What is Mindfulness?

"Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally."
Jon Kabat-Zinn

Mindfulness means being fully aware and accepting of one's thoughts and emotions, without judging or trying to avoid them, and without planning, ruminating, or worrying about the future, or being preoccupied with and regretting the past.

Most of us at times can find ourselves 'swept away' by the current of our thoughts, feelings and worries. Mindfulness can offer us an alternative way to approach life's struggles, by helping us to halt the escalation of anxious or worrying thoughts and teaching us to focus on the present moment, rather than reliving the past or pre-living the future. Mindfulness can help us see our thoughts as mental events that come and go in the mind, like clouds in the sky, instead of taking them literally. A key aspect of mindfulness is learning that thoughts are not 'facts' and can be noticed and held in our awareness without having to 'act' upon them.

Senses as anchors

One thing that mindfulness teaches us is that our senses (sight, smell, taste, hearing, touch and physical sensations) can be helpful 'anchors' to shift our focus and our attention onto, when our heads get too busy, or we get swept away by our thoughts and worries. This is not unlike a small boat dropping anchor in a storm or gale.

When problem solving doesn't always work, mindfulness can help

When we start to feel low or uncertain, we tend to react as if our emotions were a problem to be solved: we start trying to use our critical thinking strategies. When these do not work, we re-double our efforts to use them. We end up over-thinking, brooding, ruminating, and living in our heads. Before we have any idea of what has hit us, we're compulsively trying over and over again to get to the bottom of what is wrong, and to fix it. We put all of our mental powers to work on the problem and the power we rely on is our critical thinking skills. Unfortunately, those critical thinking skills might be exactly the wrong tools for the job. Mindfulness teaches us to shift mental gears, from the mode of mind dominated by critical thinking (likely to provoke and accelerate downward or anxious mood spirals) to another mode of mind in which we experience the world in the present moment; directly, and non-judgementally.

NICE (the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) recommends mindfulness as a treatment for helping to prevent reoccurring depression. The evidence base for mindfulness also finds that it is beneficial for:

- Anxiety
- Stress
- Low Mood
- Fatigue
- Memory/attention and focus

Three everyday ways to be mindful

Taking notice of your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations and the world around you is an example of being mindful.

1. **Notice the everyday**

As we go about our day, notice and focus on the sensations of things; the wind or sun against your skin, the flavours of the food we eat, the feel of our feet on the ground as we walk.

2. Make it into a routine or practice

Choose a regular time, such as a journey to work or a walk at lunchtime, during which you decide to be aware of the sensations created by the world around you, such as the colours of the sky or trees, or the sounds around you.

3. Name thoughts and feelings

To help develop an awareness of thoughts and feelings, it can be useful to silently name them: "Here's an anxious thought about the future" or "This is worry, it is just a feeling". Once you have done this, try focusing on the external things around you instead, as in the above suggestions.

Links:

Be Mindful http://www.bemindful.co.uk/

Centre for Mindfulness Research and Practice http://www.bangor.ac.uk/mindfulness/

Headspace App www.headspace.com

Action for Happiness www.actionforhappiness.org

An effectiveness study - https://www.wellmindhealth.com/news/oxford-university-research-study-evidences-effectiveness-of-be-mindful