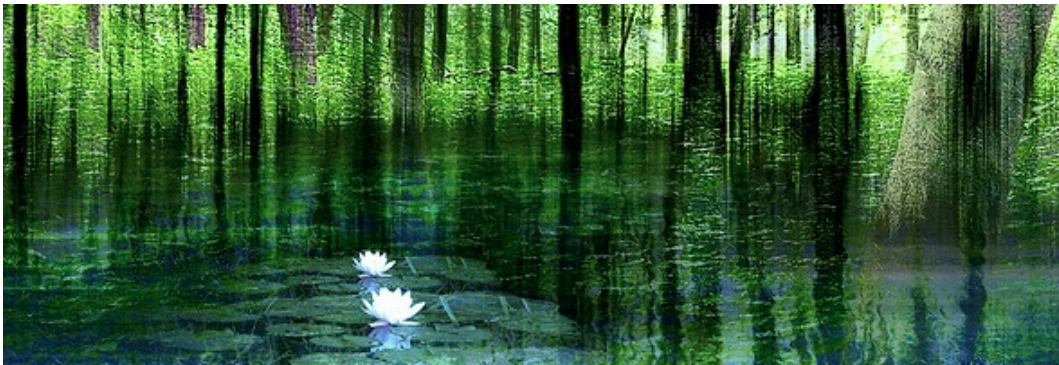


Back to the Present

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Taking some time to focus on ourselves allows us to reduce the levels of anxiety. And it's something we can do anytime really.

University students, especially in their first year, may experience some distress in their academic life. Living for the first time on their own or with other students, together with the workload of the course, can sometimes cause feelings of anxiety that interfere with their goals.

Tanya John, who is studying Product Design at the NTU, wanted to be able to control those emotions. She had already been practising Mindfulness, but really invested more time in it when she started the university.

Mindfulness, a form of meditation, helps to find the peace and calm that we need to be better organised and more successful in our academic life, says Edo Shonin, research psychologist at the Nottingham Trent University.

Recognising our thoughts

“Mindfulness is really a training of the mind, and is training the mind to be present,” says

Heather Regan-Addis, trainer at the Mindfulness Association. “We spend a lot of our time thinking, thinking about what is going to happen in the future, or going over negative events in the past. This can cause quite a lot of suffering and difficulty,” she says.

This suffering and this confusion prevents us of objectifying and dealing with the things that worry us. Meditation, which is the means to achieve Mindfulness, aims to calm and focus the mind, usually on an anchor, such as the breath, says Shonin. “Once we establish ourselves there, and our mind is calm and concentrated, we can move on to develop an awareness of feelings and of internal and external phenomena in this present moment.”

The purpose is not to get rid of the anxiety or the stress, says Jake Dartington, who teaches courses at Nottingham Mindfulness. The thoughts and worries about the deadline for an assignment, for example, may project ourselves onto a negative future and amplify the stress. Dartington says that “with Mindfulness we may be able to recognise those thoughts as being thoughts rather than as things that are definitely true.” With this awareness, we can bring ourselves back to the present moment and act reflectively over the situation, he says.

Living life mindfully

Being mindful is more than a practise. It is actually a way of being, says Shonin. “We do not have to sit on the floor with our legs folded. The idea of Mindfulness is that you practise it in your daily life.”

So, whatever you do, you should be doing it mindfully.

This is why Tanya practises with her eyes open, because it makes it easier to transfer it into everyday life. She says that she can practise it even in a lecture. “I could be sitting in a lecture and be in the same mindset. You pay attention more because you don’t have a lot of other thoughts going around in your head.”

This portability is also helpful when you find yourself stressed in the middle of the day. Dartington says that the less dependent the practise is on a particular place, the more portable it is. But ideally you should choose a place where you can be relatively undisturbed. When Tanya takes a separate time to practise, she prefers to do it first thing in the morning.

“If it’s possible, it’s best to choose the same time every day,” says Regan-Addis. She suggests starting with 10 minutes and then gradually add more time. “What’s really important is to do something every day, so practising 10 minutes every day is much better than practising an hour twice a week,” she adds.

Tanya sometimes practises for half an hour, but she says that even five minutes is good. “We have more time than we think, but we just use it in different ways. If you try it and you realise that it does actually help, then you make time for it,” she says.

If you find extra time during the day, good places to practise are libraries, parks and even toilets, says Lina Mookerjee, director of the Praxis School of Yoga in Nottingham, and also Mindfulness trainer. Edo Shonin suggests to also use the showers and the meals as mindful moments and to train to focus our mind on the experience of the water or experiencing the tastes.

Navigating the mind

There are a large number of books, CDs and online resources to get us started, but a course gives the foundation to develop our own practise, says Dartington. Shonin compares it to learning to swim: it might not be safe enough to just read about it and jump into it on our own. “As you take this journey inwards, some of the things might not be nice. Looking at what you have done, or what has happened to you can be unhealthy. That is why it is important to be with someone who knows how to guide you through,” says Shonin.

“It can be quite a challenge for people to just recognise how busy their minds are thinking all the time,” Regan-Addis says. But as you practise, “you start responding differently to situations where otherwise you would lose your temper or get irritated,” she adds.

“I’m just always kind of in tune with my emotions,” says Tanya. “If I ever feel like I’m getting stressed, then I can easily kind of dissolve it. I’ve generally felt that it has improved my life and my attitude towards everything. And it’s enjoyable as well, it’s not like a burden or anything.”

Sergio Pereira