

# How to pay no mind to the rantings and ravings of the mind

Nicole Brady

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**It has only taken 4000 years, but Western medicine is finally catching up with the East and embracing the healing power of mindfulness, writes Nicole Brady.**

VIRTUALLY overnight, mindfulness has hit the mainstream. Once a niche therapeutic tool, it is now taught to athletes, primary school students, cancer patients, the anorexic, the obese, corporate lawyers, prisoners, bankers and medical undergraduates. In short: anyone and everyone.

The truth about mindfulness is that its proponents have been spreading the word for a long time. Thousands of years, in fact. But as Western science has started endorsing many of the techniques of Eastern orthodoxies, mindfulness has crossed over from fad to commonplace.

At its essence, mindfulness is about living in the present, letting go of worries about the past and fears for the future.

"Basically, in a mental state of mindfulness you are able to engage fully in what you are doing and you are able to let unhelpful thoughts come and go as if they are just leaves floating down a stream," explains Russ Harris, the Melbourne-based author of the bestseller *The Happiness Trap* (2007), which popularised mindfulness as a tool.

"You're able to let painful, difficult feelings flow through you instead of getting caught up in a struggle with them and being pushed around by them, so it's hugely helpful for dealing with any manner of negative or stressful thoughts."

Sports psychologist Jonah Oliver works with professional golfers, the Australian Olympic team and AFL newcomers the Gold Coast Suns. He gives the example of an AFL player lining up to kick for goal at a crucial moment.

"Traditional sports psychology would tell the athlete that they need to clear their mind, they need to be calm, to have unwavering self-belief and they need to talk to themselves positively," Brisbane-based Oliver says.

"But those at the elite level are filled with doubt, worry, negativity, angst and anger - and trying to get rid of all that can be the problem in itself. If I'm standing in front of goal and trying to kick and I'm telling myself, 'It's OK, I'm a good kicker, take a deep breath, relax and do all this stuff', then I'm actually not focusing on my kick, I'm too busy focusing on my negative thoughts.

"Mindfulness is about accepting that experience, it's about saying 'Of course I'm nervous, of course I've got worries and doubt - why wouldn't I? I'm trying to kick a goal in front of a huge crowd at the MCG and I've missed my last three shots.' Of course my brain is going to pop up those strong thoughts."

If, says Oliver, the player accepts the thoughts as they arise ("Hello, there they are!") and takes a "mindful or focusing breath" then he can bring himself "into the present moment and go through the pre-kick routine".

On a smaller stage, Maryse Mannit is witnessing the benefits of mindfulness training among pupils at Fountain Gate Primary School.

The school is such a convert it has decked out an old portable as a colourful "empowerment room", where groups of grade five and six students are taught mindful meditation techniques one hour a week for 10 weeks.

"We've noticed a huge difference in the children, especially the boys," says Ms Mannit, the school's well-being co-ordinator. "They focus a lot better in the classroom now and out in the yard we're finding that they are more able to control their tempers because they are more aware of their feelings and what they are able to do about them."

Leyton, one of her students, reads his summary of the program: "It's helped me deal with my anger and stress ... when I feel worried I take a deep breath and calm down."

Janet Ety-Leal, the teacher-turned-consultant who introduced Fountain Gate to mindfulness, has been teaching mindful meditation for a decade. It is, she says, an antidote to the fleeting attention spans modern life demands of young people as their focus flits between homework, Facebook, email, SMS and listening to their favourite song.

Dr Craig Hassed, senior lecturer in the department of general practice at Monash University, teaches mindfulness to senior students at private schools such as Geelong Grammar and MLC. As well as helping teenagers to focus on their VCE studies, the skills assist them with other life issues.

"Let's take a year 12 student who has had an argument with her friend and she's going over it and over it in her mind and getting more angry and resentful and hurt. The mind is like a train of thought [that] pulls up and the person unconsciously gets on and goes to the end of the line and all you find at the end of the line is anger and hostility, self-doubt, self-criticism, fear, depression ... " Dr Hassed says.

"What we say is: 'We can't stop the train of thought from coming but what we can do is determine whether or not we are going to get on the train.' "

It's a skill that needs practice, but once mastered may have many applications, psychologists say. At Monash, Dr Hassed has overseen the inclusion of mindfulness training into the medical curriculum - a world first, he says - saying that it offers benefits to the students as well as their future patients.

At the Royal Women's Hospital, Dr Naomi Thomas teaches it to women with cancer, helping them to manage their pain and fears. University of Canberra dietitian Andrew Simpson says one of the tools used to help those with eating disorders is "mindful eating", where they focus on what they are eating and how it makes them feel.

Dr Harris believes the technique has been building in popularity in the 30 years since Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn first taught that mindfulness could be used by those who did not also subscribe to the beliefs and traditions of the Eastern religions it sprang from 4000 years ago.

He sums it up in *The Happiness Trap*: "The main goal ... is to free you from the tyranny of your mind so you can focus your attention on more important things."

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