

Supporting Your Own Emotional Wellbeing Through Mindfulness.



Self-care for
parents, carers
and teachers

Introduction

As we move through this global health crisis together, many of us have been actively engaged in supporting the wellbeing of children and young people. Parenting and teaching are all about assisting others. It is critically important that we create regular opportunities for self-care so that we can continue to support others and look after our own wellbeing at the same time.

The pandemic has created different realities for each of us and whilst people around the world are experiencing it together, each person's journey differs. Some of us live alone and have been physically isolated, others have had a houseful of people to manage; some of us have lost ongoing regular work, others are working harder than ever; some of us have loved the forced slow-down in pace, others crave for a return to the social buzz of everyday life. Every individual experience matters and deserves support.

A common thread has been the ongoing experience of uncertainty and change, two factors that we humans don't exactly love. When changes occur outside of our control, it can feel like the ground is moving beneath us and it's hard to get a steady foothold. Mindfulness is an active and supportive practice that can help us navigate the uncertainty that many of us are grappling with.

Mindfulness is when we pay attention to what is happening in the present moment, with openness and curiosity, and without judgement. When practised regularly, mindfulness has numerous benefits including increased self-awareness and ability to regulate emotion, and reduced stress. It can help improve focus, concentration and creativity. Mindfulness can also build empathy and compassion which can lead to improved relationships.

On the Smiling Mind App you will find a wide range of mindfulness meditations and activities for adults which we encourage you to explore and try out for yourself.

You will notice as you explore the meditations that common themes arise. Awareness and attention are at the very heart of mindfulness practice. The human brain has been evolving for at least two million years and our capacity to reflect, reason, imagine, anticipate and worry is well established. Awareness enables us to notice patterns of unhelpful thinking that we can all get caught up in as we navigate our busy lives. As we become more aware, we can get better at noticing unhelpful thinking, which enables us to respond more mindfully to situations rather than simply reacting on autopilot.

Paying attention increases our awareness and one of the most effective ways to build and strengthen this capacity is through meditation (known as formal mindfulness practice). In mindfulness meditation there is a chosen anchor, for example the breath, which we use to build our attentional muscle. This can then extend beyond our meditation. The breath is a natural process with which we can all engage in any moment. It is always with us and each new breath offers an opportunity to become more self-aware and focused. When we attend to the present moment via the breath, we become more aware of how we are feeling and what we are doing. This can be especially useful for navigating the wide range of thoughts and emotions that show up for each of us each day. Mindfulness assists us to observe our emotions with openness and curiosity. We start to see them less as drivers of our behaviour and more like back seat passengers that we keep an eye on. We also learn that emotions come and go and we don't have to wrestle with them quite as much.

As you explore these mindfulness meditations, you may choose to consolidate the experience with a matched activity and some journaling questions. These are especially designed to complement the meditation and encourage further exploration and personal reflection. For this, we recommend keeping a small mindfulness journal that you can add to and even get creative with if you enjoy drawing.

The downloadable activity sheets can be found at the back of this module.





Meditations

6 minute Practice (6.19 mins)

This simple meditation is one that can be repeated as many times as you like. It takes you through the process of counting your breaths and listening to the sounds around you.

Web App Link:

<https://app.smilingmind.com.au/sessions/171/583/667/>

Sounds, Body, Breath (10.38 mins)

Explore different anchors for your attention, including sounds, body, and the breath.

Web App Link:

<https://app.smilingmind.com.au/sessions/489/1396/>

The Body Scan (8.03 mins)

This practice will support you to develop a greater sense of calm, focus and to develop your overall mindfulness skills.

Web App Link:

<https://app.smilingmind.com.au/sessions/489/1394/>



Activities

What do I need in this moment?

This activity assists us to develop a regular check-in practice with ourselves. By asking this simple question, we can tune into our mind and body and provide self-care.

Returning to the present moment

Through awareness and practice, we can become skilled at noticing when we are distracted by technology. This activity invites you to identify your strategies to activate this skill.



Journal questions to reflect on

- How am I responding to uncertainty and change at the moment and am I developing a greater willingness to make room for some of the discomfort it brings?
- How am I supporting my own emotional journey and what more can I do for my own wellbeing?
- How might taking good care of myself have a ripple effect on those around me?


Self-Care Strategies for Busy Days


Finding time to meditate, at any point in the day, is a great idea for looking after your own well-being. Many successful meditators find that practising at specific times is a useful way to build mindfulness into their day – mornings and evenings are popular!


In addition to formal meditation practice it's also possible to use mindfulness to help bring awareness, focus and a sense of calm into many areas of your day. Below are some suggested strategies to help you bring more mindful awareness into your day.

During the day

It's common to try to pack as much into our days as possible, so take some time in your day for a bit of self-care.


 **Break for lunch** – Skipping lunch, lunch-on-the-run or desk lunches can take their toll on our focus, mood and energy. So, build a proper lunch break into your daily routine. Make time to fully taste and appreciate your food and give your brain a break too!


 **Go for a walk** – If possible find a park or some quiet streets to walk around. Wander. Notice what you can see, hear, smell and feel as you walk.

 **Connect** – Spend quality time with someone who makes you feel good. Listen deeply, tell stories and laugh often. Spend your lunch break or go for a walk together.


Morning


Kids and young people don't always leap out of bed fully-organised and ready for the day ahead, and despite years of practice, neither do adults! So, mornings can be frenetic. Here are a few strategies for the morning.

 **Find time for five** – Finding time in your morning routine for five deep breaths is a quick and simple way to focus your awareness and start the day off on the right foot. Do this at the same point in your routine every morning – straight after brushing your teeth, waiting for the kettle to boil, even in the shower.

 **Feel the weather** – When you first step out the door in the morning, take a moment to feel the weather. Notice the transition from inside to outside. Noticing the transitions in our day can help us reset, refocus and refresh.

After School and Evenings

 **Reset, ready** – If you have spent time away from the kids for any part of the day – your time apart has no doubt taken you to different places. Maybe you've had a tough day and your child has had a great day. Or, vice versa. So, before you come back together, take a pause, a moment to check-in with yourself, breathe, and then get ready to be fully present for the child or children in your care.

 **Me time** – Make some time in the day for an activity that's just for you! Take a long bath, read a book, learn a new skill, craft something fun, tinker in the shed or simply snuggle with your partner or pet. This is your time, enjoy it!

And remember, there will be times when the day just gets away from you. That's okay. It happens. When it does, try the STOP technique. It only takes a minute or two and is a great way to get back on with your day.

The STOP Technique



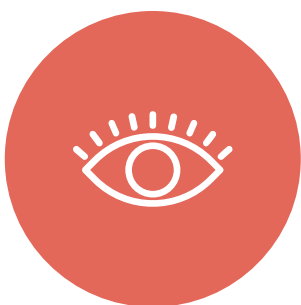
Stop

what you're doing, put things down for a minute.



Take

a few breaths.



Observe

your experience just as it is.



Proceed

with something that will support you in the moment –
e.g. talk to a friend, rub your shoulders, have a cup of tea.

Managing Worry and Stress

The global health crisis has been an unprecedented time for us all. It appeared unexpectedly just as our hopes and plans for 2020 began to unfold. The many consequences across the world continue to be deeply felt as we navigate this challenging time together.



A common thread for us all has been the ongoing experience of uncertainty and change, two factors that we humans don't exactly love. When changes occur outside of our control, it can feel like the ground is moving beneath us and it's hard to get a steady foothold. When we feel that things are not within our control, it's natural to worry which can lead to stress and anxiety.

This can show up in a variety of ways in our minds and bodies. Unhelpful thoughts may become more frequent and we can find it difficult to focus on what we are doing. We might find ourselves being more reactive and defensive. Stress is also often accompanied by other symptoms such as headaches, frustration, restlessness and difficulty concentrating and even sleeping. Too much stress can activate the 'fight or flight' response (also known as the acute stress response) in the body. This is accompanied by a range of physiological changes designed to keep us safe from harm as it primes the body for action. This can be lifesaving when faced with a real life threat or danger; but is often overactivated by imagined or hypothetical scenarios. Mindfulness can help us to notice when this is happening and provides a valuable tool for turning off the stress response.

Too much exposure to the unrelenting news cycle can be especially triggering for both adults and children alike. In an attempt to feel more in control, we can sometimes seek out more information than we need. This can end up overwhelming us and only increasing our feelings of distress and uncertainty.

Mindfulness is an active and supportive practice that can help us navigate the sense of overwhelm that many of us are currently feeling. Most simply put, mindfulness is when we pay attention to what is happening in the present moment, with openness, curiosity and without judgement. The effectiveness of regular mindfulness practice is supported by a growing body of academic research. Studies have shown that mindfulness strengthens areas of the brain involved in paying attention, building awareness and regulating emotions. Strengthening these brain areas can reduce stress and anxiety, leading to increases in our physical and mental wellbeing, our sleep and our cognitive and interpersonal skills.

In addition, integrating mindfulness into everyday life can have profound benefits for those around us. As mindful parents, carers and teachers, we become better at responding rather than reacting when with our children. As we become more present and aware of our own thoughts and emotions, we begin to be able to see things more clearly through others' eyes, and to be more compassionate.

Smiling Mind offers a range of engaging evidence-based meditations and activities designed for adults. You will find meditations and activities especially for worry and stress in this module. The accompanying journal questions will help you to further reflect. For this, we recommend keeping a small mindfulness journal that you can add to and even get creative with if you enjoy drawing.

The downloadable activity sheets can be found at the back of this module.



Meditations

Mindfulness 202 – Stress – Breath and Sounds (5 mins)

This is a general 5 minute meditation that uses breath and sounds to practise being mindful. You can listen to this daily.

Web App Link:

<https://app.smilingmind.com.au/sessions/173/591/1093/>

Thrive Inside – SOS (3 mins)

This is an SOS meditation. It's designed specifically for moments when you feel overwhelmed, like maybe right now, to help you reset and find a calmer more centered place.

Web App Link:

<https://app.smilingmind.com.au/sessions/473/1338/2752/>

Thrive Inside – Respond Rather Than React (10.35 mins)

This meditation is designed for parents and carers to help you become more mindful and less reactive in your interactions with your children by developing the ability to notice your emotions and how they impact behaviour.

Web App Link:

<https://app.smilingmind.com.au/sessions/473/1340/2754/>



Respond Rather Than React

My Internal Weather Report

This activity likens the external weather to our internal weather of thoughts and emotions. Finding relationships between the two can assist in building mindful curiosity around our emotions and emotional self-regulation.

Caught in a Storm

This activity uses the metaphor of a storm to remind us that emotions can appear unexpectedly and with force. Creating a list of strategies when we are calm can help.



Journal questions to reflect on

- How do thoughts and emotions show up for me in my mind and my body?
- How can I create a toolkit of resources for me to tap into when I am worried or stressed?
- How might I continue to connect more often with the present moment in my everyday life?

Taking in the Good

As parents, carers and teachers, we have found ourselves in the midst of uncertainty during the global health crisis. As we slowly begin to resume our routines, a wide range of emotions is completely normal and to be expected. Some of us can't wait to be back out there. Others have felt restored by the time at home and found it a welcome respite from the hectic pace of everyday life. Whatever our individual experience, it is important to nurture our own emotional wellbeing, as well as the wellbeing of others.



One of the ways we can do this is to deliberately turn our focus towards the good; to what energises and supports us. By activating positive emotions such as optimism and gratitude, we can start to make this shift. Positive emotions increase our physical and emotional wellbeing, help us to think broadly and creatively and provide us with a contrast to the more challenging and difficult experiences in our lives.

Taking in the good doesn't always come naturally. The human brain is like velcro for negative experiences and teflon for positive. Scientists call this the negativity bias. The stickiness of negative experiences was adaptive and has helped ensure our survival as a species. Once upon a time we needed to be on the constant look out for threats and danger. There are fewer dangers in our world, but the hardwiring of our brains hasn't changed.

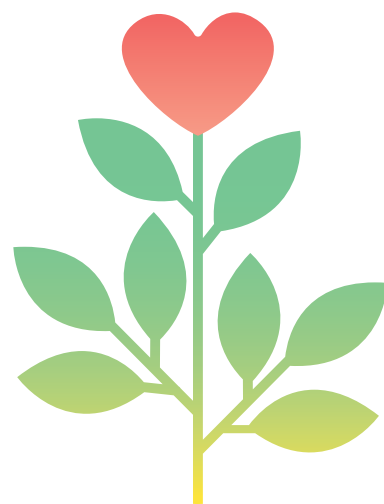
Cultivating gratitude, for example, is one way to velcro the positive. It can serve as an antidote to the natural tendency to take the positives in our lives for granted. Gratitude is being thankful for the good things in our lives. When we appreciate people, places and experiences, we begin to pay more attention to what brings us joy.

Optimism is a future minded emotion that assists us to build a positive perspective about something that is yet to happen. When we are optimistic, we expect good things to happen to us, even as we face challenges. Research shows that when we are optimistic, we are more able to cope with stressful events. We tend to take a problem-solving approach and mindfully plan our way forward.

Mindfulness can enable us to get better at directing our attention and awareness towards that which supports and sustains us. It can help us to notice and build upon positive thoughts, whilst making room and not getting as caught up in unhelpful thinking. This does not mean that we pay no attention to the challenging aspects of life. Rather, it is about gently unhooking our attention from unhelpful thought patterns and strong emotions that may be getting in the way of us being the people we want to be.

This all takes practice, and Smiling Mind is here to help with meditations and activities to support you as you focus on the positive. As you explore these mindfulness meditations, you may choose to consolidate the experience with a matched activity and some journaling questions. These are designed to complement the meditation and encourage further exploration and personal reflection. For this, we recommend keeping a small mindfulness journal that you can add to and even get creative with if you enjoy drawing.

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Meditations

Gratitude and Joy – Thrive Inside (5 mins)

This meditation will focus on cultivating feelings of gratitude, which can help improve our mood by making us feel more satisfied and connected.

Web App Link:

<https://app.smilingmind.com.au/sessions/473/1339/2753/>

I Wish For Me (6.10 mins)

Explore another wonderful way of putting a smile on your mind; by making friendly wishes for yourself.

Web App Link:

<https://app.smilingmind.com.au/sessions/175/606/1114/>

Growing Inner Strengths Meditation – Stress Management Program (13.40 mins)

Through this practice we cultivate internal resources that we can draw on more readily when we feel that our core needs are being threatened.

Web App Link:

<https://app.smilingmind.com.au/sessions/472/1336/>



Activities

A Heartfelt Wish For Me

This activity asks us to reflect on what brings us happiness and joy. Consciously pausing to notice and celebrate these moments helps us overcome our tendency to focus on the negatives.

Three Good Things

Writing down three things that went well and how you contributed to this experience at the end of each day can help support your brain to see more of the positive in your life. We recommend making this practice part of your daily routine.



Journal questions to reflect on

- What brings me joy and how might I bring more joy into my life?
 - In what ways can I cultivate and express gratitude on a daily basis?
 - How can I more consciously engage my senses in ways that help me feel positive and uplifted?
-

What do I need in this moment?



As caregivers and teachers, we sometimes get so caught up in the busyness of the moment that we lose awareness of how we are feeling and what we may need for our own wellbeing. This very simple question can help us to reconnect our minds and bodies and practise self-care.

Write the question, "What do I need in this moment?" on a post-it note, or cut out the image below. Decorate it and put it somewhere you will see it regularly – on your desk, on the inside cover of a notebook you use every day, on the fridge door. Everytime you see the note, reflect on the question, and when you can, take action.

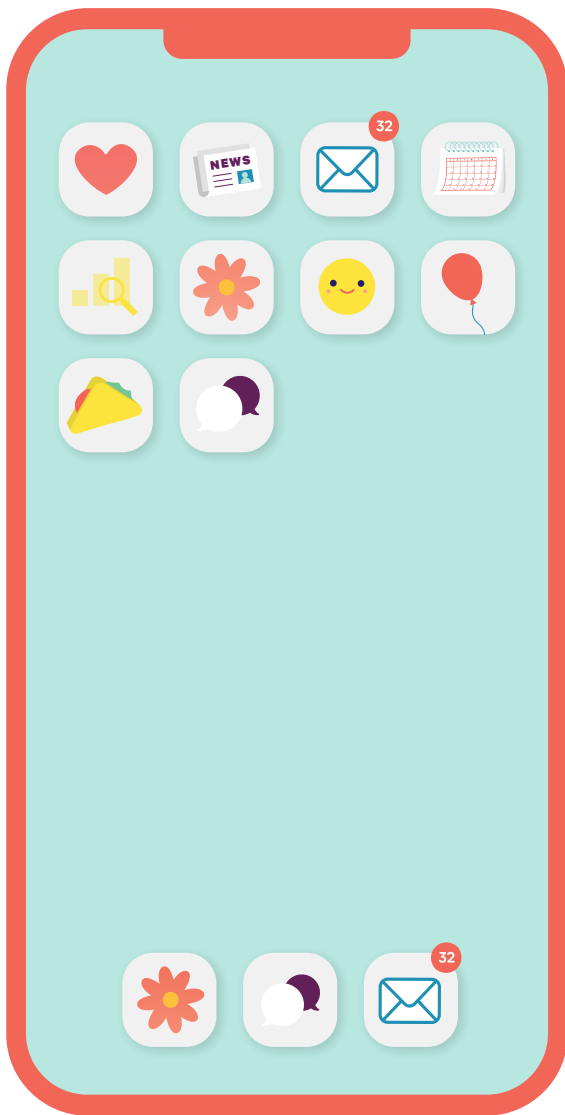
What do I need in this moment?

Returning to the present moment.



Have you noticed that technology can take up all our attention? Sometimes we even forget to pay attention to what is happening around us.

Think about some times when you were carried away by one or more screens. What brought you back to the present moment to the people around you? Look at your list and highlight the good things that bring you back to the present moment. How can you get more of these?



These things bring me back to the present moment:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

My internal weather report.



Emotions are a bit like internal weather. As a teacher, parent or carer, you can sometimes feel like a meteorologist – constantly checking in on the internal weather of the children and young people in your life. You check the weather and make adjustments.

But what about your own internal weather? How good are you at doing your own weather report? Awareness of our emotions is the first step towards managing them, regardless of age.

So, let's get specific. Look at the weather icons below and name all the emotions that relate to type of weather.

Emotions:













Caught in a storm.



If you've ever been caught in a storm, you'll know how sudden and overwhelming this can be.

Emotional storms occur inside our minds and bodies from time to time, usually when stress and anxiety levels are high. At the time, it can feel overwhelming.

Reflect on some times in the past when you have felt like you were in an emotional storm. What helped you weather these storms? Be specific about the thoughts and actions you took.

Highlight 3–4 strategies you could use for the next storm.



A heartfelt wish for me.



As we care for others, we spend a lot of time thinking about others - what they would like us to be, what they would like us to do. While this is important, it does mean that we can lose sight of the things that bring happiness and joy to you.

Think about the things that bring happiness, joy or feelings of wellbeing and contentment to you. They can be objects, places or activities you do alone or with others.

Write these things post-it notes or in the boxes below.

Things that bring me happiness:

Things that bring me joy:

Things that bring me feelings of wellbeing:

Things that bring me contentment:

Gratitude – three good things.



Regularly reflecting on the good things in our lives trains our brain to look for the positive in our lives and boosts wellbeing. And, it's simple.

Each day, as you prepare to rest, take a few quiet moments to reflect on the positives of the day. Perhaps a success of some kind, an act of kindness, an enjoyable activity, or something that made you laugh.

Choose three things that went well and write them down. Add as much detail as possible. Do this every day.

Monday:

1.

2.

3.

Tuesday:

1.

2.

3.

Wednesday:

1.

2.

3.

Thursday:

1.

2.

3.

Friday:

1.

2.

3.

Saturday/Sunday:

1.

2.

3.



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Smiling Mind is a not-for-profit organisation that works to make mindfulness meditation accessible to all.

Visit us online or download the free app to get started.

