



Health
South Western Sydney
Local Health District

RELAX

The Mindful Way



Taking care of you



Aim of this resource

This workbook is for carers. It is an introduction to the benefits of mindfulness to manage stress. Mindfulness activities are free, quick and easy to learn.

This workbook has some examples of mindfulness activities for you to try. The activities are useful for any one. They do not replace counselling, medical treatment or other therapies that a carer may access to support their wellbeing.

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Carers Program

Copies of this resource can be downloaded from the [SWSLHD Carers Program](#) website:

www.swslhd.health.nsw.gov.au/carers

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Who is a carer?

Anyone can be a carer. Carers can be:

- family members;
- friends;
- neighbours or other community members.

They can care for a child, young person or adult who:

- has an illness;
- disability;
- mental illness;
- chronic medical condition;
- terminal illness;
- or is ageing and becoming frail.

Carers often juggle paid work, family life and their caring role. Although caring can be a positive experience, it can also be stressful and therefore can affect your health and wellbeing.

Carer health and wellbeing

Carers have the lowest wellbeing of any population group in Australia (Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, 2016). Carers often ignore their own health and are 40% more likely to experience a chronic health condition such as back problems, insomnia, anxiety and depression.

The greater the physical and emotional demands of the caring role with little or no support, the more likely a carer will feel stressed.

Stress and the caring role

When you feel stressed your body reacts in the same way as it does to a threat. Your heartbeat, breathing rate and blood pressure increase. The longer you feel stressed, the greater the impacts on your body.

Carer Burnout

Carer burnout is a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion. It's caused by ongoing and cumulative stress which can contribute to illnesses such as: heart disease; high blood pressure; mental health problems; decreased immunity or chronic fatigue.

Burnout can happen when carers don't get the help they need or if they try to do more than they are able to do.

Stress can't be avoided but it can be managed

It is important to learn healthy ways to manage stress and look after your health and wellbeing. Stress management means:

- Learning to recognise the signs that you are experiencing stress
- Recognising the circumstances that trigger stress reactions in you
- Applying stress management techniques to help you cope
- Making healthy choices

Some things you can do to manage your stress levels are:

- Asking for help when you need it
- Speaking to someone you trust about what you are going through.

This could be:

- A counsellor/psychologist
- Close Friend or Family member
- Health Worker
- Carer Support Worker linked with a service
- Minister/Priest of your church
- Pastoral care worker in a hospital
- A Help Line such as (Kids Helpline, SANE, Lifeline, Men's Line etc.)
- Making time for yourself
- Joining a Carer support group
- Using practical coping strategies such as mindfulness.



Mindful practice for managing stress

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a state of being in the present and accepting things for what they are. Originally developed by Buddhist monks as part of their philosophy of being present and connected in the moment, it was later adapted by psychologists to help the general community with mood regulation and preventing depression relapse.

Mindfulness is about being:

- More **aware** and **awake** in every moment of your life.
- **Intentionally attentive** to each moment.
- **Fully engaged** in whatever is happening around and within you.

It's not about being positive all the time or forgetting your problems.

Benefits of mindfulness practice

According to the Oxford Mindfulness Centre (2018) mindfulness meditation practice has a positive impact on wellbeing such as positive emotional and mental wellbeing, better mood regulation and improved behavioural regulation.

Being mindful helps us to **train our attention**. We can **take more control** over our focus of attention and choose what we focus on, rather than passively allowing our attention to be dominated by things that make us stressed.

Mindfulness helps us to put some space between ourselves and our reactions, breaking down our conditioned responses. This can help if:

- We have trouble focusing
- We often worry or stress
- We want to improve our mental and physical wellbeing

Practicing mindfulness every day or when we are feeling overwhelmed can help with:

- Clearing our head and slow down our thoughts
- Expand our awareness of ourselves, our bodies and environments
- Slowing down the nervous system and aid sleep
- Concentration
- Relaxation
- Coping with stress, depression and anxiety

Simple ways to practice mindfulness

You can develop mindfulness during regular activities like walking, driving (without distractions such as mobile phones, talking, listening to the radio) or even doing something as basic as brushing your teeth, drinking a cup of tea or coffee, colouring pictures or drawing.

The mind is like a muscle. Just as we exercise and eat healthy food to keep our bodies fit, practicing mindfulness is a way of keeping our brain fit and healthy.

By bringing your full attention to your body, your breath, your senses and your surroundings, you become calmer, more focused and in touch with yourself. The principles of mindfulness are easy to understand and learn – but like all things, it takes practice.

**Mindfulness is choosing and learning
to control our focus of attention**

Getting Started

Each day try one of the activities in the workbook. You can repeat the activity anytime during the day.

After practising the activity or activities every day for a week, reflect on your experience. Observe and make notes how you feel.

All you need to do is:

- **Find the time**
Short periods of mindful meditation can be better than occasional long ones.
- **Start slowly**
Remember, you're learning a new skill so it'll take time to develop.
- **Be patient**
By putting pressure on yourself, you may make it harder to be mindful.
- **Practice**
By practicing mindfulness daily, you support your mind to automatically quieten down which leads to a calmer state.

“Every one of us already has the seed of mindfulness.

The practice is to cultivate it.”

Thich Nhat Hanh



Mindfulness Exercises for Every Day

Activity 1

Mindfulness body scan meditation

The intention of the body scan meditation is to bring awareness to any sensations you detect in your body, as you focus your attention on each part of the body.

1. Sit in a chair, make yourself comfortable or lay on your back on your bed. Make sure you choose a place where you will be warm and undisturbed. Close your eyes.
2. Take time to get in touch with the movement of your breath and the sensations in the body. When you are ready, bring your awareness to the physical sensations in your body, especially to the sensations of touch, where your body makes contact with the chair or bed. On each outbreath, allow yourself to let go, relax.
3. Now bring your awareness to the physical sensations in the lower abdomen. Take a few minutes to feel the sensations as you breathe in and as you breathe out.
4. Focus on your left leg, moving on to the left foot, and out to the toes of the left foot. Focus on each of the toes of the left foot in turn. Take a few minutes to feel the sensations as you breathe in and as you breathe out.
5. Next, bring your awareness to the sensations on the bottom of your left foot— the sole of the foot, the instep, the heel (for example, noticing the sensations where the heel makes contact with the mat or bed).
6. Bring your awareness to the rest of the left foot—to the ankle, the top of the foot, to the lower left leg—the calf, shin, knee.
7. Bring the focus of your awareness down the right leg, to the right foot, and out to the toes of the right foot. Focus on each of the toes of the right foot in turn. Take a few minutes to feel the sensations as you breathe in and as you breathe out.
8. Bring your awareness to the rest of the right foot—to the ankle, the top of the foot, to the lower right leg—the calf, shin, knee.
9. Continue to bring awareness to the physical sensations in each part of the rest of the body in turn - to the pelvic area, back, abdomen, chest, fingers, hands, arms, shoulders, neck, head, and face.



10. When you become aware of tension, or of other intense sensations in a particular part of the body, you can "breathe in"— using the in breath gently to bring awareness right into the sensations, and, as best you can, have a sense of letting go, or releasing on the outbreath.
11. The mind will wander away from the breath and the body from time to time. That is normal. It is what minds do. When you notice it, gently acknowledge it, noticing where the mind has gone off to, and then gently return your attention to the part of the body you intended to focus on.
12. After you have "scanned" the whole body in this way, spend a few minutes being aware of a sense of the body as a whole, and of the breath flowing freely in and out of the body.
13. If you find yourself falling asleep, you might find it helpful to rest your head on a pillow, open your eyes, or do the practice sitting up rather than lying down.



Activity 2

Mindful Breathing

1. Close your eyes. Start by breathing in and out slowly.
2. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, letting your breath flow in and out of your body.
3. Let go of your thoughts. Let go of things you have to do later today. Simply let thoughts come and go and be at one with your breath.
4. Focus on your breath as it enters your body.
5. Watch as it works its way up and out of your mouth and relax.
6. Sit in the stillness and listen attentively to your surroundings. What do you hear? Is it close, is it far? Do you recognise the sounds? What's different?
7. Acknowledge what you hear than let it go. Bring your attention back to your breathing.
8. Open your eyes.



Activity 3

Mindful Observation - Leaves on a stream

- Sit in a comfortable position.
You may close your eyes or simply rest them gently on a fixed spot in the room.
- Imagine you are sitting beside a gently flowing stream with coloured leaves, floating along the surface of the water. Observe. Relax.
- For the next few minutes, take each thought that enters your mind and place it on a leaf. Let it float by. All thoughts - happy, sad or neutral, place them on the leaf and let them float by... Do not rush. Allow the stream to flow at its own pace. You are not trying to rush the leaves along or push your thoughts away. All you are doing is allowing them to come and go at their own pace.
- If you get tired or bored or even doubting if you are doing it right, place those thoughts on the leaves too, and let them pass. And, if a leaf gets stuck, stay calm and allow it to hang around until it is ready to float by.
- It is natural to lose track of this exercise. As soon as you realise that your mind starts wondering, gently bring your attention back to the imaginary stream. Turn your thoughts into a leaf and let them float on the stream. Gently let the image of the stream and floating leaves dissolve. Bring your attention back to sitting in the chair.
- When you are ready, open your eyes.

This activity can also be practiced when you are actually sitting by a stream, river or other body of water.



Activity 4

Mindful listening

Select a piece of your favourite music or one that you have never heard before. You may have something in your own collection that you have never listened to or, you might choose to tune in to a song.

1. Close your eyes.
2. Allow yourself to get lost in the journey of sound for the duration of the piece of music or song.
3. Explore the sound by listening to the dynamics of each instrument.
4. Listen to the sound of the voice, its range and tones.

The idea is to listen intently, to become fully engaged without judgement of the artist, lyrics or instruments

Don't think, hear.



Activity 5

Mindful Eating - Eating chocolate



This exercise should take around 3-4 minutes.

You will need a small piece of **chocolate** from a large bar.

You could begin the exercise by taking a few deep, slow breaths.

- Take a small piece of **chocolate** - what physical sensation do you have? What emotions are you feeling? Simply notice them.
- Look at the **chocolate** - consider the colour, weight, feel.
- **Smell** the **chocolate** - does the smell bring any memories to you?
- Inhale the aroma, take a few breaths taking in the smell as you continue breathing
- Place the **chocolate** in your mouth but DO NOT EAT IT. How does it feel when it melts?
- Move the **chocolate** around your mouth. Does the taste change? How do you feel?
- Swallow the **chocolate**, focusing on the sensation. How do you feel?



This exercise can be applied to anything you drink or eat.

Activity 6

Colour yourself calm



Do you remember colouring pictures as a child and you lost the sense of time while applying colour to your favourite picture?

Adults from around the world have rediscovered the pleasure of colouring pictures because of the pleasant memories that this childhood activity is associated with.

Colouring (or any artistic endeavour) is an activity of practicing mindfulness, which has relaxing benefits.

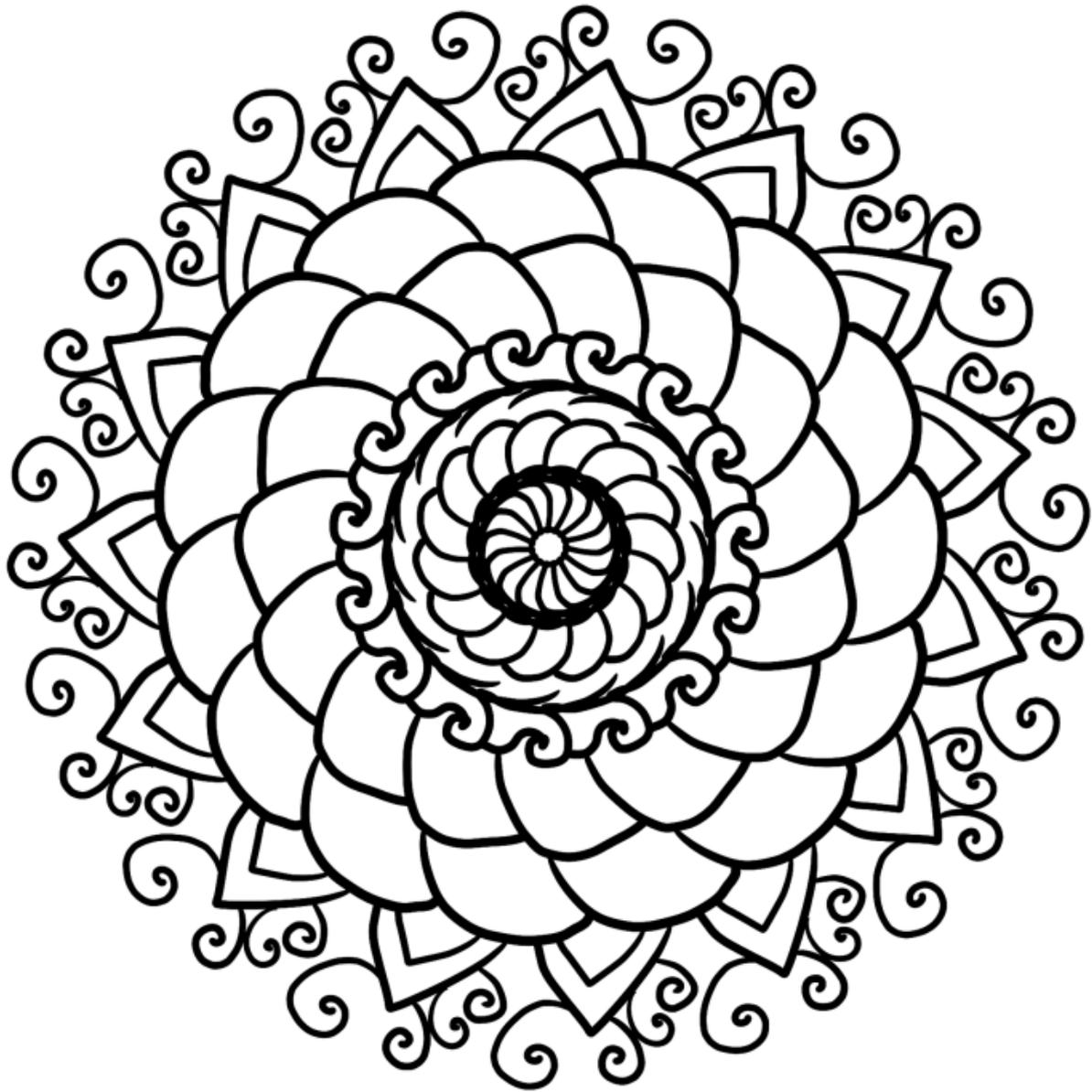
The process of **colouring** helps us distance ourselves from life's stresses by focusing on a repetitive and relaxing activity which brings us into a state of calmness.

When you **colour** a picture, your mind is focused on the act of **colouring**. So, you are in the moment. Slowly your blood pressure drops, your mind starts to relax, and you feel at peace.

Next time you are feeling overwhelmed, find your **colour** pencils and a colouring book you like and a comfortable place.

Let your imagination run free, experiment with colours.
You will be surprised how it makes you feel.

Give it a try with the mandala design on the next page and maybe make a cup of tea or coffee to drink mindfully while you colour yourself calm.



Activity 7

Mindful walking

For this practice, choose a natural, quiet place in the open air. A park nearby or your garden, a beach - the choice is yours.



While walking, try to concentrate on the feel of the ground under your feet, paying attention to your breathing.

Just observe what is around you as you walk, staying in the present.

Let your other thoughts go, just look at the sky, the view, people walking.

As you walk, try to become more aware of nature around you.

See the different types of leaves; hear the bird calls, hear the waves splashing on the shore, the wind or the distant sound of traffic; feel the air moving over your skin and sun heating your face.

Again, after a few moments, your mind may try to wander.

Be kind to yourself: gently bring your attention back to nature and your surroundings; feel the wind, the temperature on your skin; enjoy the moment.

Reflections



At this point you may find it interesting and useful to reflect back on your reasons for learning mindfulness and how practising the activities helped you (or not).

Thank yourself for finding the time and the determination to learn how to live mindfully and care for yourself.

Think about what you have learnt along the path of practicing mindfulness. Wellbeing is a daily commitment you have with yourself.

Taking a few moments each day to pause and be mindful. This is a strategy you can use to cope with stress.

What did I learn from doing the activities?

What are the obstacles to continuing the practice?

What can I do to help myself not get stuck, and to continue practising?

Next steps

If you would like to continue practicing mindfulness, here's how -

- Continue establishing daily practices that suit you.
- Maintain a habit of daily practice.
- Bring some 'Loving Kindness' practice into each day.
- Find a friend or group to practice with, ideally at least once a week.
- Listen/watch YouTube, CDs/DVDs of practice (see resource collection on the next page).

In Summary

- Stress is inevitable and can be healthy in small doses. However, the duration and frequency of stress, as well as someone's ability to return to a non-stressed state may have significant implications for overall health and wellbeing.
- There are organisations in your local area that may offer free or affordable programs for physical, mental and emotional wellbeing such as community gardening, men's sheds, exercise groups, counselling and other forms of therapy that can support wellbeing.
- A good place to start is with your local council or community/neighbourhood centre. Otherwise, speak to your general practitioner about referral options for mental and physical conditions that require medical interventions.

**Mind your thoughts, as they become words;
Mind your words, as they become your actions;
Mind your actions, as they become habits;
Mind your habits, as they shape your life.**

Useful Resources

The following websites have quality resources to help you understand mindfulness and how it can help with stress, depression, and overall mental and physical health.

www.oxfordmindfulness.org/for-you

www.mindfulness.org.au

www.smilingmind.com.au

www.carergateway.gov.au/mindfulness

www.lifehappens-mindfulness.com

www.mindful.org

www.heidi.au

“I should be happy but I’m not”: The 6 practices of Emotionally Fit people”.

Book by: Heidi Di Santo (with FREE 30 – minute meditation)

Mindfulness Meditation Digital Apps for Android or iPhones

www.smilingmind.com.au

www.stopbreathethink.com

www.calm.com

www.headspace.com/headspace-meditation-app

Note: This is not an exhaustive list of resources.

There are many digital applications for mindfulness and meditation available on the market.

Some are free and others can be purchased.

The most important thing is to find one that suits you and then practice every day.

Additional support for carers

Counselling

Counselling may help carers to understand and manage situations, behaviours and relationships that can be part of being a carer. The help and support a carer receives, can reduce the burden of stress they may be feeling that is associated with their caring role and life transitions in general.

Counselling can provide you with:

- Short-term emotional and psychological support
- Guidance in your relationship with the person you care for or others
- Managing situations and challenging behaviours
- Strategies to deal with stress
- Guidance and options in moving forward after changes or loss

Counselling is available through:

- **Carers NSW Carer Line**
Phone: 1800 242 636 (available 9am to 5pm, Monday to Friday)
www.carersnsw.org.au

Or check with your local community health centre, neighbourhood centre, women's health centre or family doctor for counselling & other support services near you.

Respite

Respite care can support you and the person you are caring for to take a break. Taking a break from the caring role allows carers to focus on their own needs and manage their own wellbeing.

There are different types of respite; some may be given informally by family, friends or neighbours or by formal respite care services that cater to your situation depending on your needs, eligibility and what services are available in your area.

If the person you care for is receiving a National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) package, the terminology used is 'short-term accommodation and assistance'.

For more information on respite options in South Western Sydney contact:

- **Commonwealth Respite & Carelink Centre**
Phone: 1800 052 222

www.carersnsw.org.au/advice/time-for-yourself

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