

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

David Whyte

A very warm welcome. The first part of this document aims to provide information about Mindfulness and the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course. The second part covers the logistics of attending one of my MBSR courses (next start date: Monday 10 October 2022, 7-9pm UK).

I am currently studying for a Master's degree in Teaching Mindfulness-Based Approaches at Bangor University (4 years, part-time) and I am a certified Mindfulness Teacher (certification by The UK College of Mindfulness Meditation, approved by the British Psychological Society).



Christoph Spiessens, Summer 2022

Mindfulness

Frequently-Asked Questions

Please note: These are brief answers to complex concepts! There is an abundance of research information available. Please just ask me for additional resources if you are interested in learning more.

- **What is Mindfulness?**

Mindfulness is a trainable skill. That skill is **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 *reperceiving* or *decentering*. Reperceiving 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 which facilitates a healthy sense of control and befriending ourselves.

Neurologically, Mindfulness practice can positively affect the brain and other parts of our nervous system. When we pay mindful attention, we operate more from the prefrontal cortex (the rational part of the brain which we use for more executive functions such as critical thinking, and is evolutionary the youngest part of the brain) therefore downregulating activity in the older, more emotional and fear-involved parts of the brain. 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.

The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome.

MBSR

"Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) 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 weekly and last approx. 2 hours. Daily homework mindfulness practice (min 6 days per week) is about 30 – 45 mins and an essential part of the course. There is an All-Day between Week 6 and Week 7. More info on the All-Day event will be provided separately during the course. MBSR class size is between 5 and 15 participants to ensure a comfortable and enriching learning experience for all.

The MBSR course Christoph teaches carefully 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.

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.

Theme: “Dive in!”

Session 7 – Life-Style 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 is a certified Mindfulness teacher, Learning & Development professional and teaches on the meditation app Insight Timer. He is the founder of The Manchester Mindfulness Festival. His personal development book, 'Life of a Lifetime,' is published by Business Expert Press, NY. Christoph is particularly fascinated by the intersection of neuroscience, Mindfulness and spirituality. He is studying for a master's degree in Teaching Mindfulness-Based Approaches at Bangor University. Christoph 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 £80 + VAT. This includes tuition, handouts and meditation recordings. The workbook is *not* included in the fee and is available for around £10 from major retailers.

Christoph will process your enquiry or application ASAP. An Orientation Questionnaire (including Consent Form) along with payment details will be sent separately to you.

Next MBSR Course

Starts 10 October 2022

Mondays 7-9pm UK

Class Dates and Times

Monday 10 October 7-9 pm UK
Monday 17 October 7-9 pm UK
Monday 24 October 7-9 pm UK
Monday 31 October 7-9 pm UK
Monday 7 November 7-9 pm UK
Monday 14 November 7-9 pm UK
Retreat: Sunday 20 November 10 am - 4 pm UK
Monday 21 November 7-9 pm UK
Monday 28 November 7-9 pm UK

More info on the All-Day retreat will be provided separately

All sessions are facilitated on ZOOM. This software is free.

The ZOOM link for all weekly classes *and* the All-Day event is:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/8478145481>

Meeting ID: 847 814 5481 **Passcode: 384059**

The ZOOM classroom will be open 5 minutes before the official start time. If you are unable to attend a class, please try to let me know in advance. The programme is progressive, it builds on earlier experiences. It is advisable to keep your cameras on during classes (you can hide self-view if you wish) and mute your microphone during the practices to avoid any white noise that might be distracting.

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 often 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://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 handouts provided weekly by Christoph, your own journal, and the workbook we will be using called, **“A Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Workbook”** by Bob Stahl, Ph.D. and Elisha Goldstein Ph.D. (please note, this workbook is not included in the course fee. Please purchase 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 myself 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, 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 as a result of relying in particular circumstances on statements made here. Under no circumstances can you hold Christoph Spiessens liable for any actions that you take as a result 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.