mountain meditation.

The 'Mountain meditation' is a 15 minute meditation written by John Kabat Zinn to help with finding a sense of grounding and anchoring when all around is uncertain:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Kg-Z8RliAI>

Put together by Tim Stead, accredited mindfulness teacher: www.timsteadmindfulness.org