

*Enough. These few words are enough.
If not these words, this breath.
If not this breath, this sitting here.
This opening to the life
we have refused again and again
until now.
Until now.*

David Whyte

A very warm welcome. The first part of this document provides information about mindfulness and the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme. The second part covers the logistics of attending one of my MBSR courses.



Mindfulness

Frequently-Asked Questions

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a trainable skill: Attention. Therefore, mindfulness is a form of attention training. But there's something specific that makes mindfulness practice special: The element of being non-judgemental as we pay attention. Mindfulness is non-judgemental present moment awareness. We can learn to focus our attention on something without colouring what we observe with our many beliefs, opinions, preferences, etc. We learn to be with something just as it is – without needing it to be different. We learn to pay what is often referred to as kindly attention. We cultivate an attitude of non-judgement and look at things as if we were in the observer seat. When we do this, we can step back from our issues for a while -even if only for one moment- and create a gentle breathing space between ourselves and our thoughts. We learn to relate to issues rather than from them. This practice can allow us to *respond* to whatever occurs instead of reacting to it.

Mindfulness helps us to wake up from the automatic pilot mode of mind. On automatic pilot, we are more likely to feel triggered. Events around us, and our own thoughts, feelings and sensations (of which we may be only dimly aware) can trigger old habits of feeling, thinking and behaviour that are often unhelpful. This can often lead to worsening mood, or to physical and emotional symptoms of stress.

The aim of mindfulness is to increase our awareness so that we can learn to live more fully, responding to situations with choice rather than reacting automatically. We do this by learning to pay attention to all our experiences, including our bodily sensations, thoughts, moods, and emotions, and to the small changes within them.

Is Mindfulness a religious practice?

Although it is generally considered that mindfulness has its roots in Buddhism (which is a philosophy and science of mind rather than a religion), mindfulness can be experienced and practiced entirely secularly. The MBSR course has no intention to purposefully promote any religion and all sessions and practices are secular.

How to practice mindfulness? And is it the same as meditation?

During the MBSR programme, you will learn about formal and informal mindfulness practice. Formal practice consists of exercises including sitting meditation, “body scans,” breath awareness, and mindful movement. Informal practices invite us to bring mindful awareness to daily activities such as doing the dishes, taking a shower, mindful listening to a friend, and so on. All great opportunities to practice paying non-judgemental attention. It is more challenging than it may seem! We soon realise how distracted we are during those everyday activities... To build the mindfulness “muscle,” it is important to train it. To use an analogy, if mindfulness is your fitness level, you’d go to the meditation gym to boost that fitness level. However, Mindfulness is but one form of meditation. During the MBSR course, you have ample opportunity to experience both formal and informal mindfulness practice.

How does it work?

Psychologically, practicing mindfulness (intentionally paying kindly attention) allows for a shift in perspective to occur. A meta-cognitive awareness called re-perceiving or decentering. Re-perceiving can help change our relationship to our experience (including thoughts, feelings, and emotions). It becomes easier to disidentify from our mind’s content, observe the inner commentary and recognise the impermanence of our predicament. This is not passive resignation but a very alive, active process that facilitates a healthy sense of control and befriending ourselves.

Neurologically, mindfulness practice can positively affect the brain and other parts of our nervous system. With mindfulness practice we develop our capacity to integrate different parts of the brain so they can work more harmoniously together, leading to better perspective-taking, less emotional reactivity, and more self-regulation.

What are the benefits?

Although mindfulness is not a panacea and mustn't be presented as one, there are many well-documented benefits that thousands of people around the world report as a result of practicing mindfulness. Countless scientific studies back up these results and can easily be accessed online for further information. In England, the National Health Service offers mindfulness training as a treatment to help prevent depressive relapse.

Cultivating a daily mindfulness practice can: Increase self-awareness and self-regulation, reduce stress, bolster the immune system, improve empathy, memory, perspective-taking, attention, patience, reduce anxiety, and more. Overall, practicing mindfulness can lead to suffering less, greater wellbeing and flourishing in life.

MBSR

"Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction is an effective, scientifically researched method for reducing physical and psychological suffering while building resilience, balance, and peace of mind."

- Mindfulness Center at Brown University

MBSR was developed by Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn in the 1970's at the University of Massachusetts Medical Centre. It is an 8-week, evidence-based programme that uses a combination of mindfulness meditation, mindful stretching, yoga, and interactive group exercises to help participants explore habitual patterns of thinking, behaviour, and more. MBSR is a secular and intensive mindfulness training course to assist people with stress, anxiety, depression, and pain. To help enable that, the following seven foundational attitudes of mindfulness according to Kabat-Zinn are explored during the course: Acceptance, non-judging, non-striving, beginners mind, letting go, patience and trust.

The programme is taught by specially trained teachers. It does not intend to diagnose, treat, or cure any medical condition, but rather to help participants change the way they relate to their circumstances through the powerful practice of non-judgemental mindful awareness. This approach can help people live more effectively with their problems. MBSR has proven to be so successful, it is used in hospitals around the world and is also taught in non-clinical settings, including workplaces, schools, and many other contexts.

About MBSR Classes

This is an 8-week online programme. Classes are held live, weekly, and last approx. 2 hours and 15 minutes. Daily “homework” mindfulness practice (min 6 days per week) is about 30 mins and an essential part of the course. There is also an All-Day between Weeks 6 and 7 (subject to change). More info on the All-Day will be provided separately during the course. MBSR class size is approx. 15 participants to ensure a comfortable and enriching learning experience for all.

The MBSR course Christoph teaches follows the official MBSR curriculum (Centre for Mindfulness, University of Massachusetts Medical School) and MBSR training documents by the Centre for Mindfulness Research & Practice, Bangor University.

A 120-page "Course Companion" workbook will be provided.

Upon completion of the 8-week course and All-Day, you receive a Certificate of Completion.

Session 1 – Introducing Mindfulness

Theme: There is more right with you than wrong with you

Session 2 – Perception

Theme: Perception and creative responding

Session 3 – Mindfulness of the Breath & the Body in Movement

Theme: The pleasure and power of being present

Session 4 – Learning About our Patterns of Reactivity to Stress

Theme: The shadow of stress

Session 5 – Coping with Stress: Using Mindfulness to Respond Instead of React

Theme: Finding the space for making choices

Session 6 – Stressful Communications and Interpersonal Mindfulness

Theme: Working with difficult situations

All-Day Session

Session 7 – Lifestyle choices. How Can I Best Take Care of Myself?

Theme: Cultivating kindness towards self and others

Session 8 – Keeping Your Mindfulness Alive!

Theme: The 8th week is the rest of your life

About Christoph

Christoph has completed a Master's degree in Teaching Mindfulness-Based Approaches at Bangor University, is a BAMBA-registered Mindfulness teacher, learning & development professional, certified coach, and teaches on the meditation app, Insight Timer. He is the founder of The Manchester Mindfulness Festival. Christoph is particularly fascinated by the intersection of neuroscience, mindfulness, and secular spirituality. He was born in the Flemish part of Belgium (Temse) and has lived in the UK since 2002.



Start Your MBSR Journey

Registration for MBSR courses is open year-round. For more information and to register, please email Connect@ChristophSpiessens.com or call +44 (0)7884 076 893. The fee for this course is £175 + VAT per person. Concessions available. This includes tuition, the “Course Companion” workbook, and meditation recordings. An Orientation Questionnaire (including Consent Form) along with payment details will be sent separately to you.

Home Practice

Daily home practice is an essential part of the MBSR programme. You will be informed during each weekly class what the homework exercises will entail. Since mindfulness is developed through practice, please try to practice daily – and especially notice when you are finding it hard to do so. Struggling can be a rich learning opportunity and can be discussed with your teacher. A part of each weekly class will be devoted to reflecting on home practice learning experiences.

Why practice daily? Well, the patterns of the mind that we will be working to change by participating in this programme have usually been around for a long time. Often, these patterns are habitual and automatic. Putting time and gentle effort into learning new ways can help us succeed in making changes in these long-established ways of mind.

Recommended websites with meditations for your home practice:

<https://soundcloud.com/christoph-spiessens>

<https://insighttimer.com/christophspiessens>

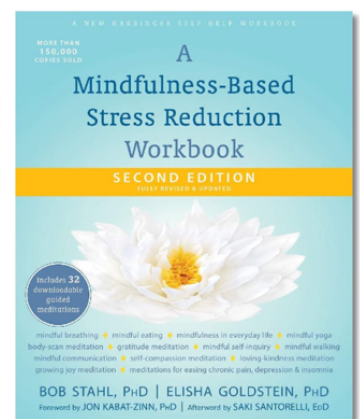
<https://www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness/audio/index.php.en>

<https://community.mindfulness-network.org/course/view.php?id=15>

A Note of Caution: Do not listen to the audio tracks while driving or undertaking any other activity that requires your attention. Also ensure that all practices are done in a safe and suitable environment. If any of the practices result in an adverse physical, psychological, or emotional reaction, discontinue the practices immediately and contact your mindfulness teacher, or your physical or mental health care provider as necessary. None of the material provided as part of this course is intended to act as a cure for any condition or to serve as a substitute for consultation and/or treatment by your health care provider.

Course Workbook

It is recommended you keep notes of your experiences as the course progresses which can be useful to help facilitate your own learning process. You can use the “Course Companion” workbook handouts provided weekly by Christoph, your own journal, and the additional suggested workbook called, “A Mindfulness- Based Stress Reduction Workbook” by Bob Stahl, Ph.D. and Elisha Goldstein Ph.D. (please note, this additional workbook is not included in the course fee. Please consider purchasing your copy before the course starts.) All notes are confidential and you will never be asked to share anything with your peers. (Of course, you can always use your notes to prepare for a class or you can bring them to class to share with the teacher or your peers if you wish.)



Practice and Patience

The sessions will include some theory but there will be a significant emphasis on experiencing/practicing mindfulness. Our classes will therefore be highly experiential and comprise of formal and informal practices, including gentle movement, basic Yoga, short and longer sitting meditations, body scans, and visualisation exercises. The entire programme is offered in a secular format and no previous experience is required.

A central aim of the approach is to learn how to be more fully aware and present in each moment of life. The good news is that this makes life more enjoyable, interesting, vivid, and fulfilling. On the other hand, this means facing what is present, even when it is unpleasant and difficult. In practice you will find that turning to face and acknowledge difficulties is, in the long run, the most effective way to reduce unhappiness. In this course you will learn gentle ways to face difficulties and will be supported while doing this.

Because we will be working to change established patterns of mind, much of the approach will involve investing considerable time and effort, the effects of which may only become apparent later. In many ways, this is much like gardening – we have to prepare the ground, plant the seed, and ensure that they are adequately watered and nourished – and then wait patiently for the results. The encouragement is therefore to approach this course with the same spirit of patience and persistence – committing yourself to put the time and effort into what will be asked of you, while accepting, with patience, that the fruits of your efforts may not show straight away.

A Moment to Pause and Reflect...

You may find it useful to write down your responses to these questions. When the course is over, you can then revisit your original reasons for coming on the programme.

What has drawn me to mindfulness?

What are my expectations of the programme?

What do I want or hope to get out of doing the course?

What fears/concerns/doubts do I have about the course?

Safeguarding and Professional Disclaimer

“Mindfulness is neither relaxation nor in the service of becoming relaxed. While relaxation may be a positive outcome of some mindfulness practices, mindfulness is about attending to and being aware of our experiences, whether they are positive, negative, or neutral. Mindfulness is not about zoning out. In fact, it is referred to in classical teachings as waking up to our experiences and lives. In mindfulness-based programmes, the practice has the intention to better understand the mind and then to train it in the service of living with less suffering and greater joy and ease.”

From “Mindfulness – Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Psychology” by Christina Feldman and Willem Kuyken, PhD.

Please take good care of yourself as you participate in the MBSR programme – and beyond. The practice of mindfulness is about learning to be kinder to yourself, to be more compassionate with yourself, and exploring your personal boundaries. Mindfulness practice is not about pushing yourself beyond your limits. If you have any concerns, please approach your mindfulness teacher as soon as possible.

Christoph Spiessens is a certified coach, BAMBA registered, certified mindfulness teacher, and experienced learning & development professional. He is not a licensed psychologist or health care professional and his website content (articles, videos, podcasts, etc.) and mindfulness services do not replace the care of psychologists or other healthcare professionals. The material contained in this programme is expressed in good faith for general guidance, and no liability can be accepted for loss or expense incurred because of relying in particular circumstances on statements made here. Under no circumstances can you hold Christoph Spiessens liable for any actions that you take because of reading, watching, or listening to any content during and after attending this MBSR course. Under no circumstances can you hold Christoph Spiessens liable for any actions that you take as a result of participating in working with Christoph Spiessens.



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