

Mindfulness is something of a buzzword at the moment, with books, websites, courses and apps all offering advice about how to bring more mindfulness and presence into your daily life. But what is mindfulness?

A quick peek in the Cambridge Dictionary reveals mindfulness is, “the practice of being aware of your body, mind and feelings in the present moment, thought to create a feeling of calm.”

Which sounds simple enough. But in our modern lives, with all their distractions, stressors and interruptions, it can sometimes feel like a difficult concept to put into practice. A recent survey of UK adults, conducted by aquatics leaders Tetra and OnePoll, has revealed that more than 50 million Britons feel under pressure, with work, money worries and unexpected life events cited as the most common causes of stress. The survey found that Londoners spend almost two days a week feeling stressed or anxious, while almost one third of Londoners turn to comfort food or alcohol as a means of stress relief, instead of attempting to reduce stress levels in the first place.

HOW CAN MINDFULNESS HELP?

“Mindfulness is becoming increasingly important in our society, because we are lost in ‘doing’,” says life coach and mindfulness expert Steve Chamberlain (stevechamberlain.co.uk). “Our pace of life is increasing at such a rate that the jobs we perform and the ‘always-on’ lives we lead would be unrecognisable to many of our parents and would likely leave our grandparents bewildered. As a society, we are moving at such a pace that many of us no longer allow ourselves time to experience each moment fully, as we are already moving onto the next. We are always one step ahead of ourselves, which can lead to a sense of general dissatisfaction and, eventually, burnout. Mindfulness offers the space we are

craving, without requiring any major life shift or upheaval.”

You might have an image in your head that mindfulness requires you to visit a mountain retreat or sit silently in a quiet, dark room with no distractions, but this couldn't be further from the truth (even though both these options might seem appealing at times!).

“These situations – the mountain top or the quiet room – could certainly help you get into the correct mindset, particularly when

MINDFULNESS ON THE MOVE

IF YOU'VE HEARD THAT MINDFULNESS CAN REDUCE STRESS, YOU MIGHT BE PLEASED TO HEAR RUNNING CAN BE THE PERFECT PLACE TO PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

WORDS: CLAIRE CHAMBERLAIN

you first start practising mindfulness,” says Chamberlain. “However, the definition of mindfulness is simply that you are mindful of what is occurring within and around you in the moment, exactly where you are. Therefore, a mindful practice can be just as effective on a crowded train journey. Can you be aware of the sense of discomfort that arises when your personal space is violated? Can you be aware of the negative thoughts as they arise, rather than being pulled into them unconsciously? Can you be aware of

the sights, sounds and smells that are the characteristics of that environment? Then this is your mindfulness practice, and will set you up to handle any challenges that arise during the day in a mindful state, because it will mean you are fully present, rather than worrying about past or future situations.”

MINDFULNESS AND RUNNING

As a runner, you are probably already one step ahead of the game when it comes to stress relief. Exercise is one of the best and healthiest ways you can manage your stress levels, giving you the chance to clear your head and boost your endorphin levels. It might come as no surprise, then, that running can offer you one of the best opportunities to take that stress management further – by learning how to practice the art of mindfulness while you're running.

“When we run, it can be normal for the mind to wander,” says Dr Natalie Walker, Head of Department for Sport & Exercise at Birmingham City University. “For example, [you might have] a thought such as, ‘I need to email X on my return to the office.’ However, running has real potential to be a place to engage in mindfulness. Mindfulness in running simply means paying attention to how our body, mind and emotions are responding to running, and how these things are all interlinked.”

Chamberlain agrees: “Running – even without any understanding of mindfulness – can give you a glimpse of this state of mind, through the necessity of focused attention. For example, when trail running, it's essential that you watch your step carefully so you don't trip over a tree root or twist your ankle on uneven ground. This requires a special attention: mindful attention. You are exactly where you are, focused on exactly what you are doing, and you are fully aware of your environment. The same goes for breathing. You are forced to become aware of your breathing as you get into your run, so you



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don't push yourself too hard, ease back when necessary, and push when you want to. You are mindful of the sensations in your body. The almost incidental creation of a mindful state is one of the principle reasons why so many of us feel refreshed, clear and energised following a run.”

Melinda Nicci, sport psychologist and founder and CEO of Baby2Body (baby2body.com) concurs that running can be the perfect place to naturally achieve a state of mindfulness, whether you realise it or not.

“Mindfulness is rooted in rhythmic behaviours – and using those behaviours to help you focus fully on the present moment,” she explains. “Running is completely rhythmic in nature, from footfalls to breathing rate. Concentrating on breathing, especially, can enhance a sense of mindfulness while running.”

So, if you've ever experienced a run where you've felt completely in the moment, listened to your footfall, concentrated on your breathing, watched out for tree roots and other obstacles in your path, and completely cleared your mind, so that you were not focused on events in your past or present, it means you were practising mindfulness.

BOOSTING PERFORMANCE

While the combination of running and mindfulness is clearly good for our mental health, could it also enhance our running performance? Walker certainly believes it can have a positive impact on your training.

“Using mindfulness while running can be a great motivational aid, as it enhances the runner's association of running with enjoyment rather than pain, discomfort or boredom,” she says. “It might also actually enhance your running performance itself. Proper posture greatly influences running efficiency and injury potential, so being mindful of your form can make running feel far less effortful. Adopting mindfulness while running might also promote what we call 'flow state'. This is a state where the runner has a heightened sense of relaxed control over their body and

running feels engaging but effortless. It can allow the runner to focus on the sensations of running, become highly in tune with how their body is responding to the effort they are putting in, and also increase confidence in their ability to meet the challenge that they have set for themselves.”

Runners have long used the act of running as a means of anxiety relief – as a way to clear our minds and escape from the daily stresses and strains of life.

Now by simply combining that running with being in a mindful state – focusing on the present moment as you run; on your breathing, on your footsteps, on your immediate surroundings, on your posture – your experience of running could not only be enhanced further, but you might also improve your running performance and reduce your injury risk, too. Quite a pay-off for simply living fully in the moment, don't you think? 🏃‍♀️

Switch off

You don't need to be running along a quiet, picturesque woodland trail to experience mindfulness while you run – after all, mindfulness is simply becoming aware of your body, emotions and surroundings in the present moment, wherever you are. Therefore, you could be running along a noisy road in a busy city centre, or on the treadmill in the gym, and still be able to practise mindfulness. Simply focus on your surroundings, your breathing and your body, without letting your mind wander into past or future. The only thing that will hinder your mindful run is by running with technology – so switch off those gadgets! Running apps and GPS watches can be incredibly useful tools while running – but the whole point of a mindful run is to listen to your body – not a gadget or app telling you how far or fast you've run. So leave the Garmin at home and tune into your body and the present moment, instead.

