

THE  
STUDENT GUIDE TO  
MINDFULNESS

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DAVID  
MAIR

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Editor: James Clark  
Assistant editor: Diana Alves  
Production editor: Martin Fox  
Copyeditor: Neil Dowden  
Proofreader: Diana Chambers  
Indexer: Gary Kirby  
Marketing manager: Catherine Slinn  
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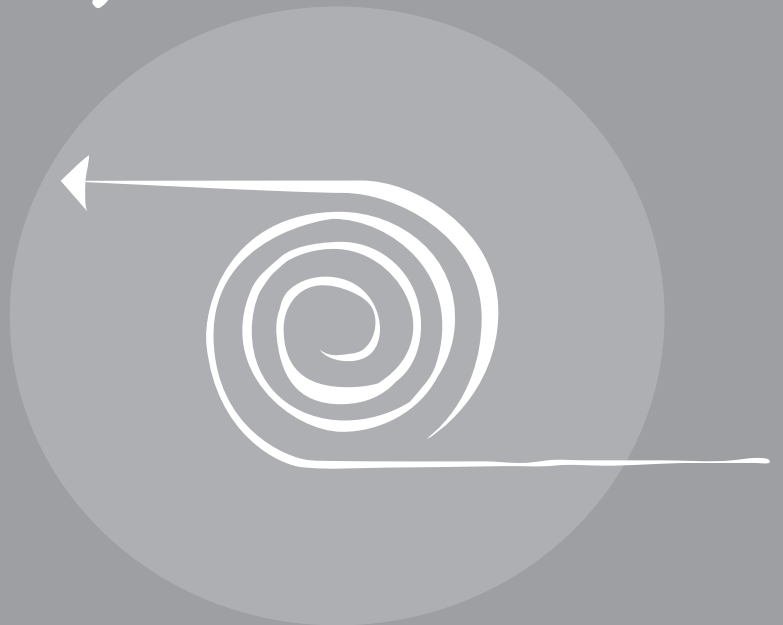
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In loving memory of my partner,  
David Rogers, who taught me to

‘JUST  
LET IT  
HAPPEN.,





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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**DR DAVID MAIR** is a BACP Senior Accredited Psychotherapist with over twenty years' experience of supporting students in university settings. He has led mindfulness groups for university staff and students, and believes – from his own experience as well as that of many others – that mindfulness offers a counter-cultural way out of suffering where awareness of self-imposed limitations, anxieties and fears has the potential to lead to greater freedom. Now semi-retired, he maintains a private therapy practice and continues to explore the impact of mindfulness on deep-seated emotions that arise from some of life's most stressful situations.





# ABOUT THE ONLINE RESOURCES



THE STUDENT GUIDE TO MINDFULNESS is supported by a range of downloadable resources available at <https://study.sagepub.com/mindfulness>.

If you are a student:

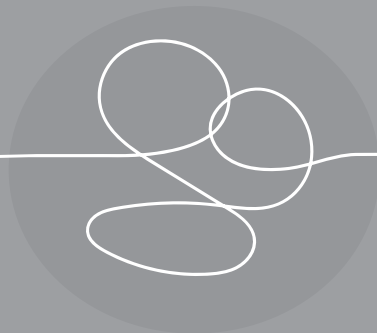
- **MINDFULNESS PODCASTS:** Audio versions of key mindfulness exercises from the book, allowing you to take an active part in becoming mindful as you read.

If you work in student support services:

- **WEEKLY MINDFULNESS SESSION OUTLINES:** These will help you to plan and run 4 x 90-minute mindfulness workshops for students, based around the structure of the book.
- **SESSION POWERPOINTS:** These editable presentation slides will support you when leading sessions on mindfulness.

‘ALL OF HUMANITY’S  
PROBLEMS  
STEM FROM MAN’S  
INABILITY TO  
SIT QUIETLY  
IN A ROOM ALONE.,

Blaise Pascal,  
*Pascal’s Pensées* (1958)





# 1

## MINDFULNESS

AND

## ITS BENEFITS

### IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL:

- gain an initial understanding of what mindfulness is – and isn't;
- see how mindfulness is a way of being, rather than simply a technique to apply to problems;
- appreciate how mindfulness can enhance your experience of life, not only as a student, but more generally too.

Sophie is a busy student, enjoying her first time of living away from home, meeting new people and getting to grips with a demanding course. She finds the days whizz past so quickly she barely has time to appreciate everything that she is experiencing. Sometimes, when she goes to bed at night, she thinks: ‘What have I done today? It barely seems five minutes since I was getting up.’ Sophie is allowing herself to experience student life to the full: she loves socialising and she works hard too. However, she sometimes has a sense of being carried along by a fast-moving river, that she is not really in control of what is happening to her. From time to time, she wonders whether some of the people she is meeting are really her types, and whether she should be more able to say ‘No’ to some of the invitations she gets. Sometimes she also feels exhausted. She wishes that she could step out of the river onto solid ground, just to take stock – to appraise everything that is happening, and to have a stronger sense of feeling grounded, more present in her life – more of a driver of the bus rather than a passenger. A friend has started going to a mindfulness group and wants Sophie to join her, but Sophie has no idea what mindfulness is, why she should go and what might happen if she does. Her friend seems to think it’s really helpful, but Sophie is reluctant to take on yet another commitment. She would like answers to her questions.

## WHAT IS MINDFULNESS AND HOW CAN IT HELP ME AS A STUDENT?

These are good questions for a busy student to ask. More than likely, like Sophie, you’ve come across mindfulness in different contexts: it’s a new buzzword and there are more and more books on the subject, from mindful colouring books, to mindful bee-keeping, mindful baking and mindful running. But with everything else you have to do as a student, is it really worth making the effort to find out about and practise mindfulness? And if it is, how can you do that?

Mindfulness has emerged in the West over the last thirty years or so, principally from Eastern philosophy and in particular Buddhism. It is just one aspect of the Buddhist eight-fold path to enlightenment (or nirvana). Because it was not, in its original context, intended to be practised as a stand-alone concept, we have to be careful in the West that we don't ignore other equally important aspects of that eight-fold path such as 'right living' or 'right speech'. Mindfulness was never, and should never be, seen as an end in itself, a kind of spiritual navel-gazing: unless it is part of a deeper philosophy of living, it's unlikely that it will be something you find particularly helpful or life-enhancing.

But what is mindfulness? The most common definitions describe it as a way of paying attention, in this moment, to whatever thoughts, feelings or bodily sensations we are experiencing, without judging or trying to stop them. For a while, we step outside our automatic ways of reacting to life and become observers or witnesses of our internal and external world: this helps us develop more helpful ways of responding to ourselves, our problems and neuroses and, just as important, more helpful ways of responding to others, their problems and their neuroses. Key to this more helpful way of responding is the development of self-compassion (and other-compassion).

Mindfulness is similar to, but not the same as, concentration. Imagine that you are walking through a beautiful wood, following an easy path, not thinking about anything in particular, just relaxed and enjoying the day. Then the path takes you to a deep, fast-flowing river. There is no bridge and the only way across the water is over some rather small stepping stones. You can see that the stones are spaced just a little too widely for you, and you also notice that the river is very deep in the middle. As you take your first hesitant step across the river, your mind is intensely focused on what you are doing: you are assessing every movement you make, testing each stone before committing yourself to it, trying to keep your balance. Everything else around you disappears from your mind as you try to make sure you don't fall into the river. This is not mindfulness. This is concentration.

Now imagine that in the middle of the river there is a large, flat stone where you can stop, relax and take stock of how you are doing. As you step onto this rock, you relax a bit and tune in to the sound of the river; you notice the sparkling water rushing past you; you sense the warmth of the sun on your body; you hear some birds singing on the riverbank; you notice your heart beating quite fast and sense your breath moving in and out of your body more quickly than usual. You look around; you *notice* that you are looking around, and you are *aware* of standing on a rock in the middle of a river. And you realise that although crossing this river is quite difficult and that you are a bit worried about actually making it to the other side without getting wet, you accept that this is how things are and wishing for them to be different is not helpful. *This* is mindfulness: awareness of yourself; of thoughts, sounds and sights and bodily sensations; and acceptance of things just as they are right now – even if they are not entirely as you wish they might be.

The four key concepts of mindfulness that we'll be exploring and practising in this book are:

- awareness and acceptance of thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations;
- realisation that we are not *just* our thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, but that we are also the awareness that contains those thoughts, feelings and sensations;
- development of compassion towards our human vulnerability and frailty (and that of other people);
- familiarisation with the way our minds work, the stories they can create about life, ways they can lead us into unhelpful patterns of living and how we can begin to free ourselves from those stories and patterns.

## IF I PRACTISE MINDFULNESS, WILL I BE A MORE SUCCESSFUL STUDENT?

Unfortunately, in its translation into Western culture, mindfulness has too often been presented as another tool for self-improvement, greater success and enhanced

productivity. It seems that in the West, the only way we know how to justify an activity is by measuring *improvement*: greater fitness, more calm, more influence, higher profits, more, more and more. Think about your own life for a moment. Since the day you were born, it's likely that you've been measured against innumerable standards to determine whether you are 'normal', whether you are succeeding in life, and how you are doing when measured against your peer group. Height, weight, IQ, exams, interview results – and more. With social media playing such a huge part in many people's lives, our field of comparison has broadened enormously. In previous years, people only had the others who lived on their street or in their village to compare themselves with; now, we have endless airbrushed, Photoshopped images, alongside unrealistic, unattainable images of wealth and success via Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and so on. No wonder so many of us suffer from what one author calls 'the trance of unworthiness' (Brach, 2013). We berate ourselves continually because we don't look as good as we think we should, we're not as confident as we think we should be and we aren't as successful as we want to be. We have turned into a neurotic, anxiety-driven generation, never satisfied and often looking in the wrong places to feel better about ourselves – such as plastic surgery or expensive consumer goods.

Not surprisingly, then, many people who come to mindfulness hope that it will be a magic bullet to finally help them to feel *permanently* calm, to develop a Zen-like peace that is never disturbed whatever outer circumstances they are facing, or to be able, once and for all, to switch off their anxiety-provoking, depression-inducing thoughts. It's fine to have those hopes. However, being completely honest, mindfulness is *not* a magic bullet that will, if practised hard enough, deliver an eternal inner peace while at the same time enabling you to absorb academic material faster and more easily. Sorry, that's the bad news.

Mindfulness, as I see it and as I have practised it, is best approached with as few expectations as possible, at least in terms of the kind of outcomes you hope it will deliver. Paradoxically, the harder we try to 'get it right', the less we are likely to feel it is worthwhile or to experience any benefits. In that sense, we might be better to approach mindfulness



rather as we approach going to sleep: when we go to bed at night, most of us don't lie there thinking, 'I hope this sleep makes me a better person', or 'If I just sleep in the right position, maybe I'll be a calmer person'. You've probably had the experience of lying awake at night, desperately trying to make yourself fall asleep, but realising that the harder you try, the more awake you feel. Trying too hard with mindfulness suggests an anxiety to 'get it right', or to achieve a certain state of being – which is likely to backfire. But unlike going to bed in order to sleep, mindfulness can be thought of as 'falling awake' – coming back to our senses and reconnecting with the present moment, stepping out of our thinking, emotional, instinctive minds.

Another way of thinking about mindfulness would be to think of it like going for a walk just for the pleasure of it, rather than trying to get somewhere specific. There's a big difference in walking for pleasure and walking with the specific aim of getting fitter, reaching a particular destination or covering a fixed distance in a certain amount time. For me, the first kind of walk is the most enjoyable. Every day I set off for a pleasurable walk with my dog, Harry. I have a general sense of the route we're going to cover and how long I expect to be out for, but I allow myself just to enjoy whatever arises as we walk: sounds, sights, smells, meeting other people (and dogs), and occasional unexpected treasures such as seeing a kingfisher flash past on the river. Harry and I become absorbed in the moment – he in his doggy way and I in my human way. We are not trying to get anywhere in particular or feel a particular way; we walk in the rain and the sun, and some walks are more enjoyable than others. Harry runs around, sniffing, exploring, fully 'in the moment', not worrying about what time we're going to get home or whether I'll feed him tonight. Sometimes, I see people running past us, gasping, red in the face, clutching water bottles, timing themselves, seeing how many steps they can cram into thirty minutes. How different is their experience of the same route. There are also some times when I come back from our walk and realise that I've experienced very little of what was going on in the world around us, because I was completely lost in my thoughts: worrying, regretting, fretting, planning, dreaming, scheming.





So mindfulness is *not*, primarily, about achieving any particular state of mind, or stopping thoughts, or clearing your mind. It's *not* about emptying your mind so that you can sit like a statue, empty of feelings and desires. Instead, it is about deliberately and consciously stepping off the hamster wheel of incessant achievement, and it's about stopping trying to always get somewhere, or make things better. It's about tuning in to what is going on right here, right now, both within ourselves and around us. We deliberately 'wake up' from autopilot and tune in for a period of time to the world around and within us: we stop 'doing' and allow ourselves to just 'be'.

## MINDFUL EXERCISE



Just for a few moments, see what happens when you deliberately and consciously direct your attention away from the outside world and turn inwards to sensations in your body. Tune in to the feeling of your breath: you are breathing all the time, but are rarely aware of this. It is an automatic process that normally passes you by. For five minutes, see if you can keep your attention focused on your breath. Just five minutes. Gently allow your focus to come away from any worries you may have, any anxiety or concerns – for a few moments, come into your body and out of your thinking mind. Feel your chest and stomach rising and falling, expanding and contracting; notice any gaps between an in-breath and an out-breath. Just notice; don't try to control or change. Each breath is unique, a never-to-be-repeated moment of your life with a different texture, speed and intensity. Your task is simply to become aware of this ever-changing life-giving aspect of your life.

How easy was this for you? It sounds very simple to focus your attention on your breath. However, I'm guessing that, as with most people, you found that your attention started to wander away from your breath fairly quickly



and that you began to get caught up in thinking about what you were doing: 'How long have I got to go?' 'What's the point of this?' 'I know he said five minutes, but I think a minute is enough.' 'Am I doing this right?' And so on. For the moment, simply register your experience of trying this simple exercise. Whether you found it enjoyable, boring, easy or difficult, just notice what your own experience was.



LISTEN TO THE AUDIO CLIP AT

<https://study.sagepub.com/mindfulness>

## WHAT'S THE POINT OF MINDFULNESS IF IT'S NOT ABOUT BEING A CALMER, MORE SUCCESSFUL PERSON?

This is another good question. Again, we have to realise that this question also arises from our achievement-obsessed culture. We find it baffling that we might engage in something simply *because* it is not achievement-orientated, that setting aside some regular time to just *be*, rather than always *doing*, might, in and of itself, be profitable. Repeatedly, I've seen students give up on mindfulness because they feel it's not getting them anywhere fast, that it's not dealing with their anxiety or depression, or turning them into super-efficient workers who will get top marks for every assignment.

One helpful metaphor from mindfulness teacher Suryacitta, which I find extremely helpful, is to think of mindfulness as 'a container for our emotions and thoughts' (Suryacitta, 2014).

Imagine a glass full of water, full to the brim. The glass, the container, represents the current extent of your awareness. The water inside the container represents your emotions, your thoughts, your bodily sensations, your behaviours. Because the glass and the water are so closely matched, it doesn't take much – a slight hurt, an irritation – to jolt the glass and for the water (your feelings) to spill over. Every day we are jolted by things going on in the world around us (you only have to switch on the news to receive several major jolts), and by things going on inside ourselves (memories of past hurts, current conflicts and worries). By the end of each day, we probably end up upset, anxious, depressed – or, to go back to the glass of water metaphor, wet.

When we first approach mindfulness, what we hope for is that the water – our emotions will change and that we will stop getting so upset by the things that happen around us, that we will stop feeling anxious or depressed. So many people say, when asked why they are interested in mindfulness, 'I want to be calm in all situations', or 'I want to stop feeling anxious all the time', or 'I want to stop being so upset by what other people say to me'. They hope for an almost zombie-like existence where they are never troubled by basic human feelings. That would be a tragedy, because if that were possible, they would, in fact, be less than human. Mindfulness should not be seen as an escape route from life, or a way of somehow switching off normal, basic human emotions – even those we find uncomfortable such as fear or anger; it is, in fact, the opposite. Mindfulness helps us to turn towards whatever is happening in our lives, to sit with it, even if sometimes that is quite painful or difficult. We learn to accept or befriend our emotions, thoughts and bodily sensations, and to stop judging them, which only makes things worse. We embrace our lives as they are with self-compassion and acceptance.

Now, while mindfulness is not a quick fix for powerful or troubling emotions, it will, over time – and we're talking months, not weeks – begin to change how we *relate* to our powerful feelings. In this sense, going back to our metaphor of the glass of



water, what we are changing is the glass, not the water. Mindfulness enables us to create a bigger container for our difficult emotions so that, even though we may still get upset, anxious or depressed, we are somehow able to accept and allow those emotions to exist with greater equanimity and compassion for ourselves and other people.

After a long time of practising mindfulness, it is likely that our emotions will change too; we may find that we don't react so strongly to difficult situations and that we have more compassion for ourselves and others. However, initially, this should not be our primary aim for practising. Instead, we should try, as far as possible, to regard mindfulness as a wonderful opportunity to step out of our automatic-thinking minds and reconnect with the immediacy of the world around us, to wake up from the 'trance of unworthiness', and simply savour some moments of awareness and connection with life. It is, ultimately, about taking better care of ourselves, other people and the world around us.

## CAN ANYONE PRACTISE MINDFULNESS? I'VE TRIED BEFORE AND I GAVE UP BECAUSE I COULDN'T CLEAR MY MIND

Basically, yes, anyone can practise mindfulness because it is a fundamental human ability - indeed, perhaps one of the hallmarks of what it means to be human. As far as we know, no other animal species is able to be *aware* of the fact that it is thinking, or experiencing an emotion: *to be aware of being aware*. Chimpanzees clearly have sophisticated thinking processes and they undoubtedly experience emotions, but do they have *awareness* of the fact that they are thinking and feeling? Can a chimp reflect on its thoughts and feelings?

**Chimp** Hungry! Food! Eat!

**Human** I'm quite hungry. I think I'll go and make a snack. [But also:] I'm aware that I'm feeling quite hungry and that I'd like a snack. But I'm also trying to lose weight, so I'll resist for a while and wait until supper time.

Humans are able to be *aware that we are conscious*, and to be aware of, to observe, the content of our thinking minds. This is, as far as we know, a unique ability and central to the practice of mindfulness. If you have tried mindfulness previously but given up because you felt that you were not 'cut out for it', that your mind simply wanders too much, then you may have misunderstood the purpose and the process of mindfulness. I hope that by the time you have worked through several of the exercises in this book, you will be clearer about the truth that a wandering mind is not a sign that you cannot practise mindfulness; your awareness of the fact that your mind is wandering merely confirms that you are practising mindfulness already.

## IS THERE ANYONE WHO REALLY CAN'T BENEFIT FROM MINDFULNESS?

This is an important question: whether everyone can practise and *benefit* from mindfulness. Are there any kinds of issues that mean that people would best avoid it? Again, in the rush to promote mindfulness in our culture, there are too few considerations given to the fact that it is not a panacea for all ills and may actually be unhelpful for some people. Because formal mindfulness practices require us to sit still and tune in to whatever is going on inside us, and to witness thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations, there are indeed some people who may be advised not to try this – at least not without ongoing professional support. If any of the following issues apply to you, you would be better not to engage in formal mindfulness practices without

professional support from a therapist or a mindfulness teacher who is also skilled in responding to mental health concerns.

- You are suffering from the aftermath of trauma from a recent or past event, including physical, emotional or sexual abuse.
- You are dealing with intense grief or loss.
- You are experiencing psychosis.
- You are in the midst of a deep depression.

Even in these situations, you may still find engaging with *informal* mindfulness practices helpful (see Chapter 3 for more about formal and informal mindfulness) but, again, you would be best advised to seek professional therapeutic support for underlying concerns.

This underscores a very important point: mindfulness is not a substitute for psychological support and therapy. There are some experiences and emotions that are simply too powerful for us to deal with alone. Sometimes we need medical or psychological support to deal with the impact of certain life events, especially those involving intense physical responses. Please don't look to mindfulness alone to deal with those experiences; you may well need ongoing therapeutic support to help you safely process what has happened.

## I DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW MINDFULNESS IS GOING TO HELP ME AS A STUDENT

Ultimately, only you will be able to decide if mindfulness is going to be something you wish to incorporate into your life. It's important to realise that reading about mindfulness can never be a substitute for simply trying it for yourself. In that sense, it's like reading about doing exercise, as opposed to actually doing exercise. Reading can give you pointers but it can never, by itself, enable you to know what it is actually like.

Here is an example of how mindfulness might be of benefit for a student:

Andy is a final-year student. All through his studies he's struggled with anxiety, never really believing that he is good enough or that he's done enough work. His anxiety has led him to avoid doing work, or attend lectures, and this means that he's fallen behind in his work which has, in turn, made his anxiety worse. Andy has always wanted to get rid of his anxiety, to feel more confident and more in control of his life. After some counselling, which has helped him to understand how anxiety works and how it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy ('I know I'll feel anxious, so I won't go to lectures; but then I'll miss lectures and feel more anxious'), Andy has been attending a short mindfulness group to learn some basic practices that he's been incorporating into his life. He spends a few minutes each morning sitting in bed, tuning into his breath, and to whatever is going on in his body. He has learnt to notice his anxious thoughts when they arise, and he is getting better at observing them rather than getting caught up in them. He's learnt that his thoughts are quite repetitive and that they are not 'the truth', and that he can allow himself to feel anxiety in his body without adding to it by unhelpful self-talk ('I can't stand this! I am such an idiot for feeling like this – what's wrong with me?' or 'Unless I feel free from anxiety, there's no point in me doing any work'). Andy is beginning to understand that the way the human brain works is not fully within his control and that his anxiety response is not unique to him. Rather than beating himself up for getting anxious, he is starting to be more self-compassionate and can say to himself: 'It's OK, Andy – you're anxious and that's OK. You can handle this. Don't beat yourself up, just take some deep breaths – this is difficult for you, but you can cope. You're not alone in feeling like this.' Andy has started to practise mindful walking and he really likes this because it enables him to focus on the outside world and, when his anxious thoughts carry him away, to gently come back to his physical senses. Rather than always sticking his earphones on when he's walking around campus, he slows down and tunes in to whatever he can see, hear and feel. Of course, he still gets anxious in some situations, but rather than seeing this as something to get rid of, to blank out, or as something 'wrong' with him, he is beginning to see his reactions as understandable and something he can handle better. Mindfulness is helping Andy to take better care of himself and to make choices that are more likely to guide him towards achieving the best he can with his current internal and external resources.

This book will not ask you to devote hours of your time to mindfulness practice. Sometimes, we can be made to feel that unless we commit one hundred per cent to something we are not taking it seriously enough. My hope, by contrast, is that you will find enough here to intrigue you and encourage you to have a go at some aspects of mindfulness, and that some of the psychological insights will enrich whatever you decide to try. Nevertheless, it's worth saying that, as with anything, you will only really discover how mindfulness can support you by giving it a real chance. Only you can decide what that looks like for you, and I would say that in terms of formal practice, five or ten consistent minutes a day are better than forty inconsistent ones. You may find the informal practices easier to incorporate into your daily life, but they will generally make more sense and be more helpful if they are based on at least some formal practice each week.

To summarise:

Mindfulness *is not*:

- a magic bullet that will enable you to always feel calm, peaceful and untroubled;
- a no-effort technique to banish anxiety or depression;
- a guaranteed way to achieve amazing academic results all the time.

However, mindfulness *is*:

- an opportunity to step out of autopilot and reconnect with life as it is in this moment;
- a way to develop greater familiarity with your own - and others' - thoughts, emotions and bodily sensations so that you can respond more compassionately;
- a way to enable you to be more present in your life and to 'wake up' from the trance of worry, anxiety or depression;
- a chance to avoid creating additional suffering for yourself when you encounter painful events in life;
- a pathway that can bring ever increasing benefits to you as you learn to relate to your life with the wisdom that non-reactivity generates.



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What intrigues you about mindfulness and what are your hopes and expectations as you approach it? What criteria will you use to assess how beneficial the practices are for you?
2. If mindfulness is a way of living rather than a technique for achieving success, how does this affect your thoughts about making time to learn about it and to practise it in your daily life?
3. At this point, how might you explain what mindfulness is to a friend who asks you about it? Can you use your own words to describe what it is and isn't?

## FURTHER READING

Thich Nhat Hahn (2008) *The Miracle of Mindfulness: The Classic Guide to Meditation by the World's Most Revered Master*. London: Rider.

A gentle, compassionate and enticing introduction to the simplicity and depths of mindfulness by a Zen Buddhist.

Ruby Wax (2014) *Sane New World*. London: Hodder.

A practical and humorous introduction to mindfulness written by someone who speaks personally of the benefits of mindfulness in daily life.

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