

Mindfulness: A Revolution Inside Our Heads

Words Jamie Christian Desplaces

It's not just going to be the year of the revolution of our minds, but the beginning of a whole new way of living, a new way of thinking. It's all about mindfulness. According to world-leading communications brand JWT Worldwide, mindful living is one of 10 movements that will shape our future. The firm's director of trend-spotting, Ann Mack, tells the *Huffington Post* that it's a "kind of counter-trend to the past decade of overly stimulated, ADD-afflicted, tech-saturated culture that we've been living in". People, she says, are waking up to the potential of spirituality and the "idea of shutting out distractions and focusing on the moment". Fortune 500 companies such as Google, AOL and Apple are offering mindfulness classes for their staff, and Oprah Winfrey dedicates two 20 minute sessions a day to it.

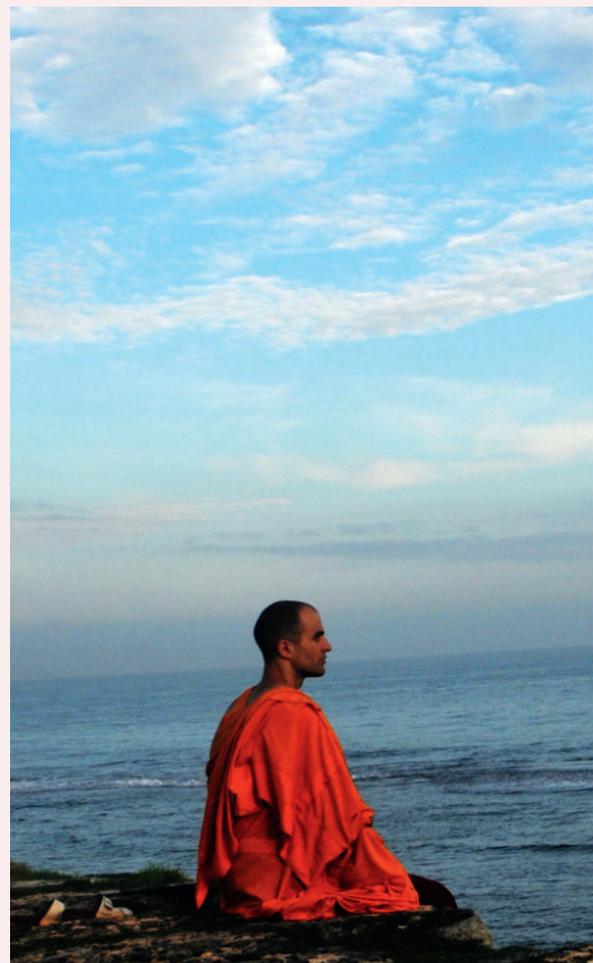
"We don't often recognise our mind and the faculties it has," says Dr Nigel Rankin, a mindfulness tutor at Auckland's School of Philosophy. "Perhaps most importantly, we don't use our minds in a conscious way. It just trundles on. But what we must realise is that it's a mental 'body', which, in an analogous way to our physical one, can be trained and strengthened. One can consciously use the mind in the same way, as it were, that you use your legs."

The journal *Perspective on Psychological Science* describes mindfulness as "the nonjudgmental awareness of experiences in the present moment," which "produces beneficial effects on well-being and ameliorates psychiatric and stress-related symptoms". The brain must be trained to focus on the "now", to savour the richness of life's every moment. Part of that involves a form of meditation. Some results are astonishing. The *Health Psychology* journal found mindfulness not only lessened stressful feelings, but actually reduced levels of the stress hormone cortisol, while the University of California concluded that student

practitioners gained better grades. The University of Oregon discovered mindfulness can ward off mental illness, and a study at Utah University found that it helps better control moods, emotions and improves sleep. It's also being used by the David Lynch Foundation to treat American soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Speaking to CNN, the foundation's executive director, Bob Roth, said that their research had found "a reduction in symptoms of heart disease, anxiety and sleep disorders" and that mindfulness is "medically sound and scientifically tested".

The Association of American Medical Colleges estimates burn-out to affect up to three in five doctors, and studies have proved that mindfulness not only combats this, but improves doctor's overall mental health and their relationships with patients. Dr Rankin is a retired Head of Intensive Care at Middlemore Hospital and practising mindfulness, he believes, certainly helped him. "You have to pay very close attention to what is going on with folk who are very ill," he says. "You must consciously recognise what's happening, learn to focus your attention. I like to think mindfulness helped me look after them better, and at the same time helped me to not get more involved than would have been beneficial to either me, or the patient. It helped me to let go, to leave problems at the hospital come home time."

The recent rise of mindfulness has, in part, been a reaction to our ever- hectic, ever-digitalised world, so it's somewhat ironic that an app has played a significant role in taking it mainstream. Named Headspace, the award-winning program describes itself as a "gym membership for the mind" and is used by more than a million people in 150 countries. There are celebrity endorsements from the likes of Gwyneth Paltrow, Evan Williams, founder of Twitter, and *Huffington Post* boss Arianna Huffington. The app, which is also



available as a book, states setting aside just ten mindfulness minutes a day can radically improve our lives and goes about instructing how to do so through brain training and mediation techniques. Andy Puddicombe, who co-founded the app with creative developer Rich Pierson, is a former Buddhist monk, described by the *New York Times* as "doing for meditation what Jamie Oliver has done for food". Last year, a BBC documentary put Headspace to the test, resulting in the presenter, Dr Michael Mosley, finally winning a decade-long battle with insomnia.

"There are major parallels between mindfulness and psychology," says Dr Rankin. "But one is an academic discipline, the other an everyday practice that anybody can take up. No qualifications are required, you just need a mind." The School of Philosophy, he says, starts you on that journey. It forces you to question what is beyond the mind, and what its true capabilities really are. "Once you're aware of your thoughts," he continues, "you can adjust your behaviour accordingly, whether to be more patient, more reasonable or more conscious. You learn to direct yourself. To put maximum effort into all that you do. We've been going for 50 years and it's improving and developing all of the time. Mindfulness, as we promote it, is for anybody that wants to take it on. You don't need to be super-bright. It's for everyday people, for everyday things."



FIVE STEPS TO BEGINNING MINDFULNESS...

01 — SAVOUR THE ROUTINE

Whether it be the taste of your toothpaste, the scent of your shower gel or the crunch of those cornflakes, focus on the mundane, focus on the moment.

02 — FREE YOUR MIND

It's natural for your thoughts to wander, so let them do so. But, recognise they have strayed and coax them back.

03 — BREVITY

Twenty minutes is the aim, but that will feel an age when you first start out. Focus your thoughts for a few minutes and gradually build up day by day.

04 — PRACTICE PATIENCE

Next time you're stuck in a traffic jam, focus on your breathing instead of your rising blood pressure.

05 — LEARN THE ART OF MEDITATION

It's necessary, whether you join a class or watch a YouTube clip. But don't expect it to happen overnight. Like perfecting any new skill, it takes time.



Above Dr Nigel Rankin

