

Episode 14: Mindfulness with Stephanie (Grounding Practice)

Podcast Transcript

Life with Alcohol and Drugs

Host: Rebecca Bradley

Guest Speaker: Stephanie Wilson (Mindfulness Scotland)

Introduction:

Welcome back to another episode of Life with Alcohol and Drugs, from the charity Scottish Families.

Interview Begins

Rebecca:

Hi, welcome to this special episode of Life with Alcohol and Drugs. We're going to be doing a short series on mindfulness and different practices and techniques for the family members who we support, and our listeners. We are joined by Stephanie today, from Mindfulness Scotland, who is going to, in this episode, give us a settling and grounding practice. Stephanie, would you like to introduce yourself?

Stephanie:

Hello, hi Rebecca. I'm Stephanie Wilson. I suppose my day job is as a physiotherapist. I work with people with chronic pain, and I've been interested in mindfulness for quite some time. I got involved with mindfulness as part of my job, but very quickly realised that I could learn a lot and benefit a lot from becoming more mindful myself. So, I've been practising mindfulness on and off for myself for the last 10 to 12 years, and I find it really profoundly helpful. I'm also a member of Mindful Scotland, and that's the umbrella under which I am coming to you today, where I can be helpful.

Rebecca:

Excellent. Very helpful! You will be very helpful because I think that mindfulness is one of those words that a lot of people hear but they don't really know what to do about it or they don't really know how to take those moments for themselves, and it's so important that we do. What would you say that mindfulness is?

Stephanie:

That's a really good question. To be honest, mindfulness is something that I personally find quite hard to talk about. Somebody once said to me, it's better felt than telt, so I'm glad we're going to have the opportunity today to do a wee practice together. But I suppose that what I've learned is that mindfulness is a capacity that we all have and it's a capacity to be fully aware of what's happening within ourselves and within our world as it's happening. So, just that ability to be awake to your life so to speak, and we can often see this capacity in small children, you

know, when they're really absorbed in something: playing with their toys or digging in the garden, at the beach or whatever, just really absorbed and without any distraction. I think the issue is that we get older and get busier with all of the concerns that life brings, and we lose that ability to really be focused and present with what we're doing. That's just the way it is, but the interesting thing about mindfulness practise is that it gives us an opportunity to just stop and take stock of how we are.

A definition of mindfulness that's often bandied about has been pulled together by a man called Jon Kabot-Zinn. Anyone who's interested in mindfulness will know that he's the person who brought mindfulness into healthcare in about the 1980s. His definition is: mindfulness is a special way of paying attention, and that is being in the present moment by choice and without judgement. So, those three elements of choice, paying attention to the here and now, and doing it in a special way that's kind and open, and open to just whatever is here, without any judgement of yourselves or others is a really useful definition I think.

Rebecca:

Definitely. It's a wonderful way to put it, and I think it's so easy to understand when you do put it like that because there can be quite a lot of definitions about mindfulness, but it's definitely about our surroundings and finding ourselves in the places where we are. Obviously, you are a physiotherapist, so how can mindfulness help?

Stephanie:

Well, I suppose for the purposes of what we're talking about here, mindfulness can help in lots of different ways, but for the purpose of what we're talking about here, I feel it can help in two main ways: the first way is that ability to help us to step out of what we call in mindfulness, automatic pilot. You might be aware, Rebecca, of times when you've jumped in the car and driven to the supermarket or driven somewhere, and by the time you've got to where you were aiming for, you've absolutely no memory of the journey. You have been so lost in the business of your own mind that you've missed a lot along the way. For me, I was thinking about that this morning as this happens to me in the morning, when I get up and jump in the shower. My plans for the day are very much at the forefront of my mind, and the number of times I've thought, oh, have I put the conditioner on? What stage am I at? I'm just not aware of what I'm doing sometimes. So, mindfulness has the capacity to bring us into the present moment when we realise that is happening.

Some of these clever researchers have calculated that we spend about 60% of our waking day not being fully aware of what's going on for us; we are just lost in thought, often thoughts about the future and what hasn't happened yet, or thoughts about the past that we can't change. Mindfulness is a way of noticing that that is happening and just stopping and coming into an awareness of what's in the here and now. Now, the ability to be on automatic, to go about our day with a degree of automaticity is really helpful; it means we can get things done. If thinking is not a problem, being able to think into the future and make plans is really useful. Being able to reflect on the past and learn from it is also really useful, but the problem is that if we get caught up in that constant rambling automatic thinking. What can actually often happen is that it really feeds our worry, it feeds our stress, and before we know it, we can often find ourselves caught up in circular, worrying thoughts that don't go away or we notice

that our mood has shifted and we're not quite sure how we got there.

Dropping into wee mindful moments throughout the day is a good way to put the brakes on that process, so that we can make the choice to look after ourselves before we find ourselves in an intensely worried or low mood state. That's the first thing that I think is really important to think about.

The second way in which mindfulness helps us is that it brings joy to our life. When we stop and use that capacity and choice, we can choose to focus on some of the positive things that are around us. It gives us choice and helps us to step out of that flow of automatic, reactive behaviour.

Rebecca:

That's excellent. Thank you. We're just about to do the settling in, grounding practise, but just thinking about the family members we support at Scottish Families, it can be so hard for them to find any time during the day to sit down and practise mindfulness, just because of the chaos of what's happening in their lives, or they might not have any privacy to do mindfulness, or truly it's just finding the time. But for anybody who is thinking that they really want to start doing mindfulness, they really want to start incorporating it into their daily lives, how can they get started?

Stephanie:

That's a really good question as well. In a wee moment we are going to explore a settling and grounding practise. It will take about 15 minutes for that. For the purpose of this podcast, we can do it sitting down, so that we get a chance to really practise it in a more formal way. Practising in that formal way definitely strengthens your mindfulness muscle, if you like, so it makes it easier to drop into that state at little, small points in your day, when you don't have time to sit down. I think if we start with that 15-minute practise, that will build up the understanding of what mindfulness is and how it might help us. But I suppose what you are asking is, how can you drop that into your day? Hopefully, from the practise that we explore together, you'll see that there are very simple things that you can do. The first thing is to just stop. The next thing after that is usually to drop into noticing your breathing, just taking a few slower breaths, and then maybe becoming aware of your body, in particular your feet on the ground. That's a really good way of simply steadying yourself, giving your mind a wee opportunity to quieten down a bit if it's racing. It's almost like you are taking your attention right down to your feet, which is the furthest place away from your busy head.

Even just doing that: focusing your breathing, grounding on your feet, or your bottom if you are sitting down, and really just becoming awake to this moment, that can be really profoundly helpful and put the brakes on a build-up of stress.

Rebecca:

Excellent. Thank you so much. I'll let you take the lead now, going into the settling and grounding practise.

Stephanie:

Okay. We'll aim to make this not too long, maybe around 15 minutes. As I say, as a listener, if you can sit down for 15 minutes, that might be a good way to start. We can do it with our eyes closed but we don't have to, so if you don't like your eyes closed, just keep them open, but maybe look at something ahead of you, a little lower than your gaze, and let your focus soften a wee bit.

What you'll notice as we go through this is that it is actually not possible to have your mind being quiet and floaty and an empty space with lovely rainbows and unicorns, that's not what we're aiming for. We're not aiming for a state of blissed-outness, and it probably won't happen. That's not a mistake; what you actually will notice is just maybe how busy your mind is, and the practise that I'll guide us through is just a wee way of giving yourself a chance to notice that, but also to settle down and ground yourself, particularly when times are busy. So, I hope it all goes well for you.

If everyone can just take a seat, that's great. If you take a moment to sit with your tailbone right back in the corner of the chair and your feet flat on the floor, so it's best not to have your legs crossed. If your feet are on the floor you really get a sense of grounding. And now is the time to close your eyes if you'd like to. And we can begin.

As we begin, you might want to just let go of whatever is going on around you today, all of the activities of your day, the business, the stresses. Notice that you are stopping. You are making a choice to stop. Give yourself a wee bit of time to settle, to ground and to look after yourself. You might firstly get a sense of the weight of yourself sitting in your chair. Maybe you will have a sense of your whole body just stopping - what's it like to just stop and sit? How does that feel? And you'll be aware that you are breathing, just in whatever way you are breathing, it's fine.

Your mind might be very busy, that's just the way things are.

By choice now, I'm going to invite you to take your attention right down into the soles of your feet, resting on the ground underneath you, wherever you are. Maybe see what it's like to really tune into the sensations in the soles of your feet: sensations of touch, of pressure and contact. You might get a sense of the floor underneath you, spreading out in all directions, offering you support.

You are here and you know that you are here because you can feel the sensations of groundedness, of contact, of support through the soles of your feet. Take a wee moment to really connect with those sensations, and you will notice that your mind might have wandered off a dozen times already, or even more, and that's not a mistake, that's perfectly normal. Just see if you can turn your attention back to the soles of your feet. You are breathing, you are sitting and you are noticing the soles of your feet in the here and now. This moment.

Then, travelling up to your bottom area, you might feel your thighs and your two sitting bones - those wee bones in your bottom that hold your weight, you might notice them, weighting you into the seat of your chair. So, what's it like to notice those sensations? Contact and pressure and a sense of weight? A sense of being supported by the chair. A sense of being here. Again,

the mind might be scuttling off somewhere else, into the future or the past, but when you notice that, that is a great moment because you're waking up to what's here, and then by choice you can turn your attention back to sensations in your bottom area and the backs of your thighs. Just settling, giving your mind a break, noticing your body.

As we move the attention up to the length of the back, just noticing your own back; from your tailbone on the chair, right up to the top of your head, and you might like to imagine that there's a little thread popping out the top of your head and someone is giving you a little lift so that your spine can elongate a little bit upwards, without any sense of stiffness, just a sense of lift and space as you notice the length of your own back. The bottom half of your body is grounding down through your seat and your feet, and your spine lifting upwards, right up into the space above you, grounded and lifting at the same time. You might want to tuck your chin down a wee bit to ensure your neck is nice and comfy. Then you might like to drop your shoulders a little further away from your ears. Just notice how that might make you feel. You can bring a wee bit of softness to your face, maybe around your eyes, around your jaw, just softening the muscles around your mouth maybe, becoming a little more peaceful. A little more restful.

Again, the mind might have wandered off. Don't worry about that. That's just what's going to happen. When you notice, you can choose to bring your attention back now to softening your face.

Now, noticing your arms. Just letting your hands rest, maybe in your lap or on the arms of your chair. Noticing how the arms can just be at peace, they can just rest for a moment. You might like to take your attention specifically to your hands. Your hands are rich with sensations. Lots of sensations in your body, particularly here in your hands. Maybe there is a sense of aliveness, a sense of being here in this moment through these rich sensations in your hands. And if your mind is wandering again, just coming back to this area of rich sensation in the palms of your hands, the backs of your hands. A place to anchor yourself if you like, if your mind is wandering off.

We can use our body like this; as a way to settle the mind, maybe tuning into your feet or your seat, or your hands, places that are rich with sensation, pressure or contact, if your mind is fizzing.

We can also bring our mind to an awareness of our breathing. You might like to now just notice your next breath in, noticing how the air enters your nose or your mouth, travels right down into your chest. Then at some point, you notice how the breath turns around and comes back out again, travelling out from your chest, up through its pathway through the nose, back out into the room, into the space in front of you.

It's the same how it is to notice the next breath: bring in, if you can, that quality of openness and curiosity and interest, that mindfulness encourages us to bring. Really noticing what's here in your body by following the journey of our breath. This is a maybe more subtle sensation than the feet and the seat or the hands. If your mind is wandering, just see if you can return to observing your breathing. You might notice the change in the flow of air in your throat. You might notice that the next stage of the breath journey is in the top parts of your chest, just under your collar bone. What does that feel like? Is that a place that you can bring your

attention to draw you towards this present moment? With this breath, only this breath, it's the only thing that's really real and happening just now.

Maybe then noticing the movement of your breath at the sides of your body; how your ribs swing out to the side towards the under surface of your arms. Can you tune into those sensations for a few breaths and just stay with that? It might be tugging you away, but just see if you can return your attention to the awareness of your breath at the sides of your body, as your ribs move in and out. What does that actually feel like? How amazing is this breath that keeps us alive, keeps us here.

Then, dropping your attention right down to your belly area, maybe noticing if there's any movement down there with your breathing? Breathing in, the tummy swells inwards and upwards. Each time you breathe out, the tummy falls back and down a bit. With your next inward breath, just see if you can stay with that journey, through the nose, upper chest, side chest, right down to your tummy, noticing the little pause as the breath turns around and travels back out again. If the mind wanders off and you just notice that, congratulate yourself for actually noticing, and come back to following the next breath, noticing that each breath is an opportunity to begin again. No matter what, no matter where you've been to in your mind, the next breath is fresh and a new beginning, starting again.

Maybe noticing too that if your mind is wandering, where might it be going to? What type of thoughts are here? Just acknowledging what's on your mind without pushing it away but just letting it go for now. Not a pushing away or a denial, just almost letting the thoughts float off, a bit like a helium balloon, every time they pop into your awareness and an observation if you find you can.

Have you been noticing too how you are feeling? So we're not denying that. We are not pushing it away, but we are holding it in kindness, being aware of what is here, and still returning to this moment through observing our breath. Or if it's easier, returning and anchoring yourself in the hands of the seat, whatever works best for you to support your desire to just settle yourself, to ground yourself, give yourself a wee break.

And as we bring our short practise to a close, you might like to experiment with breathing, as if you can breathe into your whole body. A bit like as if the breath could travel beyond your chest, down into your legs and your arms and up into your head so that there's a sense of your whole body sitting here breathing, supported by the floor and the chair. Supported internally by the lift and length of your own back. Support from outside and inside. Just sitting with the flow of your breath. Each breath a fresh start. And as we finish, I'll invite you to take three really good, deep breaths. Big breath in. And a longer, slower deep breath out. Three intentionally deep breaths, with a longer out breath each time.

When you are ready, you might just like to open your eyes and look around you. See that you are in your room, or wherever you are, just coming back to your day.

Rebecca:

That's excellent. Thank you so much. It actually makes you quite tired when you do that! I just feel so relaxed.

Stephanie:

Yes, your body is tired.

Rebecca:

No, it was excellent. I think as well, for any of the listeners, you can keep coming back to that nearly every day or just whenever you've got that time. That was what? 10 minutes of practising.

Stephanie:

Yes, you are doing it and focusing in on yourself. You can do it standing up, just focusing on your feet. You can do it during a busy day, maybe just focusing on your hands or the traditional way is to just stop for a moment and focus on your breathing. There's a lot in mindfulness about coming back to your body, which is really interesting because the big thing about automatic pilot is about how much we are in our mind. This emphasis on coming back to the body and whatever anchor - which is what they are called - whatever anchor is most useful to you: breath, hands, feet, whatever, just to come back to the moment and the way of giving yourself a break. I hope that's useful for people.

Rebecca:

Thank you so much. Well, you are going to join us for the next little episode in this series where we are going to be looking at gratitude practise. So, that's going to be excellent as well. Thank you so much for your time today.

Stephanie:

Yes, you are more than welcome. Bye, Rebecca. Bye, everybody.

Interview Ends

Exit:

Thank you for listening, if you're worried about somebody else's alcohol or drug use you can contact Scottish Families on 08080 10 10 11 or by email at helpline@sfad.org.uk. We also have webchat and further information on our website www.sfad.org.uk.