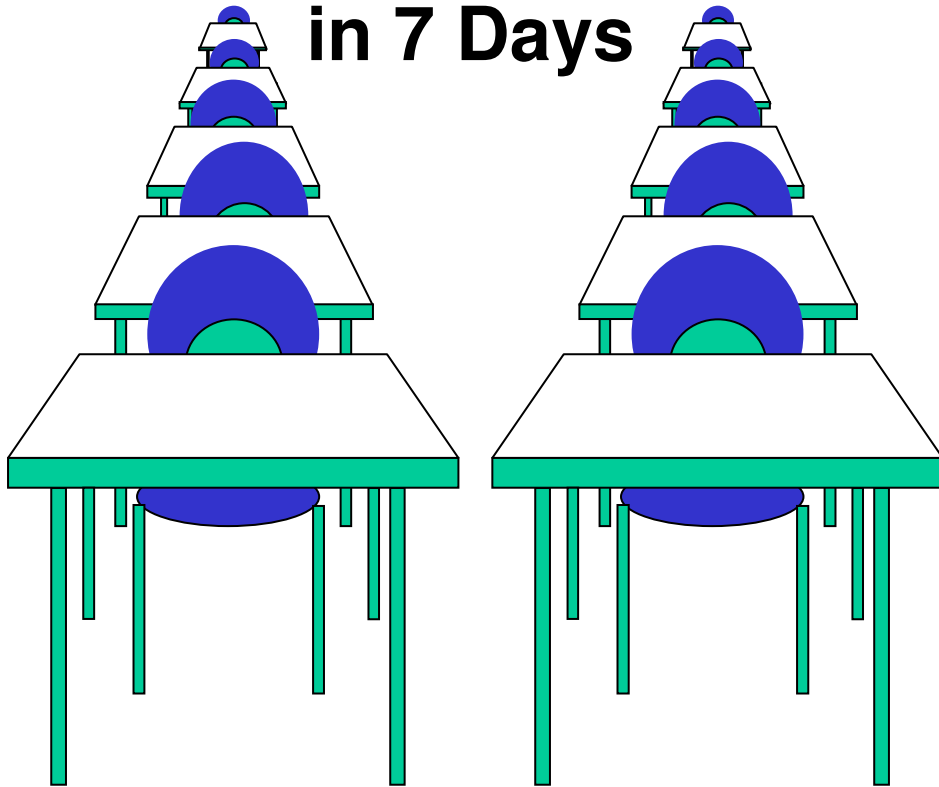


# LESS EXAMSTRESS in 7 Days



## The Mindful Way

**“Really know what your Mind is up to  
and stop adding to your stress!”**

Colin Eveleigh

## LESS EXAMSTRESS in 7 DAYS The Mindful Way

*“At last, quick and practical help for Exam Stress!”*

- “I can’t concentrate or think straight.”
- “I keep falling out with everyone.”
- “Exams are making me exhausted.”
- “I feel hopeless and worthless.”
- “I’m terrified of failing.”
- “I feel so tense and anxious all the time.”
- “Exams are making me ill.”
- “I can’t sleep and I’m not taking care of myself.”
- “The more I do the more there is to do.”
- “I’m running out of time.....”

*Take personal responsibility for doing your BEST WORK*

Learn to :-

Be Present, Fall Awake, and experience Peace  
Be Calm, Patient, Compassionate and Accepting  
Be less Fearful, Anxious and Self-Critical

**Less ExamStress in 7 Days tells you all you need to know  
about your stressful Mind and Mindfulness, and it shows you  
clearly and simply how to be less stressed about your  
exams. It accompanies guided MP3 audio practices which  
can be downloaded from [www.everydaymindfulness.com](http://www.everydaymindfulness.com)**

The audio practice consists of:-

HerePRESENT	2 minutes
MindPAUSE	10 minutes
ThinkAWARE	15 minutes
FeelAWARE	15 minutes
SoundAWARE	10 minutes
MoveAWARE	10 minutes
BodyAWARE	30 minutes

**Read about the audio practices - then do them and start being Mindful!**

**LESS EXAMSTRESS**  
**in 7 DAYS**  
*The Mindful Way*

First published in the UK 2008 by Everyday Mindfulness

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For Christina, Sally, Annabel and Romily  
Who've all been students and yet might be

*This book accompanies the MP3 Audio Practice Guide*

**LESS EXAMSTRESS**  
**in 7 DAYS**  
*The Mindful Way*

*Which can be downloaded from*

[www.everydaymindfulness.com](http://www.everydaymindfulness.com)

**LESS EXAMSTRESS  
in 7 DAYS  
The Mindful Way**

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~ **PART ONE** ~ Introduction

## “Stop adding to your stress!”

*Please note. The book you're about to read contains some useful and important information, like Part Two about how the Mind works, and later pieces about Mindfulness, and how to Practice being Mindful.*

*Before you get on with the practice described in Part Four, it may help you and save you time to read through these early pages now.*

**And it really is up to you!!**

## Welcome to MINDFULNESS

Thank you for purchasing and downloading this book along with the MP3 Audio Practices.

Whatever level of study, whether you're struggling with revision, at the beginning or end of a course, or even in the middle of your exams, the following information leading to the audio practice, will help you to make an immediate start on becoming more Mindful and reducing your stress.

*This book is solely about stress – not how you prepare for and take your exams – but how you deal with the stress of exams.*

You're a busy student, and you want a quick-fix for your problems – someone to tell you how to make it all go away. I really wish that were possible. If I knew where the 'off-switch' was, I would show you right now! There is no off-switch.

The best way to deal with your exam stress is to tune in better to what's going on for you. This means learning to listen to and see all your stress without adding to it. No need to make it worse, by over-reacting so you can't function at all.

How can you achieve that?

An excellent way, is to become more *Mindful* – which means.....

*Deliberately and intentionally paying attention right now – in the present moment – to all your thoughts, feelings and sensations (whatever they may be) without making positive or negative judgements about anything. Just accepting what is present for you in your direct*

*experience and learning to let go of anything that might sweep you away.*

To put it another more simple way.....

*“Really know what your mind is up to, and stop adding to your stress!”*

And do I hear you say.....

*“I don’t add to or cause my stress do I? Everything would be fine if I didn’t have to do the Exams!”*

Well, in a way actually yes, you *do* cause a large part of your stress. You don’t mean to, but instead of accepting the level of exam stress as it is, you **add** to it and you don’t realise you’re doing this.

Developing awareness (being Mindful) will help you to see this clearly, and this will change forever, the way you react and over-react to the stresses and strains of preparing for and taking exams.

*Being able to do your best work more of the time will give you the results you want. Being Mindful of the ways you add to your stress, is the best way to achieve that.*

**This is a unique opportunity to look into and re-think the whole business of your exam stress, and ask the key question....**

**“Why do I need to suffer like this every time I take exams?”**

## What is STRESS?

We could say that stress is simply your perceived level of pressure, versus your perceived ability to cope. If there is a discrepancy between the two, then you're stressed!

Definitions don't really help or change anything though, do they?

*If you're stressed, you pretty much know it.*

You may wonder.....

*"How stressed am I compared to other students?"*

And yes, in Part Four – A Brief Guide to the Audio, you'll see some interesting quotes about the ways that other students feel when they tackle their exams.

You might want to compare yourself with others. But it's how **you** feel as an individual that really matters.

If you feel that your exams are getting on top of you and you really can't cope, then like many other students, I guess you're stressed.

Why be so stressed? You wouldn't be taking exams unless you were pretty bright, so you definitely deserve to be taking them.

Equally, you don't deserve to be *so* stressed, that taking your exams becomes an unbearable ordeal.

**Nobody deserves that!**

## What about exam TECHNIQUES?

This book will help you accept and come to terms with exam stress, **not** learn about exam techniques like how to plan, be better disciplined, memorise, organise, study, recall facts and be motivated – all very useful stuff.

Mindfulness won't show you how to do these things. Mindfulness is about the direct experience and acceptance of stress.

*And the truth is most students tell me that even if they know about the tools and techniques of taking exams, they're so stressed, they can't use them anyway.*

Mindfulness is **not** a tool or a technique for mastering these skills, it's a **practice** to help you become more aware. Mindfulness will help you to see how your mind works and how to accept the stress of your exams. This will help you become calm in the process. Becoming calm is a welcome bonus and by-product of paying attention moment to moment.

**That's why this book, majors first and foremost, on Mindfulness – to help you to be aware and calm.**

*Nothing is more important than being calm in the face of your exams. That's the only way you'll be in the best shape and frame of mind to do your best work.*

**By doing the audio practices and by practicing Mindfulness in everyday-life, you'll learn how to be more calm and how to add less stress to your direct experiences. This will put you in a better frame of mind to learn about and use the tools and techniques of taking exams – if you need to.**

*And remember, although tools and techniques are useful, don't make the mistake of thinking that by rushing off and using them for your exams, you can manage, control and organise your way through your exams without stress. You're only human, and you're just as susceptible to the stress of exams as any other student.*

In any case, I think you probably know by now, how best to prepare for and take exams. On good days, when your stress is low, you probably do a great deal of good work.

*This is such an important time for you that only practicing being still, calmly turning towards your fears to observe and acknowledge them - and breathing yourself into the present moment - will help you to stop clocking up all those points for stress!*

*Are you willing to accept that and give it a go?*

~ **PART TWO** ~ A brief guide to The MIND

**“Is your mind really helping?”**



## Your Oh So (Not So) Helpful MIND

*Your Mind is amazing! It's always there at your service, constantly monitoring and checking that everything's alright and working well.*

Most of the time, you don't need to tell yourself what to do, you do it all automatically..... the heart beats, the breath comes, and comes again, and you take it all for granted.

*You can rest easy – your mind really does have your best interests at heart, and it does its utmost to take care of you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Looking out for threat and danger, helping you thrive and survive – your mind never rests.*

Strictly speaking, it's the brain we're talking about here. The brain takes care of our basic bodily and physical functions, and plays a huge part in helping us to communicate with others through language, and solve problems too.

*Unlike the brain, the Mind is not a real thing you can see, if you think about it, it's just a concept we've created to explain the fact that we're conscious and can think about what we think.*

.....*Thinks*..... It must be very tiring and stressful being the mind, and having to think about everything we think and feel.....

*That's right! That's the trouble! If only we didn't have to think about everything we think and feel, we might not get so stressed!*

But we can't stop thinking – it's what our minds do.

We think about stuff all the time, and it's when we're thinking that we get ourselves into more and more stressful states of mind.

Some problems, like, "I'm thirsty, I need a drink", are easily solved with logic, and action and we need hardly give it a second thought. Even complex problems can be figured out when we put enough creative effort into them. Unlike needing a drink, problems that get us really wound-up, like *exams, relationships, the past* and *the future*, are not so easily dealt with.

*That's because these problems are problems of life, and they're full of emotion. Emotion is what drives us to action, and our mind is a strong believer in taking action to get things done and resolved.*

The more we puzzle over these life problems, try to use problem-solving and logic and action, the worse we seem to make them. The problems don't go away, and things just seem to become more and more stressful.

*So we get even more emotional and stressed!!* Yes, we get emotional, take action and often get ourselves into an even deeper hole.

*The following examples show your mind in action, creating stress for you. Reading this will help you to see your mind in a completely different way.*

## “Mind Out!”

### 1. Wandering MIND

*Try to focus on just one thing – maybe your breath – for more than a few seconds and see what happens.*

Just pay attention to your breath as it comes and goes..... the full extent of your in-breath and your out-breath..... Perhaps counting, “This is my in-breath, one.....this is my out-breath one, .....This is my in-breath two, .....This is my out-breath two, .....” See how far you get before your mind wanders off, and you have to start again. *It’s not easy at all.*

Easily bored and distracted, it’s as if your mind is programmed to wander aimlessly around from one thing to another. Usually, completely at random, and often at odds with what you’re trying to do.

*What happens when you’re revising for an exam and trying to memorise lots of stuff?*

The chances are – at every opportunity – your mind will be off in a world of its own, and the effort it takes to concentrate, just gets harder and harder.

The more you *force* yourself to concentrate, the more stressed and exhausted you begin to feel.

Minds do wander and that’s OK.

*The answer is to learn to accept that this is what your mind does, and stop trying to fight against it. Distraction doesn’t work, fighting and controlling doesn’t work, avoidance doesn’t work – you know this from your own experience. Are you willing to accept that?*

## 2. Stuck MIND

It doesn't seem to matter whether it's good or bad, the mind hangs on to everything as best it can – *even irrelevant, useless and unhelpful things.*

It seems to get stuck, and at times of stress it gets stubbornly and single-mindedly stuck on stress.

*Use your imagination to think of this..... a giraffe, wearing sunglasses, and driving an open top, red sports car.*

Get the picture? Well, now try not to think of it – get it completely out of your head.....

Can you do it?

It's about as easy as getting the idea out of your head that you're going to fail your exams!

*The idea is not the reality, but to your mind, if it can think it, then it's definitely a really stressful and fearful possibility. Your mind can also imagine things in such a way that it thinks they're happening now, or going to happen, or have already happened.*

Once your mind has made up its mind, that's it, ***follow me!!!*** You can try, but there's no reasoning with it - the more you get into and go along with your mind, the more difficult it is to stop this stressful way of thinking.

*The only way to get un-stuck, is to learn to see all your thoughts as just thoughts, passing by.*

## 3. Knowing MIND

You didn't get where you are today without learning and valuing your ability to know many things.

As the years roll by, our mind picks up more and more bits of knowledge – knowledge which is vital to your survival. We put a huge amount of value on our ability to learn and know things. Society does too, and that's why you and other students all over the world, are suffering from exam stress. The big challenge you're confronted with is:-

*“Tell me what you know, and prove you know It!”.*

And your mind rises to that challenge every time you have to take exams, by acquiring more and more knowledge, and churning out more and more facts. It's exhausting, and stressful, but we make ourselves do it.

*One autumn, I gave a student who was a client of mine suffering from exam stress, a leaf I had picked up at lunch time in the park.*

He was surprised when I asked him to describe everything he saw there in the leaf. It was beautiful; full of colour, texture and form.

He looked at the leaf and then he looked at me with a puzzled and pained expression. After a long pause, he started to tell me everything he knew about plant biology! It was like listening to a text book. I was very impressed with his knowledge and presentation of facts. But, he hadn't told me anything at all about the actual leaf he held there in his hand.

Apparently he thought my question was some kind of *test* of his knowledge, and he felt he was being examined in some way.

Because of this, his mind went on the defensive and tried to protect him from this perceived threat by drawing on his knowledge.

*It was not a test or a threat of any kind, but an opportunity to see something as if for the very first time without pre-conceptions, preferences or judgements. That's not how his mind saw it, and not how his mind got him to react.*

By adding stress to an otherwise harmless situation, he passed the test of knowledge, but failed the test of being alive and aware in the present moment.

*Life takes place in the present moment. It's not about our knowledge of that moment, but the moment itself, our direct experience of this very moment, right now.*

#### 4. Neglectful MIND

*Imagine you're a farmer or a gardener and you have a field.*

You plant seeds all over your field and every day you go in to do some watering, nurturing and caring for your seeds.

Sounds good, but for some reason, instead of going over the whole field, you keep going back to the same patch to take care of it. Day after day, you do this, and the rest of the field is neglected. These seeds are not fed, weeded or watered, and left un-tended they will not thrive, and some may not survive.

*"I'm going through a bad patch right now".*

A student said that to me recently, and it could be true for you. The "bad patch" that you may be going through at present in getting stressed about your exams, is the part of the field that has had the *most* watering, nurturing and attention. Stuff about *failing*, about *being stupid* or *doomed*, with *catastrophe looming*.

It's the part your mind is most used to visiting, and feels most comfortable with. The most highly cultivated part.

*There are all these other parts of the field that are just as worthy of attention, but from habit we neglect them. This habit of neglectful mind, makes us suffer. It's the habit of not being Mindful.*

Even when you're stressed, why not take a mental walk around the field of your mind and you'll see all sorts of positive seeds lying there, just waiting to be watered to come alive and flourish.

*Seeds of acceptance, of patience, of calmness..... they're all there.*

When we're low because of exam stress or illness, it does leave us susceptible to negative frames of mind taking over.

*You are what you practice.*

And if you practice only paying attention to and watering the old familiar safety-seeking and negative seeds, that will be the part of your mind that regularly comes up for you.

*Take a walk around the Field of your Mind and see what positive seeds you can pay more attention to, to water and to take care of, and truly cultivate Mindfulness in a way that will ease and prevent your stress.*

## 5. Reacting MIND

*Preparing for and taking exams does not exactly put you in your right mind! In fact, wouldn't you agree we can all go a little crazy during these times?*

I remember once being in a university library when, because a couple of people were talking nearby, and he couldn't concentrate, one student completely lost his cool. He ended up storming out, shouting, swearing and throwing things around in a very disturbed and stressful way.

*The reverberations of this incident affected us all for a long time afterwards..... and what about the student himself?*

This was a typical over-reaction during exam time, which we can easily experience when we're under pressure to perform. Our stress level runs so close to the tipping point, that it only takes a little extra stress to tip us over the edge. In this case, a little noise from equally stressed students, dealing with their stress by chatting (inconsiderately). The student who over-reacted, was suffering from the difficulty of trying to concentrate in a crowded place. He heard the students talking and then this became the focus for his mind – which would not let it go. So to his mind, their voices became louder and louder, and they became more and more inconsiderate. Almost as if they were deliberately trying to wind him up.

*As the next example 'Story MIND' shows, all kinds of exaggerated ideas about what's going on can spring from this way of mind, and this can only add to your stress.*

## 6. Story MIND

An anxious exam-stressed student came to see me in my clinic once, arriving in a very agitated state. She said,

*“I was just nearly killed by an idiot driving a white truck!”*

She was extremely upset and angry, so I asked her to tell me what happened. She said she was crossing a road on foot and a white truck came round the corner and drove straight at her and she had to jump for her life and run to the pavement. At this point she said she turned around and shouted, screamed and swore at the driver, who promptly screeched to a halt. After a pause, the truck drove away again. Sitting near to the student at a bus stop was an old lady, and she was very upset because of all the swearing. She complained to the student, who then felt a hundred times worse.

I commiserated, and asked her what else she wanted to say. She went on to tell me all about the driver, that it was a male, how old he was, where he came from, what his intelligence and parentage was..... I said, “Wow, do you know this man?” And she said, “No, of course not!” And I said, “Did you actually see him?” To which she replied,

*“Well no, but you know the sort of person I mean!”*

This got me thinking, and I said “Well hang on, what about if your mind made up a story, and it might not be that way at all?” What if he had just had an argument with his boss, he wasn’t concentrating and didn’t see you? He hadn’t actually tried to kill you at all, he just hadn’t seen you?”

*I made up other stories and she found it very hard to accept them, until finally..... the penny dropped.*

When you’re suffering from stress, your mind will often make up stories and leap to conclusions. You need to know this is happening so you can have a choice about how to *respond* to the stressful situation.

In the example above, the student didn’t respond to the situation, she *over-reacted*, and she had no choice in the matter. Moreover, she was telling herself all kinds of unhelpful stories about her ability to prepare for her exams too.

*It didn’t matter to her mind whether they were true or false, the fact is, the stories her mind made up were really unhelpful.*

What matters most is not listening, paying attention and following the stories your mind tells you, but actually understanding you have a choice about what to do about them.

*Stories are just stories, not necessarily true, or real, and they don’t need an over-reaction. Sometimes they don’t need any reaction at all, just acceptance or a calm response.*

## 7. Action MIND

*There's nothing more reassuring than actually being able to DO something about a problem – to take action.*

It's what your mind is programmed for, to make quick assessments of a situation, and take immediate action.

*You try telling your mind to hang on a minute, and you'll get short shrift!*

Of course it's a life-saver, but sometimes this knee-jerk reaction can get us into serious trouble. When we're suffering from stress, our mind is so keen to try to take care of a situation, we're liable to over-react, and act in haste. We don't take enough time to weigh things up properly and so we often misjudge the meaning and get it wrong. For example, if we feel slighted or let down by someone, we may become overly-sensitive and take things badly.

*This is your mind assuming the worst again. There are many reasons why things don't always go our way. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary, the simplest, kindest and most forgiving and understanding answer is probably the best.*

So instead of over-reacting and going along with the ideas your mind feeds you that might suggest you're the kind of person no-one likes, or that no-one cares about, or whatever else your mind might say to you, why not pause a while and re-consider?

Look at things in a more balanced way?

*Act in haste – repent at leisure!!*

## 8. Disaster MIND

*You know how sometimes you get so focused on doing something, you just obsessively put all your energy into it and everything else gets dropped until it's done?*

Your mind does that too. It only seems to be interested in one thing – your *well-being*.

*The mind is completely single-minded. It's focused on taking care of you, to make sure you thrive and survive.*

To do this it stays alert all the time, constantly scanning the environment, tipping you off about threats and dangers, and trying to solve problems for you. Mostly, even before you realise there's a problem there.

*If your mind didn't do this, you wouldn't last very long in one piece.*

I think our mind generally does take care of us really well. But sometimes it's pretty dumb, and doesn't know the difference between something that's happening *now*, something that happened in the *past*, or something that could possibly happen in the *future*. It treats them all the same, as if they're really real and really happening right now.

And of course we all know that can't always be true. How many times do you have the experience of worrying about something and then it actually doesn't happen. Or, it turns out not to be as bad as you thought it would be?

*“Another disaster that didn't happen!”*

This can be a real problem, if while you're trying to work, your mind keeps feeding you warnings and alerting you to potential catastrophes - and of course it will, because that's its job.

*So, rather than being thrown and messed up by it, let's learn to accept things just as they are. "This is what my mind does, and it's OK to think that the exams will be a catastrophe - that's just a thought. I can have the thought, and still do what I have to do anyway".*

## 9. Fixed MIND

*"Nothing very good, or very bad, ever lasts for very long".*

So the saying goes. But I don't think it's the way our mind sees things.

Events of mind don't *normally* last very long, but under pressure, your mind will often make things actually last longer than they need to. That's the only way it can get you to pay attention to what it wants you to see and feel, and therefore protect and take care of you. Constantly reviewing the same stuff over and over, good or bad, your mind wants to keep things just as they are without changes. This constant reviewing may wear you down, and cause your mind to react with fear, insecurity and vulnerability, and it may do all it can to fight against these effects of change.

*"Do I really need to fight against, try to control or prevent change?"*

If you see what your mind is up to, that it's prolonging the agony, you can learn to let go of the need to keep things constant. Try allowing things to be just the way they are. Then you'll see the truth of the saying and notice how things are always changing and transforming.

Whatever we do, everything constantly changes anyway, so why not let go into that?

*If you turn on a tap and watch the water splash into the sink, you'll notice that no two splashes are ever the same. Nor will they ever be..... ever, ever, ever!*



## 10. Demanding MIND

Students frequently tell me that exams can seriously damage your health and happiness. I know this for a fact myself! I'd put taking exams, right up there with any other major life event, like illness, injury, moving house, getting married or having a child.

Why not? When you think about it, exams are one of the first major life events for which you have total responsibility. You're on your own. Unless you drop out, you have to go through it all by yourself. Nobody can do exams for you – not legally anyway!

*Exams are one of the key life events we may go through, or that may happen to us. Our attitude towards them very much determines how we approach and deal with them.*

For those of us who have to, or choose to take exams, this is a vital part of growing up, becoming independent and finding our own way. Exams are a kind of 'Right of Passage'. Everybody – parents, tutors, employers, society, they all expect us to do well. Understandably, this creates huge pressure on us, and we don't want to think about how important it is to pass our exams; it's a frightening responsibility. And it would be good if we could turn towards and face this, and accept that these demands are an essential and natural part of life.

*If we're able to face stress in a calm and accepting way, we might have a better chance of being less stressed in preparing for and taking our exams.*

## 11. Perfect MIND

Are you the sort of person who says.....

*"Got to get this right!"*

*"Must be a better way!"*

*"That was good, but not really good enough!"*

I expect you're always beating yourself up for falling short of your ideals and standards. The more you achieve, the higher you set the bar.

*Isn't that stressful?*

It's bad enough having to achieve certain standards that others set us, without having to achieve unnecessarily high self-imposed ones.

I have worked with quite a few students who had minds which made them suffer in this way. The system and society rewards high performance, but the higher we perform, the harder it becomes to maintain the level we reach, and the effort to raise our game becomes a nightmare.

If you could see and be more aware of the enormous pressure your mind is exerting on you in this way, you might be able to ease up a bit and be kinder to yourself.

*You're only human, and at some point your body will reject your mind and say "Enough's enough!", and that will be it – no more work – until you recover.*

## 12. Past MIND

When we're taking exams, no matter what concerns us, our mind tends to spend a good deal of time reflecting on *past troubles and failures*. It's easy to get stuck and keep going back to the past.

You may notice this if something bad has happened in the past, and at anniversary or associated times, it all comes flooding back. I think we can all recognise that when it's happening.

*Interestingly, as well as being focused on the distant past, our mind can also get stuck when things have only just happened.*

So for instance, if a few minutes ago, you had an argument or disagreement with someone, you'll find it very hard or almost impossible to get this out of your mind. Whether you're right or wrong, your mind just wants to keep going back to try to sort things out. Your mind is so persistent and so troubled, that pretty soon it cannot see sense. Obviously, it would be better to back off and begin to let go, but your mind says, *"No! We have a point of principle here....."* and so the disagreement rumbles on, or even escalates into a worse argument in your mind or elsewhere.

Not giving in or giving up, but accepting, with good grace, whatever is, and helping your mind to move on, one of the most helpful things to learn, is to see what is happening, breathe calmly and say to yourself,

*"That was then and this is Now".*

## 13. Fraud MIND

Many students get to a point in their life where they stop, look around and wonder.....

*"How did I get here?" "How do I come to be doing these exams?" "Do I deserve to be taking them?" "Am I good enough?"*

Sometimes the view from your mind is not pretty, and often there is the nagging feeling that you won't be able to live up to other people's and your own expectations. It's too hard. *"I can't do this". "I'm a fraud". I'm not half as good as everyone thinks I am". "They don't know what I'm really like". "The truth will come out pretty soon".*

All we can see is endless work, no fun and potential disaster looming every step of the way. *From the perspective of your mind, it makes perfect sense to run away – very fast! The problem is, as the old saying goes, "You can run, but you can't hide".*

If you run away from something that troubles you, it will always be there, just behind still chasing you. That's because, wherever you go, you take your fears and problems with you.

Better to stand and turn towards your fears and anxieties. To face them calmly with acceptance and let go of the pressures imposed by your mind, rather than have to live up to some ideal of how you should be.

*You are as you are, so be kind, have respect for yourself, stand fast and do the best you can.*

## 14. Avoiding MIND

Running away from the idea of being a fraud is just one way your mind deals with its fears. We have so many fears, our mind is constantly searching for new ways of avoiding them. Common fears such as:-

*“I’m going to fail”*

*“No-one likes me”*

*“I’m never going to have enough time to do all this”*

*“I just can’t take this in”*

Fears are made worse by avoidance, but your mind doesn’t seem to know this. If it did, it wouldn’t constantly be:-

*Distracting*

*Wandering*

*Denying*

*Blocking*

*Busying*

*Blaming*

*Controlling*

When I tell people this is normal. *My mind does this, and everyone I know says the same, they find it hard to believe.*

*The fact is, to deal with fear, we all try to avoid, but it’s just not possible. The way our mind approaches fear is to try to make us believe there is everything to be afraid of. The trouble is, this just makes us a hundred times more afraid than we need to be! And is it true anyway?!!*

## 15. Critical MIND

When it comes to being critical, finding fault and running you down, your mind is second to none. You’d think it would be your best friend, but no, it spends way more time trying to knock your confidence than trying to build you up.

*When we’re suffering from exam stress, that’s the way it seems – hardly a kind word is spoken and the art of beating yourself up is practiced daily.*

This is the kind of un-relenting self-torture, which even the strongest of us find hard to put up with for long. Your mind has no sense of the suffering it’s putting you through, and it has an infinite capacity for self-criticism.

If you can be Mindful of this, and realise when you’re being overly-critical of yourself, you might have a chance of surviving long enough to complete your studies and take your exams. I mean, you won’t need to demoralise yourself to the point of giving up or slowing to a standstill.

Recognising and saying something to yourself, like....

*“Criticism is here....”*

Welcoming this into your awareness so you can see it clearly – looking deeply into it, and gradually accepting it.

*It doesn’t matter where the criticism comes from – your past, from your parents or wherever. It just matters that you take care of it in this moment, so you can see it and not have to continue doing it.*

## 16. Answers MIND

Sometimes, trying to solve our problems becomes a big struggle. We may fight, control, change, fix, and try to resolve things, all to no avail. This effort can work for a while, but it's not so easy with problems concerning emotions and stressful life events.

Your mind is programmed to search for answers, and it never gives up. And because it doesn't know when to stop, we're constantly testing out theories and creating new ones. (I don't mean answers to exam questions, although I expect that's all you can think of at present! I mean the general questions that life poses.)

*Consequently, ceaselessly searching for answers, we get exhausted and completely stressed about everything.*

When we *do* come up with answers to explain things, after a while we feel unsure and off we go on the hunt again.

*Without answers, we feel totally lost. With answers we can get even more hopelessly lost.*

Generating many answers isn't difficult. Selecting the correct one isn't easy, and it's all time consuming.

Perhaps it might be better to let things be for a while and not struggle so much to find the right answer. What's right for you at this time, may gradually appear if you stay calm, focus on the key issue and without looking for one, just let an answer emerge. This is insight.

*Life has a habit of unfolding and being just as it will be. What is the answer to that?*

## 17. Happy MIND

It's amazing how easy it is to be distracted by things in times of stress. We're trying to study, and our mind gets us to take a break, have a drink, call a friend, go out, watch TV, play a computer game, eat something..... anything as long as it's pleasurable.

*"In trouble? Take the Pleasure Train!"*

Your mind wants you to be happy and free from stress and so it is constantly on the lookout for ways to divert and entertain you to make you feel good.

Feeling good is OK, as long as the work gets done as well. If your mind has its own way, the work will definitely take second place to play (unless of course you've got your controlling mind engaged, which slave-drives you on with more and more work).

We need to find a way to make studying and working hard feel good, instead of exhausting.

Noticing and being Mindful of when you're taking the pleasure train a bit too much, and knowing that this is just your mind leading you astray will help.

*The pleasure train goes nowhere, and to really feel good about yourself, it may be time to get off ! Maybe sit awhile in peace on the platform, and without having to get anywhere at all towards pleasure or pain, just watch everything in your mind as it busily unfolds around you. You're OK just where you are.*

## 18. Unhappy MIND

*Many students become very lonely and unhappy at exam times. We get on with our work, and become increasingly isolated and cut off from the real world. All the fun seems to drain out of life. We get bored, irritable and fed up. The more we miss the trappings of a so-called normal life, like socialising; the more resentful and angry we may become.*

*“It’s just me. I’m the only one suffering like this”.*

*“Nobody feels as lonely and unhappy as me”.*

If, in any case you normally feel lonely, and find it difficult to fit in, this will be an even tougher time for you. Your mind won't give you any peace about that. For many people, the same sort of thing happens every year at holiday and anniversary times. We become stressed because our mind reminds us of an 'ideal' it thinks we should have in order to be happy. Whatever thoughts and feelings you experience are created by your mind – they are not necessarily the truth or reality. They occur to your mind because it is obsessed primarily with you. Its world revolves mainly around one thing:- “Me, Myself and I”. But it's not about YOU, we're all the same really. We just want to be happy, in peace and free from suffering.

*When you find yourself heading towards the downward, negative, self-centred, unhappy and lonely spiral, it's very easy to get drawn into it at these times. Whenever you can, it helps to focus outward and think more about others in a kind and compassionate way.*

## 19. Impatient MIND

As far as your mind is concerned, it's almost always the case that:-

*“If I can think it, it's already done!”*

If I invite you to stand up right now..... I expect (even though you really don't have to stand up) – in an instant – your mind has already gone through all the motions of standing up. A mind can easily do that.

*To your mind, it's already carried out the thought a hundred different ways and times, before you've even moved a finger (or foot)!*

How many times have you been impatient today?

*“The Bus or Train isn't coming soon enough”.*

*“Why am I being kept waiting so long in the queue?”*

*“This computer's so slow!”*

*“We agreed a time, but my tutor still isn't here to see me”.*

Every time we think a thought and worry about something over which we have no control, we potentially clock-up many more points for stress.

*It's OK thinking the thoughts, they're harmless. It's just when we get into and go along with them that it gets distressing.*

## 20. Failing MIND

Of course, there may be times when we really don't do so well, or we actually *do* fail.

What does your mind do with real failure? As ever, it tries to protect you and help you to survive.

*“We’re not going to go through the pain, shame and embarrassment of that again!” “Let’s just quit, or give up”. “If I don’t do the work, I can’t be blamed for failing!”*

Watch out your mind doesn't convince that you are failing, and set you up to fail, when in fact you don't need to.

If on the other hand, it's true for you that you never have failed, then well done, that's great! But you know as well as I do, the fact you've never failed doesn't really help prevent you from feeling stressed out. Not being content with success, your mind is ceaselessly looking out for you in case you *might* fail.

*“I do well in my exams, but I still need to beat myself up in case I don’t succeed!”*

That *is* stressful! Some kind of mind you've got there!! I think we all have pretty much the same kind of mind. Regardless of whether you're on the point of failure or far from it, your mind will always try desperately hard to get the very best for you. Because the fear of failure runs deep, your mind will constantly try to protect you from failing.

*Failure usually only comes from not being able to concentrate and apply yourself to your work. If you can accept your stress and work steadily, positively and progressively, you probably will not fail.*

~ **PART THREE** ~ A brief guide to MINDFULNESS

**“What is really happening in this moment?”**

*Before you read this Part of the book to learn more about Mindfulness, why not – if you haven't already done so – complete the Checklist, a copy of which can be found on the website ~*

[www.examstress.org.uk](http://www.examstress.org.uk)

## What is MINDFULNESS?

In Part Two, 'A Brief Guide to the Mind', we saw many ways in which our mind can catch us out and cause us to add more stress to already stressful situations.

It's not the complete picture, but do you recognise anything of this in yourself?

*Mindfulness is the practice of Mind-Watching.*

*Watching your mind is a way of guarding against the automatic tendency your mind has to over-react and cause you stress.*

Without trying to analyse, judge or change anything, Mindfulness helps us gain awareness of what our mind is up to. It's like asking the question....

*“Am I sure my mind is right about this?”*

But without really asking the question – just looking deeply into what's happening here and now.

To be Mindful, you need to be aware of what's happening here and now, so that you can consciously, intentionally and purposefully cultivate the attitudes of :-

1. **Non-Judging**
2. **Patience**
3. **Beginner's Mind**
4. **Trust**
5. **Non-Striving**
6. **Acceptance**  
and
7. **Letting Go**

## 7 Pillars of MINDFULNESS

They're a foundation of attitudes and commitment that will guide you towards less exam stress, and they are the basis of the guided audio practice.

1. **Non-Judging** – Automatic judging locks you into mechanical reactions. You become preoccupied with liking and disliking. You need to observe and be an impartial witness. No need to judge your judging. Watch whatever comes up.
2. **Patience** – Patience can give peace to the agitated mind. To understand that things must unfold in their own time. Why rush through one moment to get to other 'better' ones? You don't have to fill up moments with activity and thinking in order for them to be rich. Being patient helps you to be open to the moment to accept it in its fullness.
3. **Beginner's Mind** – Willingness to see everything as if for the first time, having a Beginner's Mind can leave you free of expectations based on your past experiences. Each moment is unique and contains unique possibilities. See with fresh eyes, right now with a clear and uncluttered mind. Watch out for the veil of your own thoughts and opinions.
4. **Trust** – Trust in your own intuition and authority. Honour your feelings if something does not feel right to you. No point in imitating someone else. Become more fully yourself. The more you trust yourself the more able you will be to trust others. And see their basic goodness.



5. **Non-striving** – Doing things for a purpose can be an obstacle – the goal is to be yourself. Try less and be more. Mindfulness is about simply paying attention to whatever may be happening. Just watch. Allow the experience to be here because it already is. See and accept things as they are moment by moment. Movement towards goals will take place by themselves as an ‘unfolding’ that you invite to happen within you.
6. **Acceptance** – Coming to terms with things as they are - at this time with no need to try to force situations to be the way you want them to be, it only makes for more tension and is a waste of energy. You have to accept yourself as you are before you can really change.

*It's not about stopping or giving up or tolerating or avoiding. It's about a willingness to see things the way they are. This is the precondition for appropriate action. You need a clear picture of what is actually happening. Take each moment as it comes and be with it fully, as it is. Receptive and open to whatever you're feeling, thinking and seeing.*

7. **Letting Go** – There are certain thoughts and feelings that your mind wants to hold on to. If they are pleasant you try to prolong them. If they are not you try to get rid of them, prevent or protect yourself from them because they are unpleasant and painful and frightening. Let your experience be what it is whatever it is. Practice observing from moment to moment. Letting go is a way of letting things be - of accepting things as they are. If you find it

particularly hard to let go then focus on the opposite and observe what it feels like to hold on. You let go when you go to sleep - if you can't let go you can't sleep. Practice letting go when you're awake!

*These seven pillars of Mindfulness, are the principles we practice through the audio programme. Doing your practice will make you more aware and more Mindful. Being more Mindful will help you to suffer less exam stress.*

### **In Summary**

Mindfulness means being able to pay attention with curiosity and interest, to all there is to directly experience. Staying open and awake moment to moment as each present reality of experience unfolds. Being able to notice when your mind has slipped into the past or the future, and focus on bringing yourself back gently to the present moment here and now.



## Mindfulness in EVERYDAY LIFE

In addition to the practice you do when you listen to the audio, there are many opportunities to practice being Mindful at other times in everyday life. The more you practice, the less stress you will add to your life.

Each day – even when you’re studying for and taking your exams – you go through a lot of routine activities. Much of the time you do these without being Mindful – you do them on auto-pilot.

For example.....

*Waking Up  
Getting Up  
Washing  
Dressing  
Eating/Drinking  
Walking/Moving Around  
Using transport  
Standing/Sitting  
Meeting/Talking with Others  
Working and playing*

These are often activities you’re engaged in, with nothing much for your mind to do, or to concentrate on. You do them automatically, often in a kind of dream, without being aware of what you’re doing at all.

Much of this Mindless time on auto-pilot, may be used by your mind to ‘wind you up’ creating stress, anxiety and tension. We’re very prone to this at exam times, because all the work we have to do seems so boring.

If you could be more Mindful when you’re doing your routines and your work, you could be more focused on the present, notice the stress more clearly, and let it go.

*Right from the moment you begin to wake up, why not practice this Mindfulness of daily routines too?*

Every time you notice you’re engaged in a routine activity, or you’re getting bored with your work and not really focused on what you’re doing – not really there – scan your body and Mind for stress, anxiety and tension. Then gently let this go – letting all the stress and tension drain completely away from you on the out-breath.

That way you won’t score so many points for stress each day, carrying them over with you to the following day and making yourself suffer so much.

It’s the build-up of stress that gradually causes exhaustion, fear and hopelessness. We don’t notice it because we’re not aware.

*Being more aware, more of the time, helps us to release and prevent the build-up of stress.*

*Learning to be Mindful in everyday life is an important part of experiencing less stress at exam times. Mindfulness is your ‘safety valve’, through which you can release lots of stress, tension and anxiety, remain calm and do your best work.*

## The PARADOX

As a student, you didn't get where you are today without being competitive, working hard and setting out to achieve results. Well maybe not always the 'working hard' bit.....

I know that a lot of you are brilliant and apparently haven't had to work very hard to achieve good results. It's sometimes a shock when you go from school where you were top of the class, to University or College, and find that there are a lot of even more brilliant people around you. Very stressful, suddenly discovering you've *got* to work really hard to keep your head above water!

If you *have* had to work hard to get here, then well done! Either way, in order to succeed, we all have to work hard in the end.

*But, do you have to try **so** hard to succeed, that you create a huge amount of pressure for yourself to do well, only to find the pressure is too great?*

Where does the pressure come from? Much of it comes from the demands of your course. But a lot of pressure also comes from your mind, when you compare yourself to others, worry about the future, and work excessively at all hours of the day and night. Why not learn to work smarter rather than harder? The Mindful way is smart, because it shows you how to achieve your best, by not trying to achieve anything at all. Mindfulness is the practice of non-doing, and it is a paradox that sometimes this non-doing works better than anything we can ever do to make things right. Maybe they're right already – if only we'd let them be.

*When you're stuck and stressed, it's better to stop and meditate rather than plough ahead – then when you're calm, you can carry on more peacefully and effectively.*

## ~ PART FOUR ~ A brief guide to the AUDIO

### “You are what you practice!”

*Here you'll find a brief guide to each of the audio practices. I have written this to accompany the audios so that you can read it now and/or whenever you want to. That way, you don't have to listen to me repeating the explanations over and over again on the audios. On the days you do your practice, it might be an idea to read the relevant bit of Part Four again.*

## Be MINDFUL of this

All you need to do is.....

1. Read the Audio Practice Guide
2. Follow the instructions on the MP3 audio itself.
3. Pay attention to your Mind and Body.

*~ There are 7 brief practices for you to do – one, or more than one a day, for at least 7 days ~*

As you practice, you will see how your mind is making you stressed, and this will give you more freedom and choice to let the stress go.

**Please be advised ~ listen to the audio, and do your practice:-**

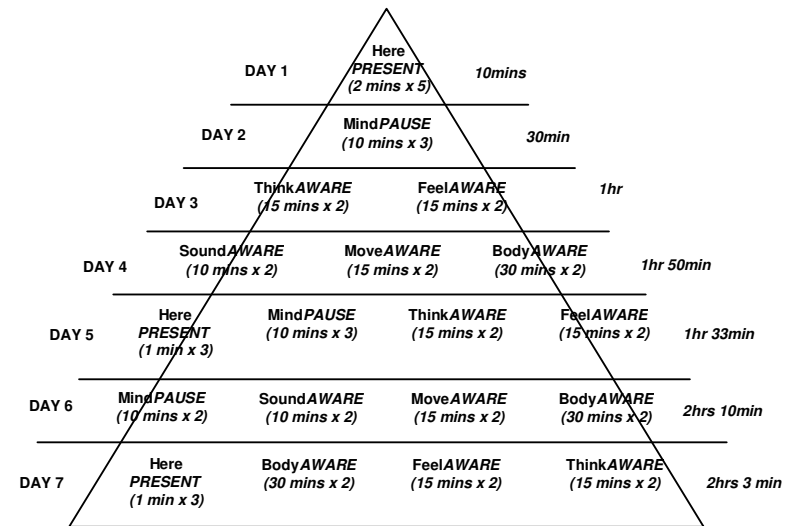
- *In a safe and comfortable place where you won't be disturbed*
- *At times of day when you're not too tired*
- *Only at dedicated times when you're focused solely on the practice, and not doing anything else*

Whether you're struggling with revision, at the beginning or end of a course, whatever level of study, or even in the middle of your exams, the following pages leading to the audio practice guide, will help you to make an immediate start on becoming more Mindful and reducing your stress.

*The practice takes very little time, and if you can, it would be a good idea to read this book before using the audio.*

## The PLAN

My suggestion, as best you can, is to read the book and then follow The Plan below.



**THE PLAN IS VERY SIMPLE – EACH DAY DO YOUR PRACTICE!**

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*The idea is to get used to practicing regularly, and gradually build up a store of direct Mindful experience. This will help you to recognise, accept, investigate and observe your exam stress in a completely new and far less stressful way.*

*This is not the usual 'relaxation tape' kind of approach where you passively get lulled into a state of relaxation, it is a plan for you **actively** to develop your AWARENESS.*

*And, as you become more aware, you will no doubt become more calm and relaxed. It's one of the great bonuses of being Mindful.*

## If POSSIBLE

Try doing your first practice of the day, as soon as you can when you get up, and then spread the repeat practices over the rest of your day.

Whatever schedule works for you.

Starting first thing is a good idea – begin each day as you mean to go on.

Ending your practice at a time of day when you're still awake would be a good idea too!

There are 7 different practices, and each day you add to your experience of Mindfulness.

If you keep them up, you should feel the benefits of becoming more Mindful growing from Day 1, day by day.

Repeating the practices over again for further weeks might be good too, returning to the practices as and when you need to. Perhaps discovering which practice or practices help you the most, and staying with those practices, and using them on a regular basis – hopefully every day.

You are what you practice! With practice you can replace old habits with new Mindful ones.

Remember – don't try too hard, just allow yourself gradually to become more Mindful.

***Good Luck with the Plan.  
Take ownership of Your Plan!!  
No Plan? No problem, good Luck with your 'No Plan'!***

## For those of us who don't like PLANS!

Following a routine like this is very helpful for some. An hour or two a day (less to begin with) spread over each day for 7 days, is not much to do really, but doing it like this to a plan doesn't work for or appeal to everyone. Some of us just like to be more spontaneous and dip into things in a less orderly way. That's really OK too, as long as you do all the practices several times, and discover what works best for you in becoming more Mindful. The invitation is to use the audio practices in whatever way best helps you to be more Mindful. So don't feel constrained or inhibited at all. You need to do what's right for you, taking care of yourself every day with every practice. As I said before, ***you are what you practice***, so practice really does count. ***If you practice being Mindful you will gradually learn to be more Mindful.***

My wish, is that – based on the ideas and guidelines contained within the audio practices – you are inspired to have a regular practice of your own, that really helps you to observe, acknowledge, accept and be at ease with all the exam stress that currently shows up for you. Regular practice will keep you ***AWARE***, and that will prevent you from falling down the slippery slope of Mindlessness, into the familiar depths of exam stress.

***Eventually, you'll probably be able to do your practice without needing to listen to the audios at all.*** And of course you can always return to this written guide as a refresher at any time you want to use it.

What if you're so stressed you're thinking.....

***"7 days?!" "I don't have 7 days!"***

If that's true for you, then as soon as you've finished reading this and perhaps Part Four which is the section of the book

focused on the practices, you can get straight on with the 2 minute Here**PRESENT** practice - it's up to you. Here**PRESENT** will help you right away, to slow down the rate at which you add to your stress. You may feel an immediate benefit from this. It will also help you to get into a better frame of mind for when you do have time to read carefully the rest of the book and explore the other practices. The audio practices will guide you in developing vital Mind and Body awareness. This will give you more choice about whether you're going to continue to allow yourself to add to your suffering and be excessively stressed, or whether instead, you'd like to become more Mindful. Incidentally, learning to be more Mindful won't just change how you approach your examinations it will also change for the better, your approach to all the stresses and strains in your life. Wouldn't that be a good thing?!

## What is the PRACTICE?

You know how easy it is for your mind to stress you out, and how helpful it would be to be more Mindful. Practicing being more Mindful is the next step. This guide will help to prepare you for your audio practice.

The practice is brief, daily and very simple. Simple but not easy!

You **meditate mindfully**, focused on different aspects of your stress.

*Notice what your mind does with the word meditate? Meditate is just a word. Leave aside all your pre-conceptions and expectations and don't get stressed about it!*

Meditation means paying attention moment to moment, with gentle interest and curiosity, and without making judgements.

All you do is sit or stand in a comfortable, quiet place for a while and notice whatever is there for you in your thoughts, feelings and sensations.

*Not trying to do anything, get anywhere or achieve anything at all. Not trying to empty, to erase or clear your mind, but to allow your mind to be still, calm and aware. Not falling asleep, but 'Falling Awake'.*

Whenever you see your mind *wandering* off into the past or future, you notice with curiosity where it may have gone, and gently bring yourself back to the present moment.

*In the audio practice, I will guide you in how to do this.*

The practice will help you to become an *observer* and *witness* to the events of your mind, without having to be carried away by them.

Mindful meditation is the practice of non-doing. It's a *paradox*, and you need to *do* the practice in order to understand. I will guide you.

As you practice, you'll soon learn how to be more Mindful while you do your work, and more Mindful in your everyday life too.

Seeing how your mind really works, the practice will show you how to let go of all the stress that you are making for yourself.

*The following brief description of each of the seven audio practices will help you to prepare to use the MP3 audio itself.*

### **About Practice 1 – HerePRESENT (2 minutes)**

Years ago when I was at school, the teacher used to check to see who was in class, by 'calling the register'. She would call out a name and the pupil – if they were there – would say "Present, Miss!" or "Here, Miss!" As I reflect on those times, most of us weren't here or present at all! We were young, restless, bored, agitated and our minds were all over the place, but not here or present.

*Your only chance of doing the best you can in your exams, is right now. Now is when you can be your most calm and resourceful, your most free to make good choices, and your most aware to make your best moves.*

So that you can do this, the HerePRESENT practice will help you simply to practice being here right now in this moment – to know that you're here and that you're present in body and mind.

*Being present is not an easy thing to be.*

Just like we were as kids, most of us are not really here or present at all.

As an experiment, if we went into a shopping mall and stopped somebody at random right now, I'll bet they wouldn't be there!

Of course, they'd be there physically, but their mind would be off thinking about something they had to get or do in the shops, or somewhere they had to go later, or they'd be going over something that happened earlier that they wish hadn't, or that they wish had gone a different way.....

*Why do you need to be Here? Why do you need to be Present? The reason is, because the present moment is where life is.*

### **Real life takes place in the present moment.**

The past is in the past, it's already happened and we can't do anything to change it. The future is in the future, it hasn't happened yet, and we don't have any idea what it will be.

### **Both the past and the future are made right now in this present moment.**

### **That's how important NOW is.**

So right now is the only chance I have of saying something useful.... and already that moment has gone into the past. That's how fleeting the moment is. To be AWARE of being present, takes a conscious *intention* to be present. The HerePRESENT practice will help you to show up and do just that. Having the *intention* to be present is the first step towards being more aware of yourself here and now – being more Mindful, and therefore able to focus and concentrate on whatever you need to.

*It's important to remember the past and to imagine the future – that's what our mind does really well anyway. Unfortunately, when we're under the pressure of exams, we tend to remember the bad experiences we've had in the past, or those we recently had. This depresses us and makes us feel very negative towards our exams. We also tend to imagine the worst possible future, and this has a similar effect. Being aware of now, is critical to being able to make the most of now.*

### **About Practice 2 - MindPAUSE (10 minutes)**

Building on the brief HerePRESENT practice, each day, it's helpful to check-in with yourself a little more deeply through the MindPAUSE, to see how you are – to notice, recognize and acknowledge what's happening for you in that moment. What you're thinking, what you're feeling emotionally and what kind of sensations you have in your body. That way you can learn quickly to see your stress, accept and let it go. Especially by being aware of your breathing and reconnecting with your body.

Using the MindPAUSE will help you do just that, so that you can PAUSE, check-in and 'reset' your mind to its calm position whenever you need to. It only takes a few minutes, and it's a helpful way of reducing your daily stress. I know it's hard to believe, but your 'default' position is really to be calm and at peace with yourself.

*You can be calm, when you let yourself be, even during stressful exam times when there is so much riding on your performance.*

The MindPAUSE will help you to stay more present and Mindful for more of the time, so you can focus on the work you're doing. It will help to refresh and wake you up. By doing this, you won't clock-up so many points for stress – and that means you'll be more available, get more done and feel better about yourself. We all know it's only the hard work of preparation that gets results, so staying fresh and alert for more of the time will definitely help.

I know from my own work with students, and as a psychologist in the UK Health Service, that people – myself included – find it very hard to slow down and be in the moment. In times of stress it is easy to get wound up over nothing. That's why this brief sitting or standing practice is so



useful. In just 10 minutes, you can use it at any time during your day to check-in, acknowledge, release stress and calm yourself down.

So that you can really see what's going on, you slow things down and allow your mind to *PAUSE*. Then you notice all there is to see, and then Re-Set your mind and body to its calm position.

*Well actually, it's more like allowing your mind and body to re-set itself to its calm position.*

This is an important point.

The great thing about the Mind*PAUSE* and most of the other practices, is that you can even do them when you're moving around (not driving, riding a bike, or crossing roads!) or out in the company of others, and no-one needs to know. This practice is fine anywhere as long as you carefully consider the safety of yourself and others.

*As you learn, there's no need to force yourself, or try too hard to follow my instructions – just learning by picking up what's best for you, and with practice gently finding your own way.*

### **About Practice 3 - Think*AWARE* (15 minutes)**

This practice will help you to focus on whatever thoughts you are experiencing, that may be causing distress and preventing you from getting on with your work.

If you try to stop your mind from wandering, worrying or thinking about anything you don't want it to - does it work?

Not for long!

These are typical worrying thoughts that students have reported in surveys I ran at exam times.....

*"I am going to fail...I don't know which topics will come...my friends will pass and I will fail".*

*"I will never be able to cover all this material. It's too much!"*

*"If I fail then it's the end of the world and I have wasted my life away".*

*"I'm going to be a failure or just not good enough for what is expected by the people around me, like I will let people down and most of all that I will let myself down".*

*"I don't understand anything - I feel trapped, agitated, challenged, and angry at myself for not spending more time studying during the year. I want to spend time with my friends having fun".*

*"I'm disappointing myself – letting myself down".*

*"I can't do this!!!"*

They look familiar to you?



From moment to moment, our mind has many thoughts. If they're worrying, we're immediately caught up and carried away by them. This is normal, day-dreaming is normal, getting distracted is normal, not being able to follow what someone is saying, or see clearly what you need to see on signs or in books, is all perfectly normal - especially during times of stress.

In fact it's a wonder that we can focus and concentrate for more than a moment on any one thing at all – there is so much stuff to process, and potentially to be frightened of and worry about.

As well as the difficulty of having too much to think about, our busy mind is also constantly being distracted and bombarded by the stories we tell ourselves and the internal dialogue in which we engage. We are full of Mindless *CHATTER*, and seldom is there a time when we're not thinking about something, or even thinking about our thinking.

Most of the time, our thoughts are concerned with past memories about things we cannot change, and future imaginings about things we can't predict (like all the predictions of failure you saw above). The Think*AWARE* Practice shows you clearly how this can happen.

Learning how to see your thoughts rather than have to be caught up in and carried away by them is not easy, but with regular practice it does get easier to be an observer and witness.

As I've already said, there is no off-switch, so learning through the Think*AWARE* practice to be OK with your thoughts just as they are – whatever they are – is a worthwhile thing to do.

*No need to engage in Mindless chatter with yourself and your thoughts, if you can be Mindful of them, rather than having to believe in and do everything they say, you will suffer less stress.*

#### **About Practice 4 - Feel**AWARE** (15 minutes)**

This practice will get you to focus on whatever feelings you are experiencing, that may be causing distress and preventing you from getting on with your work.

What kind of mood did you wake up in this morning? Were you perhaps feeling...

*Anxious  
Angry  
Ashamed  
Depressed  
Embarrassed  
Sad  
Guilty  
Excited  
Frightened  
Irritated  
Insecure  
Proud  
Cross  
Panicky  
Frustrated  
Nervous  
Disgusted  
Hurt  
Cheerful  
Disappointed  
Enraged  
Scared  
Happy  
Humiliated  
Loving*

A whole variety of them?

As you probably know, the mood you wake up with can set the trend for the rest of your day. Our feelings do change frequently, throughout the day, but you may keep returning to the bad ones and cause yourself a great deal of unnecessary stress.

It is very common to experience a lot of difficult feelings during exam times, and these quotes below are typical of the worrying feelings and emotions that students have reported.

*“I feel sad, upset and very irritable”.*

*“Loss of patience”.*

*“A state of constant alertness and often panic. For prolonged times, I can't concentrate on anything else without thinking of the exam (e.g. I can't watch a movie, or I am lost in a conversation with others)*

*“I become unfriendly, down and often very aggressive”.*

*“I'm very focused on just the exams and neglect all other areas of life including emotions. I get irritable and more introverted”.*

*“I become paranoid and anxious and start panicking”.*

*“Short tempered - argue a lot with friends and boyfriend, and on the brink of tears”.*

*“Depressed and disheartened”.*

*“I feel inadequate, I lack confidence and I become needy of encouragement and approval from people around me.*

*It makes me very depressed, tense and short-tempered. I feel a time-pressure and often rush things”.*

*“Mood swings, nervous, impatient and less tolerant”.*

*“Feel lost and locked away”.*

Sound familiar?

Like the weather, feelings come and go, and they are constantly transforming. Sometimes what we might call ‘good weather feelings’ arrive, and sometimes ‘bad weather feelings’ are there. In some parts of the world we like to go on about the weather, and in the same way, many people have a habit of getting into and carried away with their feelings. Feelings are powerful and draw us into them. Some feelings come along and we don’t seem to be able to let go of them and shake them off at all.

If they’re happy feelings, we want to hang on to them and experience them more and more, and if they’re sad ones, we don’t like them, but we can get drawn into them just the same. It becomes a habit, and just like in sport, dance, music and languages, the habits we practice are the ones we get good at.

But who wants to get good at being more and more negative, or sad or depressed? No one I guess, but that’s what happens. We get repeatedly drawn towards particular feelings and we practice and rehearse what they feel like, and so we *become* expert at the way they feel. We even make up stories that support our beliefs about the feelings we have.

*“I feel afraid I will fail”* – This may also be a thought, *“I think I’m afraid, so I will fail”*. Either way, if we follow that train of thought or feeling, it may easily make us behave as if we are going to fail, and so fail we might, if we don’t calm down and do the work we need to.

*“I feel trapped and isolated”* – This is also a thought, and it can make us trap and isolate ourselves.

So are feelings, just thoughts? In a way, yes, apart from images that spring to mind, it’s all just thoughts – ‘Events of Mind’. In fact, everything that comes and goes in our mind is made up of the words we use in our language. And we end up having a kind of running commentary of what we think is happening..... thoughts.... feelings.... sensations..... never ending.

Thoughts and feelings have a lot to answer for. If we believe and follow them, they end up making us behave in ways we feel we should behave. For example, if you feel anxious about not being able to do a piece of work, you might question your ability, and this in turn might make you try to avoid doing what you’re afraid of. Avoidance might make you feel better for a while, but then other thoughts and feelings might come along to make you feel bad again. You know the routine!

Unfortunately, there isn’t really any way I know, that can break the habit of feeling the many different and often unhelpful ways we do. Feelings come and go – just as they will.

*The thing is to be able to watch and witness the feelings come and go, and not have to get so carried away with them. Not trying to have preferences and not trying to make one feeling more important than another – the idea in Mindfulness is to be open, to create a sense of spaciousness and acceptance, to really take care of your feelings.*

With practice, you *can* learn to see your Feelings as ‘*Events of Mind*’ which you can observe and accept. Gradually this will help you to let go, and suffer less exam stress in the process. When we have pleasant feelings we desire and want to hang on to them, and with unpleasant ones, we often condemn and turn away from them.

*It's important to notice that – like waves breaking on the sea shore – feelings come and go. They arise and they pass away. The feelings you have now, are probably not the same ones you had when you first started reading this piece. Is that a good or bad thing?!*

Sometimes we enter a period where we seem to get stuck on certain feelings – they fade a little bit, but we keep coming back to them. You know what it's like when you get a bit depressed, or you get over-excited about something you really feel you want desperately. This happens to a large extent, because we rehearse the feelings over and over and become a kind of expert in the process – an expert at being depressed or an expert at being over-excited, or just about anything we practice and rehearse. Whatever you're doing as you prepare for and take your exams, it's very helpful to become more Mindful of your feelings as they arise and fade away. Paying attention to, spending time with and taking care of your feelings, much as you would a child, you stand a good

chance of transforming any stubborn, difficult, unhelpful or stressful feelings.

*Being AWARE and Mindful of your feelings through the FeelAWARE practice, will help you to really know what's going on, and more importantly to know how to accept, take care and let go of unhelpful feelings.*

## About Practice 5 - SoundAWARE (10 minutes)

This practice is not about listening to your music or anything else you might choose to listen to. It explores the fascinating association between all the sounds that are there to experience in the world, and the ways in which we describe them to ourselves.

Sitting and listening to whatever sounds there are to be experienced around you – ordinary, everyday sounds – and noticing that there is a natural tendency of Mind to make interpretations, judgements and have preferences about the sounds.

When we engage with our Mind in this way, the description is not the sound, it's just an addition, an interpretation. When we add to our direct experience we often cause stress. Adding and interpreting, feeds the chatter of your mind, and can lead to a build up of stress. Paying attention to sound is a good way to practice letting go of the chatter and just accepting what is, in a calm and peaceful way. A sound is just a sound, but if you listen and try not to describe your experience of it, it is very hard to do.

The SoundAWARE practice is a good way to see how we have preferences, and how we become attached to experiencing things in our own way, so that the sound becomes almost about us and not about the sound at all.

*“This sound is irritating me.” “I like this sound.”*

*“What was that noise?” “I wonder if that was.....”*

*These distractions of mind, close down, rather than open up our awareness, and they increase the likelihood of stress.*

By deliberately focusing on one thing, like a sound, and bringing it to the forefront of your mind, and getting stuck on it, you leave yourself prone to experience more stress than you need to. This is because you're exerting a lot of effort to focus on and hang on to something, at the exclusion of all else. Instead, with this SoundAWARE practice, you can learn to notice and appreciate sounds – just as they are – showing you that you can let go of habits and preferences, to experience your direct experience as it really is at this moment.

As with anything else your mind can perceive, most sounds we hear in everyday life don't represent threat or danger, but when we're stressed – especially during exam times – it's very natural to focus on sounds which distract, annoy or irritate us. That's your mind trying to take care of you again, trying to protect you, often by over-reacting.

As with the other practices, the lesson in SoundAWARE, is to notice and appreciate what *is*..... so that you can know when you're over-reacting and adding content and stress unnecessarily, to your direct experience.

*Try this brief practice (preferably more than once) and see for yourself. The more you can be Mindfully AWARE of, the more likely it is you will be able to see and let go of your stress.*

## About Practice 6 - MoveAWARE (15 minutes)

This MoveAWARE practice is an interesting exploration in-depth of a few simple things we do every day, such as standing up, sitting down, walking..... but in the practice, we do them Mindfully.

In everyday life, even when we're preparing for or taking exams, there are many ordinary routine things we have to do, such as.....

*Waking Up – Getting Up – Washing – Dressing – Eating/Drinking – Moving Around – Standing/Sitting – Meeting/Talking with Others –*

We do these things without giving them very much thought. In fact they become so much a part of our routine, they provide 'Wind-Up Time' for your mind. I mean, you get wound up because your mind has very little to do. Instead of staying focused on the task in hand, it occupies itself by chewing over or making a mountain out of one kind of problem or another. So we are doing things, but we're not really there doing them.

Because when we're engaged in routine activity, our mind is on auto-pilot, and since most of our daily activities are routine, it means that there is a great deal of time when your mind can wind you up. This is simply because you don't have to concentrate on what you're doing. The net result is stress.

*Be Mindless of what you're doing and suffer stress!  
That's what happens when you're not Mindfully AWARE.*

Instead, why not try focusing on what you're doing – if you're drinking a cup of coffee, try being there with the drinking of the coffee, if you're brushing your teeth..... try really being there! The MoveAWARE practice will help you begin to see how useful this can be.

It's not that we need to concentrate on what we're doing, so that we can use that as a way of blocking out or avoiding worrying thoughts – you know it can't be done. And it doesn't mean that to be Mindful of movement, we need to do everything slowly, laboriously and seriously. No, this practice is not about that. It's about calmly learning to see and accept all there is to be seen and accepted, within the movement of your body, without having to do or change anything – just being Mindfully AWARE. We cannot avoid stress, anxiety and tension, but we can surely be there to witness it in a calm and compassionate way.

This practice shows you that it *is* possible to be Mindful when you move around. Being more Mindfully AWARE of how you move is a good way to be less stressed. Mindful movement is StressLESS movement in the present moment. Most movements we do are done on auto-pilot as a kind of routine. Now you have a choice, you can do things Mindfully or stressfully. This is also true when you spend a day of routine study and all that entails. Why not study more Mindfully and make all your actions more Mindful if you can? If you do this regularly, you'll clock up far fewer points for stress.

*You'll be surprised each time you do the MoveAWARE practice, just how many tricks your mind plays on you when you move around!*

## About Practice 7 - BodyAWARE (30 minutes)

Building on the MoveAWARE practice, BodyAWARE will help you become more deeply AWARE of all the physical sensations that you may be experiencing that contribute to your stress. These are the same physical sensations that if un-noticed, can build up and cause much tension, discomfort, and tiredness, which in turn can badly affect the amount of stress you feel.

As you prepare for and take your exams, without even realising it, a great deal of tension, stress, discomfort and tiredness can creep into your body. Well, you know what it's like, you get so stressed, you become exhausted. How Mindfully AWARE of this stress and tension are you right now? Where is it? How does it feel? How is this affecting your ability to focus on and do your work effectively, or be with people or relax?

The idea of looking deeply into and being curious about the sensations of your body in this way is to learn to be more sensitive to the slightest bits of stress and tension you may find there. To know where they are and how they feel, so that as you're noticing them, you'll become more Mindful and free to choose to accept and let the stress and tension go. More freedom and choice means less exam stress.

These are typical Bodily reactions students report during exam times.....

*“I lose my appetite, can't sleep, and acne breaks out”.*

*“I can't sleep well at night”.*

*“I get upset stomachs to panic attacks, and I have so much anxiety I can't even look at the page I'm reading. I hyperventilate, get tearful, and I hit things occasionally”.*

*“I have a fast heart rate ,can't sleep, and I shake”.*

*“Churning stomach (sick feeling), dizziness (light-headed), diarrhoea and sweats”.*

*“Feeling cold”.*

*“My blood pressure drops and sometimes I faint”.*

*“I find myself more tired than usual”.*

*“Sick, I can't sleep, always want to smoke, very tired , stressed and very tearful, weak arms from writing, digestive problems”.*

*“Hair loss, digestion and sleep problems, headaches, and acne”.*

*“I keep eating all the time!”*

*“Last year I was sick on the morning of the exams. I lost weight during the exam period because I stopped eating properly.”*

How about you?

Developing a greater awareness of your body will help you to be more Mindful of the build-up of unnecessary stress and tension in your body. The sooner you're Mindfully AWARE of tension, the sooner you'll be able to learn to accept and let it go.

You can view the sensations in your body from head to toe or from toe to head – it doesn't matter, as long as you spend

long enough to really feel all there is to feel in each part of your body.

*One tip about the BodyAWARE practice, is that if you do this lying down and find it hard to stay awake (this is a very common experience) why not try next time sitting in an upright chair, or practicing at a time when you aren't so tired?*

### **Note about your PRACTICE**

- Doing the 7 practices will help you see how your mind works – how you add to your stress unnecessarily.
- Practicing will help you to be Mindfully Aware, to take care of yourself and let go of exam stress more of the time.
- When we begin practicing, we get a glimpse of what it would be like to be more Mindful. Sometimes it does take a while for all the benefits to begin to sink in.
- On the other hand many students feel an immediate benefit.
- You are what you practice, so if you practice being more Mindful, you will become more Mindful, and learn to let go of stress.
- You may find that after a while, you don't need to listen to the audio practices to help you stay focused on doing the practice.
- To practice being Mindful, it is enough to sit, or walk or lie in silence with the intention of being Mindful.
- Anything we do in everyday life, can be done more Mindfully.
- Each moment of Mindfulness is a moment of presence – reclaimed – when we're really here, really alive.
- Each new moment is a chance to be Mindfully *AWARE* – to take care of yourself and let go of exam stress.

*What would you rather do?  
SEE your exam stress and let it go,  
or BE your exam stress and cling on to it?*



## The importance of SILENCE

- Each practice on the audio has deliberate spaces of silence built in.
- These are not very long. They are there because silence is an absolutely vital and essential part of the practice of Mindfulness. Silence gives us 'seeing time'.
- Silence affects us in different ways.
- Sometimes it seems to still the mind and create a sense of peace.
- Sometimes it can create agitation and restlessness in the mind.
- The practice of Mindfulness is about being *AWARE* of whatever is there for you at any one moment. Just to observe and witness whatever shows up.
- So, if in silence, your mind becomes peaceful and still for a while, then you can use the stillness for calm reflection.
- If your mind becomes agitated, wandering or troubled and turbulent – which it often will – then there won't be the stillness on which to reflect. Nevertheless, even if there is no stillness, you can still look deeply and calmly at the agitation, wandering and trouble, just as it is.

*For many people, silence is hard – we're always trying to fill silences to cover unrest, embarrassment and uneasiness. Willingness in the practice, to go towards and embrace silence, to notice and acknowledge the way your mind is working, is all we're trying to do.*

## What do I do after 7 DAYS?

Take whatever time you need, to do your practice.

*There is no end-point.*

Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, the aim is to learn how to *practice* being Mindful.

*You are what you practice.*

If you can bring Mindfulness into your life, you'll benefit with your exams and in your wider world too.

*No need to try hard.*

Maybe you can set aside a little time to practice each day.

*Just learning to be aware.*

And you can practice in everyday life.

*Seeing all there is to see.*

Everything you do is an opportunity for practice.

*Hearing all there is to hear.*

Practice may not make you perfect.

*Feeling all there is to feel.*

**But it will make you alive to this moment.**

~ PART FIVE ~ Conclusion

**“Why be any more stressed  
about your exams  
than you need to be?”**

## Exam Stressed MIND

*All these Minds to be in!! All this stress to create!!*

We've seen here, just some of the many ways our mind can easily get us stressed out when taking exams. You probably identify with a lot of them.

Instead of saying.....

*“Yes, that’s me, that’s what I do!”*, maybe now you can begin to say.....

*“Yes, that’s my mind, that’s what my mind does!”*

Being able to observe and witness your mind, means you're becoming more Mindful.

As your mind grapples with the stress of preparing for and taking exams, you'll often go through 'bad patches'. These patches are the parts of your mind you go into, nurture and take care of every day. It's this unhelpful practice that develops the stressful habits of mind we'd rather not have. We are what we practice, and the more we practice dealing with stress in a stressful way, the more we'll suffer stress. There's no way to stop or turn off these stress habits, but we might be able to learn to see, know and accept them. Understanding what your mind is doing, will give you more freedom of choice in ways to respond. When you choose the habit of Mindfulness, you will weaken the habit of stress.

*The invitation is to learn to be more Mindfully aware of your mind, just as it is in each present moment.*

## Understand the Ways of Your MIND

When we're *really* stressed about our exams, our mind metaphorically falls into a hole and goes into over-drive trying to dig us out. The mind takes action, grabs the nearest shovel..... and digs the hole deeper in the process. So we make matters worse, and we stay well and truly stuck. *Whose side is your mind on?*

In spite of the many ways the mind *seems* to be so negative and unhelpful to us, I still think it has our best interests at heart. It will do anything it can to protect you from threat and danger, and help you to thrive and survive. That's what minds are for.

*And, I hope you know by now that no matter how good your mind is – unless you can see what your mind is up to – your mind won't help you pass your exams without suffering unnecessary stress.*

You can't stop your mind doing its job of taking care of you. *Your* job, is to understand the ways of your mind and see how they might not always be very helpful to you when you're under pressure. If you learn about the activity and motives of your mind from a more objective view point, as a calm and curious observer and witness, you'll have a real chance of accepting your stress – not adding to it – and suffering far less exam stress.

*"Let me see.... Ah yes, you're my mind and you're just trying to take care of me. You can say what you like, but I don't have to do or be what you say!"*

*Do the audio practices regularly, and see for yourself the benefits of becoming more Mindful.*

**Are you willing to study  
and take your exams  
more Mindfully now?**

**YES!!!!**

*"It is said that effort should be like a river, sustained and continuous. If you have the gift of perfect effort or diligence, free of any sense of discouragement or inadequacy, then anything you do will succeed."*

*The Dalai Lama 2002 The Spirit of Peace*

## Re-MINDER

Why not take a copy of the 'MindCARD' shown below, cut it out and use it as a prompt to Mindful practice?

**M**y mind is not always right  
**I**s this really true, really real – really happening right now?  
**N**o action I take is going to completely change my mind  
**D**o I have to do or say everything my mind is telling me?  
**F**eelings are just feelings – I don't have to act on them  
**U**sually the way I think is just a habit  
**L**et go the habit of only seeing bad thoughts, feelings, sensations  
**N**ow is the only time I have to change  
**E**verything is constantly changing anyway  
**S**taories I tell myself are just stories – they're not happening now  
**S**eeing all there is to see I can let things unfold just as they will

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## Remember Who?

This book is about you, and the stress you suffer when you take exams.

Who suffers the stress? You do. Or at least that's what your mind would have you believe.

It would be good to contemplate and reflect on this .....

*Who is it that suffers the exam stress?*

## Further Readings about MINDFULNESS

If you find this introduction to Mindfulness helps you to recognise, accept and let go of your exam stress, and it inspires you to learn more, then you probably would benefit from reading anything you can lay your hands on regarding the subject.

The book initially that sparked off my personal and professional interest, and the one that many people who are interested in Mindfulness read to begin with, is by Jon Kabat-Zinn. It's a wonderful exploration and guide to Mindfulness called 'Full Catastrophe Living', giving an in-depth description of the 8 week programme in Stress Reduction that Jon started at the University of Massachusetts. It contains much wisdom and many anecdotes about people who have benefited from Mindfulness.

I realised from reading Jon's book first, that many of the practices, like the ones I have been guiding you in here, have derived from Buddhist teachings. I also soon learned that you don't have to be a Buddhist to appreciate and benefit from the wisdom to be found in the teachings – see Stephen Batchelor's book 'Buddhism Without Beliefs'.

So I read and continue to read more widely, including the Buddhist teachings. I tend to leave the mantras, prayers and chanting to one side, and just delve in. One of the most engaging and wise authors I have found, is Thich Nhat Hanh. He writes in a very simple, straightforward and compassionate way, and he is an exceptional teacher.

And from the Acceptance perspective, there are several books by Steven Hayes and others, including a best-selling workbook called 'Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life'.

There are many teachers to be discovered and explored, and these are just a few authors I would happily recommend to you..... Jon Kabat-Zinn, Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein, Eckhart Tolle, Saki Santorelli, Stephen Batchelor, Steven Hayes, The Dalai Lama and many others you can discover for yourself.

When I first practiced as a psychotherapist many years ago, we tried to help people who suffered from stress by teaching them such things as 'Thought Stopping'. It seems amazing to me now that we ever believed this would help.

I remember thinking that half the trouble seemed to be, that people were trying *too* hard to control their thoughts and feelings. As I said at the beginning, there is no off-switch.

I didn't know it at the time, but I think I was searching for Mindfulness and Acceptance even then.

*As I look back from this present moment to the past, I realise we've come a long way since those times. Here and Now, with Mindfulness, we can really start to be the best we can be!*

~ **PART SIX** ~ Book BONUS

**A few pages of graphics and  
writings that may also help you.**

**The MAD Routine  
The Mind TRAP  
Body Mind RELEASE Cycle  
The Bad PATCH  
Over-REACTING  
Breathe Panic AWAY  
Mindful EATING  
The ME Mirror  
Wishing WELL  
The Guest HOUSE  
The BOOK**

## The 'MAD' Routine

**M**indless **A**utomatic **D**aily Routines  
**Activity with Nothing much for your Mind to do**

Waking Up  
Getting Up  
Washing  
Dressing  
Eating/Drinking  
Driving/Moving Around  
Standing/Sitting  
Telephone calls/Receiving/Making  
Computer time  
Meeting/Talking with Others  
Reading  
Sleeping

**Each activity provides Wind-Up Time.**  
**Time for your Mind to play havoc with you,**  
**to wind you up creating Stress, Anxiety and Tension.**

## Body-Mind → Release Cycle



**Use each daily routine activity as a reminder to practice the Release Cycle**



## Start as You Mean to Go On

**Instead of continuously scoring points for Tension, Stress, and Anxiety  
with every MAD activity,  
Make sure you notice what is going on.**

Just pause for a moment

NOTICE and BE AWARE of Your **Breath**, NOTICE and BE AWARE of Your **Body**,  
NOTICE and BE AWARE of Your **Mind**.

and in that moment, on the out-breath....

Let go of all the stress, tension and anxiety your Mind and Body  
is storing up for you.

**Let it completely drain away from you.**

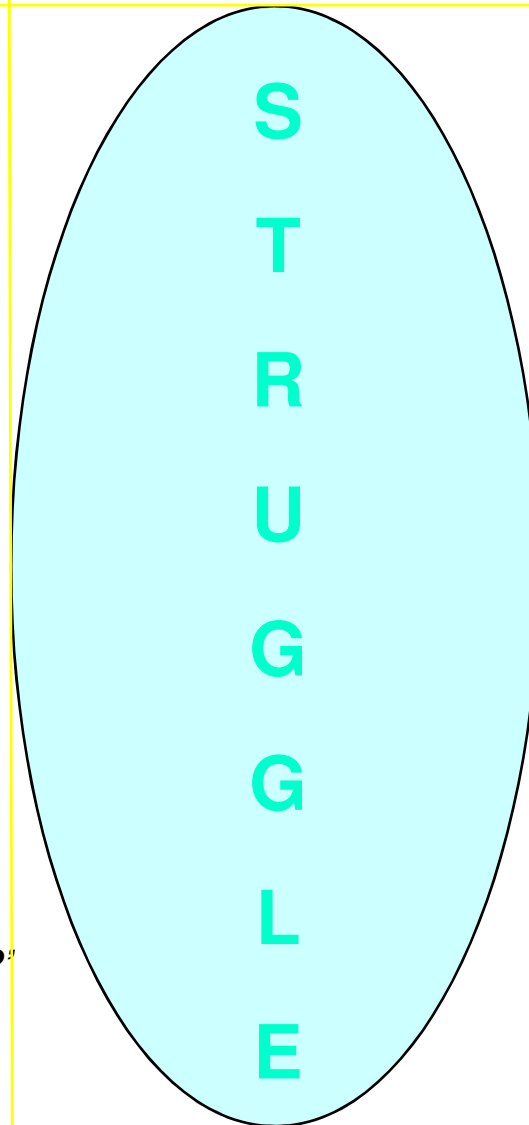
**Begin before you get out of bed, and stay there for a few minutes until  
you have calmed and prepared yourself ready for the day.  
Throughout the day, each time you check in, you will not be scoring  
points for stress, so much as Releasing Stress before it even gets started.**

# 'The Mind Trap'

Present Moment

**Trapped in Past Memories**  
'This (memory) was awful'  
'I wish this hadn't happened'  
'I feel bad about it'  
'I want to be sick'  
'Why did this happen to me?'  
'It's too horrible to look at'  
'I just want it to go away'  
'I feel guilty'  
'What did I do wrong?'  
'No one ever loved me'  
'Everyone gave up on me'  
'I broke the rules'  
'I've always been depressed'  
'Everything was such a worry'  
'I couldn't avoid it'  
'I've always been anxious'  
'It wasn't my fault'  
'That pain was real'  
'What else should I have done?'

**Thoughts/Feelings/  
Sensations  
-Struggle-**

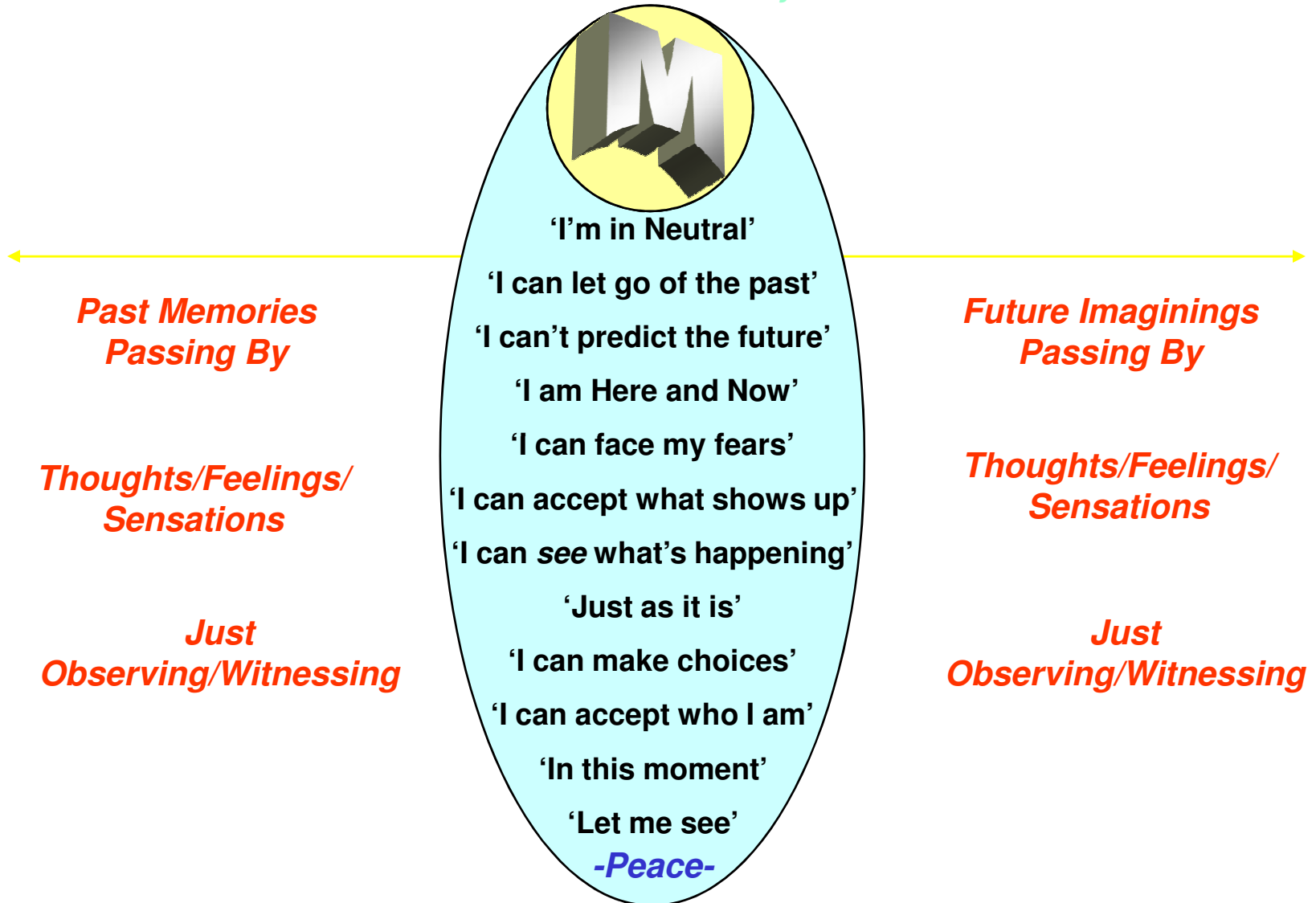


**Trapped in Future Imaginings**  
'Here comes that awful feeling'  
'It's bound to happen again'  
'This time it could be worse'  
'I'm just going to fight it'  
'Success will bring me peace'  
'No one will ever love me'  
'I'm going to be sick again'  
'I will feel inferior'  
'I need more answers'  
'If I just try harder'  
'I need to get it right'  
'What happens if?'  
'I just can't do it'  
'I need to be more in control'  
'Here comes another failure'  
'Feels like another headache'  
'I need to be stronger'  
'I should be more positive'  
'I can't break the rules again'

**Thoughts/Feelings/  
Sensations  
-Struggle-**

# Stepping Aside from the Trap

*Present Moment - Mindfully Aware*



# The Bad Patch

A farmer went into her field to plant seeds, and every day she diligently watered, nurtured and took care of them.

But she didn't do this with all the seeds, only a small part of the field got her full attention.

So these were the seeds that flourished and were cultivated..... in one small patch.

The only thing was, they were 'bad' seeds in this patch - seeds of unkindness, uncaring, negativity and unhappiness.

When she went through her bad patch, she saw the fruits of her labours, and took care of them.

This did not make her happy, but she felt she had to do this – it was her habit.

She did not realize that she could turn around and take care of the seeds in other parts of her field.

There were a whole variety of interesting and good seeds there lying dormant .

They were withering due to a lack of care – seeds of kindness, compassion, curiosity and happiness.....

They were waiting patiently for her to notice them.

## Get Over....Over-Reacting

**O**ld habits based on past history unconsciously practiced over and over

**V**ery hard to control – in fact almost impossible!

**E**very good intention of not doing the same again, but.....

**R**egularly failing to stop the automatic reaction

**I**

### REACTING

- Learn to see your over-reactions, and just observe them
- No need to constantly jump at their command
- Learn to be aware of the causes of these reactions
- Learn to be aware of the consequences
- Learn to see them rather than have to be them
- Over-react less often and less strongly
- Learn to be calm in the face of provocation and stress
- Learn to be Mindfully Aware, rather than having always to be on 'Auto-Pilot'

# Breathe Panic Away

When we panic, many things happen.

You might start to think **negative and unhelpful thoughts**:-

“The worst is bound to happen”.

“Here we go again”.

“This is awful”.

You might start to feel **emotionally unstable**:-

“I feel really frightened”.

“I feel down”.

“I feel insecure”.

You might start to **feel physically unwell**:-

“My heart is really pounding”.

“I feel dizzy”.

“I feel as if I can’t get my breath”.

You might start to **behave in ways to protect yourself**:-

“I’d better get out of here”.

“I need help”.

“I won’t go any further”.

These are natural responses to real and perceived danger, and it can feel as if they are all happening at once. These responses can also happen gradually, bit by bit, almost without you realising.

***By being more aware of what is happening, there is a lot you can do to prevent panic from building up.***

Being aware of how you are breathing is one of the best ways to ‘nip’ panic in the bud.

***People who get into a panic state generally over-breathe and they tend to hold their abdominal muscles in and breathe short shallow breaths from the chest. This has the effect of making them get dizzy because they don’t get enough oxygen, and it can also make them feel as if they are not going to be able to breathe at all. Their heart rate goes up and they start to feel very unwell.***

This affects their emotional and physical well-being and they definitely feel that they need to escape or protect themselves in some way.

# Breathe Panic Away II

***Breathing in a calm way can have the effect of reducing the panic - especially if you start to do it as soon as you can, to prevent the build up of fear.*** The good news is that ***no 'special' kind of deep breathing is needed.*** All you have to do is breathe as nature intended you to, with a comfortable and steady rhythm – just like you do every night when you are asleep and not dreaming, calm and relaxed.

When we get into a panic we don't breathe in this way at all.

***In order to prevent panic attacks, you need to practice breathing in this calm way – when you are awake.***

Start while lying on your back. Place one hand on your chest and one hand on your belly.

Focus on allowing your belly to rise easily on the in-breath and to fall easily on the out-breath.

If you find that your hand on your chest still goes up and down, it's probably because you are still tensing your tummy muscles in some way.

***Keep coming back to an awareness of your tummy muscles and allowing them to relax.***

The objective is to breathe in a slow relaxed way – mostly from the abdomen, and there should be no sense of effort at all. No need to control the breath. ***Practice this kind of breathing for 5 minutes, 2 or 3 times a day lying on your back. Then extend your practice to sitting, then standing and then walking – breathing slow and easy, with no effort. And pay special attention to the contact you are making with the ground – know that you are there in that place in the present moment breathing and calming yourself just as you are.***

After you can breathe in this way in different positions, try practicing in different situations. Start with common situations like sitting in a car, or when sitting watching TV, or walking up and down stairs. Progress until you can breathe with the belly, in situations that previously felt un-natural and uncomfortable. The aim is to be aware of your breathing so that at any moment, you can do a check and in whatever situation you are in, you will find that you are breathing from your belly in a calm and relaxed way. ***It does take practice to be aware of this more natural way to breathe.***

Generally we are well practiced in breathing the wrong way. This is because we habitually try to hold ourselves in 'good shape', which means not letting the tummy sag. And in any case, in anxiety-provoking situations it is natural to hold your breath – it can be a life-saver. But in this instance there is no need to do these things because we are not really in any danger and it doesn't matter about our body shape – it's more important to manage ourselves in a perceived threatening situation by breathing in a relaxed and calm way from the tummy – this is the best way to minimise the stress we might feel. ***IMPORTANT: Watch your tendency to 'try hard' to control your breath. You need to do the opposite, and allow yourself to breathe in a natural wave-like rhythm – with your tummy rising easily on the in-breath and falling easily on the out-breath. Just let the tension and stress go – let it completely drain away from you on every out-breath.***

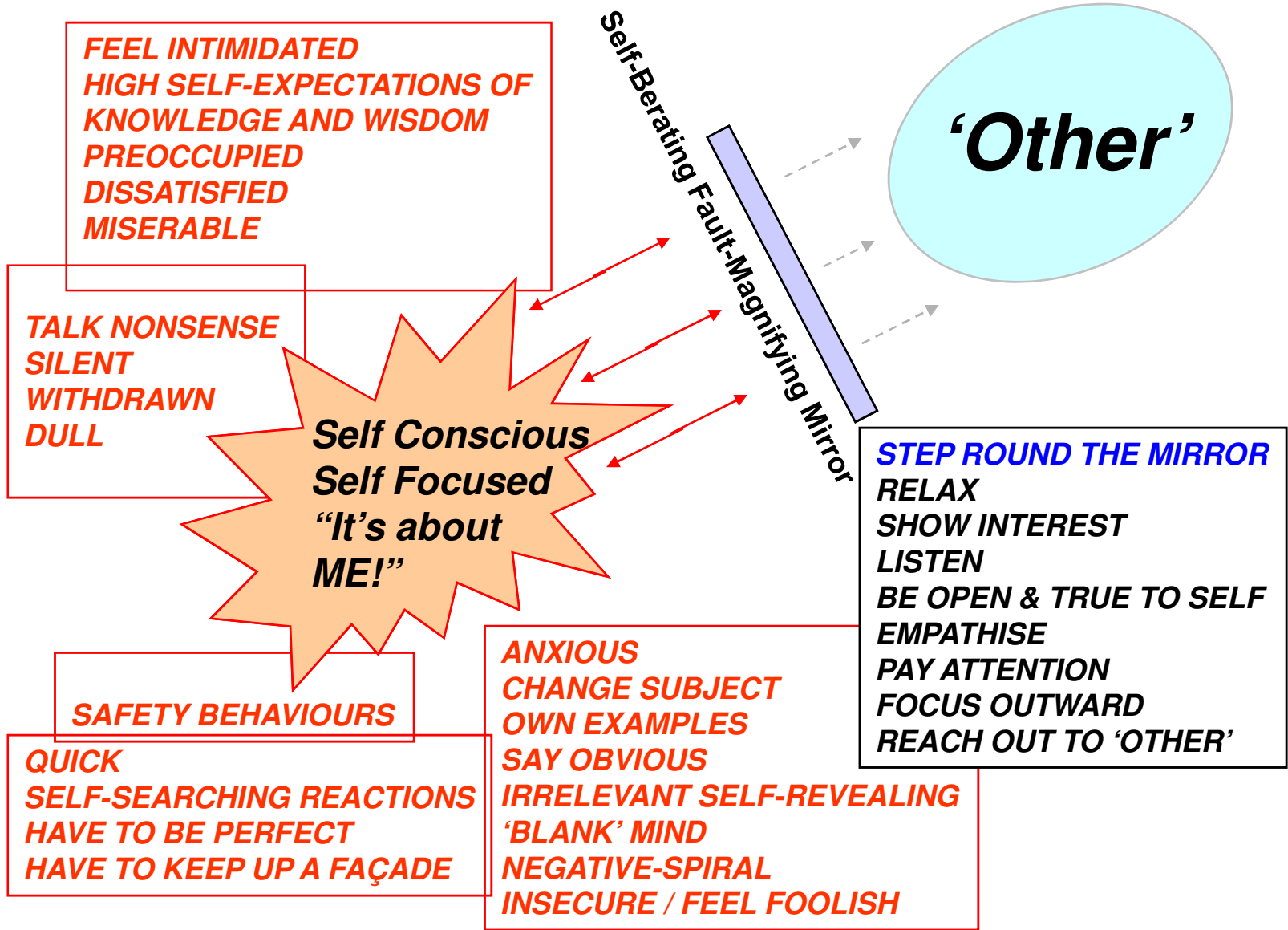
# Mindful Eating

- At this moment I'm eating a little bag of 'carrot crunchies' which – so it says on the packet – is a detox friendly, 28 calorie snack, part of a meal deal. And they are nearly all gone.....
- I will try to describe them to you.
- First I notice each tiny 'clean-shaven' carrot is cold and damp to my finger touch and the surface is not exactly smooth, and not exactly rough either.
- If I look closely and turn the form around between my fingers, I can see the irregularity and bittiness of the carrot. It looks smooth from a distance but not so smooth up close. Just like I think the palm of my hand is smooth, but on closer examination I see lots of marks and lines and twists and turns there.
- As I look more closely still at the little carrot, I notice as the form moves, that the dampness catches the light and changes the vibrant orange colour by many shades, bit by bit.
- There is the faintest smell as I try to detect the carrot's odour and I'm not sure if I can smell anything really, or if I'm imagining an odour that I think the carrot should smell of.
- I take a small careful bite with my front teeth and sniff again..... and yes, there is a very faint sweet smell, but again how much is this smell-perception being affected by my beginning to be aware of the *taste* of the carrot?
- The taste is there, stronger at first, but very soon fading into background warmth that sits on and coats the back of my tongue and roof of my mouth.
- I really notice the crunch noise rather than the taste first, and how the sound is inside my mouth and at the back of my ears, like someone walking slowly across shingle on a beach, off into the distance.
- The form goes gradually from hard and resistant, to soft and gooey ready for the swallow which doesn't get all the pieces and so the swallow is repeated as I squish some saliva back up to go down again. The bits are still there in the back of my throat but not unpleasantly or uncomfortably so.



# The 'ME' Mirror

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# Wishing Well

*Your Mind is very concerned about you and mostly makes  
YOU  
the centre of attention*

*See if you can notice this ~ME~ ME~ ME~ call of your Mind  
This is one of your habits of Mind to be more Aware of*

*Gradually you can change this habit by more often focusing on others and wishing  
them well*

*May you be Happy*

*May you be in Peace*

*May you be free from Suffering*

*This helps us learn we are all the same – we all suffer and we all want to be happy and peaceful*

*Without making it all about YOU again,  
IT REALLY HELPS IF YOU WISH YOURSELF WELL IN THE SAME COMPASSIONATE WAY*

# The Guest House

This being human is a guest house  
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!  
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honourably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice,  
meet them at the door laughing,  
and invite them in.

Be grateful for whoever comes,  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

*Written in the 13th century by Rumi, a Sufi poet*

# The Book

The book writes itself..... it is Life unfolding moment to moment.

The next blank unwritten page is the next present moment.....

If you look deeply into the blank page, each fresh present moment emerges just as it will.

Once written, it stays just how it is..... you can look back on it, but it always stays the same on the page.

If we don't like them or are not happy with them, we can tear already written pages out and destroy them.....

We often do, but the annoying and distressing thing is, they always come back just exactly as they are.

We can imagine how the pages yet to be written might look and what they might say, but we cannot really know for sure how they will be, or whether we will like or be happy with them.

The book is the book..... the book is Life. The book is the book of your unique and precious life.

A very important and much missed point is that you're here in this moment, not to be the Author, or even the Reader..... but to be the Observer and Witness to the story as it unfolds..... as we began, ..... 'the book writes itself'.

As best you can, without preferences, judgements, being caught up in, or swept away with any of it, good and bad..... allowing yourself to be Mindful to not miss a moment. Why? Because this is your life to do with as you will in this moment. It is an opportunity to make a journey in a valued direction of your choice.

You can be free to do this if you are Mindful of the present moment. 'Staying alive to each present reality'.

With wonder and curiosity, really looking deeply, with care and compassion at each moment as it emerges and appears in **reality** on the page.

~ APPENDIX ~

## Mindful Misunderstandings

### Q and A with the Author

#### Mindful MISUNDERSTANDINGS

1. **“Mindfulness is a technique I’m learning to help me to relax”** Mindfulness is *not* a relaxation technique. It’s a *practice* rather than a technique, and as we practice, we may become relaxed incidentally as a by-product of Mindfully paying attention to and becoming more *AWARE* of all our thoughts feelings and sensations. Becoming more calm and relaxed is a happy bonus, not the main purpose of the practice.
2. **“When I practice looking at my thoughts, I don’t have any thoughts - my mind’s a blank”** Even saying you have a blank mind is based on a thought! If you *do* have a blank mind, or you think you do because you think you *should* have a blank mind, then that’s not it either. We’re not trying to make anything happen at all – just to see whatever is there for us.
3. **“When I try to do the practices, I can’t stop my mind from wandering”** Nor can anyone – it’s what minds do, and that’s just the way it is for all of us.
4. **“I’ve got to try harder to get this Mindfulness right”** Sometimes the more we try to control things, the harder they get. Maybe there is no *right* way. I know this sounds odd, but it is one of the wonders of Mindfulness, the *paradox* of really getting somewhere by non-doing. Not trying to get anywhere, not trying to achieve anything or succeed in any way. That doesn’t mean sitting back and non-doing your work. *It means non-doing getting carried away with the stresses of your work.* It takes practice!
5. **“When I do the practices, I’m sure I’m not getting the right effect”** We’re not aiming to achieve any state or

effect, so much as just allowing ourselves to become more *AWARE* of whatever there is to be aware of – whatever that might be.

6. **“When I listen to the Audio, I just feel like falling asleep”** That may be because you meditate at the wrong time of day, or that you need to get more sleep.
7. **“When I try to be Mindful, I like some experiences more than others”** That sort of implies that you’re still attached to preferences. Maybe you need to practice some more so that you can see and let go of whatever comes up for you, being Mindful of not avoiding the thoughts, feelings and sensations you don’t like.
8. **“When I am Mindful I really try to solve my problems”** Generally we meditate for the purpose of non-doing, so that means not trying to solve, fix or operate on anything at all. Hard as it may seem, there is nothing to solve. This is the paradox of Mindfulness. By staying focused on one simple theme, word or image, or the breath, and by keeping calmly returning to it without trying to achieve anything at all, then gradually, insights, solutions and/or choices will often unfold. Mindfulness creates a sense of freedom and spaciousness that opens up opportunities for us.
9. **“Some of these practices seem like a form of prayer to me - a devotion based on religion”** Mindfulness is just about paying attention to the present moment and learning as best you can, to spend more of your time in that place – not to avoid or hide away from anything, but just to be aware. If you want to make it a part of your religious practice, of course you can, but it doesn’t have to be.

10. **“As I do the practices, I see, but I can’t let go of my stress”** Seeing everything as an observer or witness is not easy, it is the first step – practising and looking and bringing yourself back to the present moment – you need to do that before you can let go of your stress.

*Remember ~ Mindfulness is about staying alive to each present reality. The reality of your moment to moment direct experience – and noticing what your mind tells you about it. There is reality, and there is what you add to reality - and the two things are not the same!*

## Q and A with the Author

**Q.** “What sort of background do you have?”

**A.** “Pretty unusual! I originally trained as a psychiatric nurse, and worked in the UK National Health Service for 10 years as a cognitive therapist. Gradually I realized I wanted to work in a more preventative way, and maybe see people before they came to hospital or a health centre and were ‘labeled’ in the medical system. So I decided to work with people at work, retrained as a Chartered Organisational Psychologist, and spent the next 20 years in the corporate world in management consultancy. I trained and coached managers how to lead and how to take care of themselves and others. It was very similar to my clinical work, but in a different context.”

**Q.** “How did you get into working with students?”

**A.** “Soon after 9/11 in 2001, there was a big downturn in corporate work for management consultants. This made me pause, stop and think about what I really wanted to do. For some time I had been unhappy with the consultancy way of life, and I had the feeling that I wanted to return to my roots in psychotherapy. Surprisingly, this turned out to be much easier said than done! Anyway, to get properly accredited and registered again as a psychotherapist, I had to be seeing a lot of people for therapy. To add to my caseload, I applied to a University in London to work in their health centre offering cognitive behaviour therapy to students and staff. This brought me into contact with many students over the next 3 years, and most of them were suffering to some degree from exam stress. I worked with them individually and I ran exam stress workshops too. Since that time I have moved within the NHS and I now work in Adult Mental Health. I divide my time between that work and private practice. The work with students has always interested me, because I realized early

on, that they were the same people I worked with in the corporate world. Pretty soon they would be the ones with huge responsibilities, managing the big budgets and controlling other people’s lives. It’s very likely that the students I saw who were suffering from exam stress, would easily go on to become stressed at work, messing up their own and many other lives, so it seemed to me to be a great opportunity to begin helping to prevent this by working with their exam stress.”

**Q.** “Why Mindfulness?”

**A.** “Returning to clinical practice, I had to attend a certain number of hours training, and I looked around for what I might do. In 2003, Mindfulness was beginning to take off as a part of the third wave within psychotherapy. There had been behaviour therapy, then cognitive therapy and now great interest was being shown in Mindfulness, Acceptance, and Compassionate Mind Training approaches. This was really different to anything we had done before, and it was much less about teaching people techniques for controlling their mind, or exploring beliefs and thinking patterns, and much more about helping them to see how their mind worked. It seemed like a way of life rather a technique, and I took to it immediately. I attended and continue to go to a variety of courses and retreats. These have included an 8 week Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy course, and teacher and therapist development courses provided by the University of Bangor, Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice, and other events run through Gaia House in Devon. These teachings have helped me to develop my own Mindfulness meditation, teaching and therapeutic practice, and I attend regular retreats – this year I attended one with Thich Nhat Hanh here in the UK and it was a wonderful experience. I practice Mindfulness meditation - it would be difficult (well

impossible) to teach anyone about Mindfulness without firsthand experience myself. Also I have to say, that on a personal level, Mindfulness has been very helpful to me in facing a major life event myself in 2004. We never know what life has in store for us, and there are quite a few stresses around. We all have our 'tipping-point' and for many of us exams seem to take us there."

**Q.**" Why this book and the audio practices?"

**A.** "I started writing *Less ExamStress in 7 Days* because students told me Mindfulness was helpful. I know there are many students out there suffering when they take their exams, and I want to share with them my interest in reducing stress by being more Mindful. My concern is to help students do the best they can without adding unnecessary stress to their exams. Years ago when I was studying and taking exams myself, I wish I'd known about and practiced Mindfulness then. Like many students, I didn't do badly, but it was a bit of a struggle.....as you know, there is always more stress to soak up. I hope students find the practice of Mindfulness inspirational in discovering the peace that lies within, and that it helps them to recognise, accept and reduce their exam stress a little more every day."

November 2008