

Part 4: Introducing mindfulness

The mindfulness practices in this book can help you to stay calm and focused as you revise for your exams.

Important

If you feel that stress and anxiety are getting on top of you, speak to an adult that you trust. Opening up about how you feel can really help in dealing with what can be an intense time.

If you have recently experienced the loss of a loved one, a traumatic event or have been diagnosed with a mental illness, or have any ongoing physical pain, it's really important that you check in with someone (such as a parent, teacher, counsellor or doctor) before doing these practices.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a great way to help you prepare for exams. But what is it and how does it work?

Mindfulness is essentially awareness. It is about training your attention to notice your thoughts, feelings, sensations, and anything around you that is happening right now, without judging them. By doing this, you step away from automatic responses and observe what it means to be in the present with an open mind. This can help you to make better, more skilful decisions.

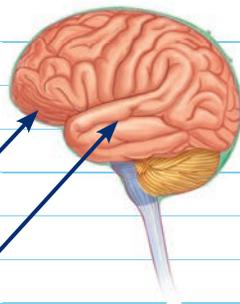
Your brain can be 'rewired' to work in more helpful or skilful ways. In many ways it's like brain training. Just as people go to the gym and lift weights regularly to build muscle, so mindfulness helps train the brain by doing the practices daily.

Preparing for exams

Neuroscientists are just starting to understand more about how mindfulness practice can help. Studies indicate that it helps in two main ways, especially when it comes to exams.

1 It helps to increase the density in the front of your brain. This is the part of the brain associated with **memory**, your ability to **solve problems** and to **manage distraction**.

2 It helps us to manage strong or difficult emotions. Feeling some stress and anxiety around exams is natural and, indeed, can **help boost performance**. It's when this becomes too much that it becomes a problem. Mindfulness helps to calm activity in the bit of your brain associated with worry.



The form of mindfulness that we have used in this book was developed by three psychologists: Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale.

Connecting mind, body, emotions and behaviour

Mindfulness isn't just about training the mind – it's also about you connecting with your emotions and your behaviour.

Emotions and feelings can affect our bodies and our actions, and vice versa. Just as thinking can affect physical reactions (for example, feeling anxious can cause 'butterflies' in the tummy before an exam), so your body can affect your thinking.

By becoming aware of emotions, you can try to deal with them before they grow too strong or start to take over your thinking. Some of the practices in this book will help you reconnect with your body.

Doing and being

Very often, it is easy to want to get straight into doing a task like revision just to get it finished and out of the way. This is called **doing mode** – it helps you to get things done, but not always to consider the **best way** of tackling the task.

Mindfulness helps by giving you a moment to pause and enter **being mode**. This allows time for you to ground yourself and be fully focused on the present moment, so you experience things more fully. Usually this will help you to take a calmer and wiser approach to a task, which will mean you're more effective. The practices that you are given in this book can help you to create this mental space.

Moving into being mode

The pressures of revision and exams may make you feel that taking 'time out' from revision to do these practices is not possible. However, regularly doing even short practices where you can drop into 'being mode' can begin to give you greater mental space or clarity.

You can practise the following simple exercise to help you come out of doing mode and move into being mode, which creates a more mindful, moment-by-moment experience. It might seem a bit silly to start off with, when you're so used to doing a task without giving it much thought. However, the purpose of doing this exercise is to move away from doing things automatically and, instead, start to be fully in each moment and experience it more completely through all the senses.

Mindfully making a drink

- What can you **hear**? For example, when making a drink, notice the sound of pouring the drink or boiling water.
- What can you **smell**? For example, for tea, coffee or juice, notice how the smells **change** as you make the drink.
- What can you **see**? For example, notice the colours and how they **change**.
- What can you **feel**? For example, the warmth or coolness of a drink in your hands.
- What can you **taste**? For example, when taking a sip of drink, notice how it first tastes and any **changes** in taste.
- Enjoy **being in the moment** as you consume your drink.



This simple exercise can have a big impact. Many people find they notice and taste far more.

When you take time to slow down and live in a more moment-to-moment way, you are able to experience life more fully and appreciatively.

This can then help to create a greater sense of **calm**.

Practising mindfulness

In addition to everyday mindfulness, you can do more formal practice, which is sometimes referred to as **meditation**. Just like learning any new skill, for example playing a sport or an instrument, mindfulness is something that has to be practised daily to have richer benefits. Doing daily practices of 10 minutes or so can really help you to move your awareness to be fully in the present moment in a non-judgemental way, helping you to avoid overthinking, which can lead to worry, anxiety and stress.

Practices in this planner

This planner includes three introductory practices which are useful techniques to help ground and anchor you in the present moment and encourage you to be accepting and kind to yourself. The practices are:

- Mindfulness of Breath and Body
- The Body Scan
- The Three-Step Breathing Space

Each practice is accompanied by an audio file.

If you are interested in mindfulness, speak to your teacher to see if a course is running in your school that can give you a structured programme to follow, or search online for 'mindfulness in schools'.

Being kind to yourself

Exam preparation can be a stressful time, so it's important to take some time out regularly to be kind to yourself: to recharge your batteries, give your brain some breathing space, and acknowledge all the good preparatory work you're putting in. Take regular breaks and enjoy some 'downtime' with your friends and family to help recharge. Using the three practices regularly can also help keep you calm and focused during your revision period.

Good posture for practice

Getting your posture correct for doing mindfulness practice is really important. The practices in this planner are designed to be done in a seated position. The Body Scan can also be done lying down.

Try to find a chair you can sit in that allows your feet to rest fully on the ground with your ankles, knees and hips all at right angles, with your back slightly away from the back of the chair so you can sit upright in an alert, but not tense, manner. Being comfortable will help to reduce distraction – but don't choose a chair that's so comfy that you fall asleep!



The room you choose should be somewhere you won't be disturbed. Turn your phone onto silent or flight mode. Let the people you live with know that you'll be doing mindfulness practice so that they do not disturb you.

Mindfulness can help you take a healthy, effective approach to your revision. But remember, you will still need to plan and revise!



Practice 1: Mindfulness of Breath and Body

Very often our minds like to wander. In this practice, you focus your attention on your breathing and on different parts of your body. It's a bit like shining a torchlight so that you focus on just one thing at a time, feeling the sensations that arise. Practising this regularly helps the mind wander less, which leads to less worrying and helps with concentration. Remember – it is normal for your mind to wander while you are meditating as that is what minds do! You are just trying to train it.

If your mind wanders, try to bring it back with a sense of kindness. It doesn't matter how many times the mind wanders, it's bringing it back each time to the focus on the breath or the body that's important, as you are increasing your concentration and training your attention each time. Don't be frustrated, as it is just part of training your brain.

The **Mindfulness of Breath and Body** practice will help you to develop your awareness and focus, which can help with revision. In addition, focusing on breath also has a calming effect (great if you are worrying about exams). Moving the focus to the body can also help to identify physical feelings caused by stress. Examples of stress in the body might be 'butterflies' or cramps in your tummy, your hands shaking, getting sweaty, or your mouth going dry.

To access the audio file for Practice 1, please scan the QR code or visit <http://activetea.ch/32wQnxo>





Practice 2: The Body Scan

Just as thoughts and emotions can affect our bodies, stress and tension in the body can affect our thinking and our feelings.

Constant analysis of problems (such as worrying about exams) can be exhausting and doesn't really help to find a solution. Sensing what's going on in your body can help to reduce the amount of time you spend analysing your problems. It grounds you back into your body, allowing you to see where you might be holding emotions and feelings as stress/tension in different parts of the body.

In the **Body Scan** practice, you move attention to different areas of the body, which allows you to feel where you might be holding emotions, such as worry. As you hold each different part of your body in awareness, really explore what feelings or sensations are arising in each one. This can help you to move away from thinking or analysing your problems too much. It can also improve posture, which, in turn, can improve thinking.

This practice can be done either lying down or sitting down. If you're lying down then find somewhere comfortable but not so comfortable you might fall asleep!

To access the audio file
for Practice 2, please
scan the QR code or visit
<http://activetea.ch/306mG4R>





Practice 3: The Three-Step Breathing Space

Worrying about what has gone on in the past or what might happen in the future cannot change events, and distracts you from the present – from what you are doing now. The present **is** something that you can change, so that is where your focus should be. For example, worrying about your exams in several months' time won't be as helpful as revising now!

The **Three-Step Breathing Space** practice helps you to fully ground yourself in the present, and gives you a few moments to rest and recharge. The practice is structured a bit like an hourglass.

- 1 Firstly, you do a 'weather check' of the mind, to see what's going on, by observing your thoughts, giving you a more objective viewpoint of how busy or calm your mind is.



- 2 Then you turn your attention to your breath, helping to focus you in the present moment.

- 3 Finally, you expand out that awareness to sensations in the rest of your body, becoming aware of where you may be holding any emotions in the body as stress or tension.

The Three-Step Breathing Space is a very useful practice if ever you start to feel stressed and want a pause to help you step back and get perspective. The really great thing about this practice is that you can do it in three minutes or less. Use it to 'recharge' yourself while revising or ground yourself just before or even during your exam.

To access the audio file for Practice 3, please scan the QR code or visit <http://activetea.ch/34EAMh4>

