

# To what extent does the practice of mindfulness help us control our emotions?

By Juliet Adams, MSc, FCIPD, Strategic Learning specialist

## *What is mindfulness?*

According to Jon Kabat-Zinn, "mindfulness means **paying attention** in a particular way; **on purpose**, in the **present moment**, and **non judgmentally**."

Mindfulness practitioners learn how to **pay attention** on **purpose** by practising specially developed mindfulness meditation practices & mindful movements. With practice, practitioners learn to slow down or stop brain chatter and automatic or habitual reactions, experiencing the **present moment** as it really is.

When practicing mindfulness, everyone, however much they practice, will experience thoughts creeping in to their heads uninvited. This is fine - its just what brains do, but how we respond to these thoughts is important.

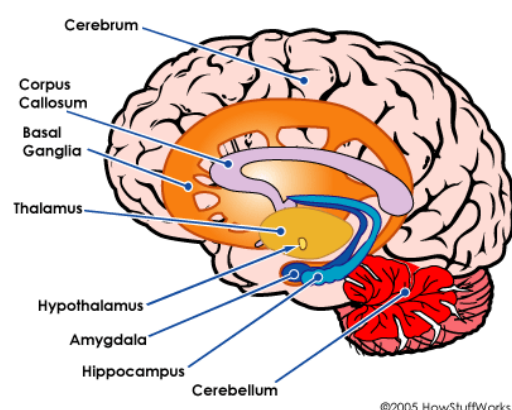
If we start to think about the thought, or get annoyed with ourselves for not being able to retain our focus, it stops us paying attention and takes us away from the present moment. If we just acknowledge the thought and let it go **without judgement**, we retain our focus on being in the **present moment**.



## *The brain and emotions*

Emotions are triggered in the brain by thoughts, which are often unconscious.

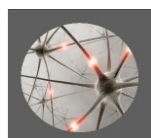
### Basal Ganglia and Limbic System



Many conventional patterns of thinking are held in neuro-circuits in the primitive parts of the brain. The basal ganglia acts as the brains "habit centre" – managing semi-automatic activities such as walking or driving. The amygdala, a source of strong emotions such as fear and anger. Information processes in these parts is often not brought to conscious attention

When we are confronted by a potential threat, this can trigger fear, anger or the urge to flee (sometimes called "amygdala hijack"). The reaction is often disproportionate to the actual provocation.

When in the grip of these emotions, your capacity for higher "rational brain" thinking is diminished, and you are likely to revert to rote behaviours stored in the basal ganglia.



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Recent neuroscience research has demonstrated that contrary to popular belief, the neural connections of the brain are highly plastic. Even the most entrenched thought patterns can be changed. In order to purposely change our entrenched thought patterns, we need to change our neural pathways. This can be achieved by learning to recognise and observe our own thinking processes

## ***Mindfulness and emotions***

The practice of mindfulness helps us to recognise and observe our thought patterns. Practitioners develop the ability to recognise when thoughts arise, and observe them in a detached manner, without the need to become involved in them (thus not triggering an emotional or "automatic" reaction).

By regularly practicing mindfulness, we develop strong neural pathways connected with this activity in our brains, which makes it easier for us to recognise when thoughts arise. This can help us identify the source of a strong emotion as it is triggered and choose more effective ways to respond.

Once you learn to become "an impartial spectator", you can recognise old, habitual patterns that no longer serve you well, and reshape those patterns in new directions. Whilst practicing mindfulness may be uncomfortable at first, it has the capability to rewire our thinking patterns. This makes the new ways of thinking (that previously felt unfamiliar or uncomfortable) become habitual.

## ***Conclusion***

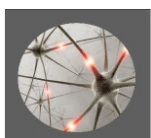
1: How and exactly where emotions are generated in the brain is still a topic of hot debate in neuroscience circles, but we do know that thoughts trigger emotions.

2: Whilst the aim of mindfulness is not to help us control our emotions, the practice of mindfulness helps us develop neural pathways in our brains that make it easier to RECOGNISE and CHOOSE how we respond to our emotions.

## ***Further information:***

For more information on neuroscience aspects of mindfulness, visit the neuroscience page of mindfulnet: <http://www.mindfulnet.org/page12.htm>

For research into the neuroscience of mindfulness visit: <http://www.mindfulnet.org/page4.htm#RNEUROSCIENCE>



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