

Mindfulness, Meditation & Anxiety

One definition of **MINDFULNESS** is:

Mindfulness is the quality of being present, in a non-judgemental way, and fully engaged with whatever we're doing at the moment — free from distraction or judgment, and aware of our thoughts and feelings without getting caught up in them. We often train in this moment-to-moment awareness through meditation, allowing us to build the skill of mindfulness so that we can then apply it to everyday life. In teaching the mind to be present, we are teaching ourselves to be live more mindfully — in the present, taking a breath, not beholden to reactive thoughts and feelings — which is particularly helpful when faced with challenging circumstances or difficult situations.

All the main western religions: Christianity, Islam and Judaism have traditions of meditative / contemplative practices whether it is called prayer, contemplation and reflection. NOW meditation has become common and popular as a secular practise without any specific beliefs attached. Mindfulness practices are from a Buddhist tradition but you are not asked to BELIEVE anything – these are PRACTICES which are important for our wellbeing – and now found to be good for our health as well.

In the everyday world mindfulness started to be used by Jon Kabat-Zinn – with MBSR – an 8 day course to help with stress, then other courses developed including ones for depression (found to be as helpful as medication for those with serious recurrent depression) and working with pain.

Amazing work has now been done looking at what meditation does to our brains when meditating and how and why it helps, all in the last maybe 20 years. There are now over 19K mindfulness/ meditation studies and still more being created.

Our situation now:

We are all at home keeping ourselves and our communities safe from Covid but it is not easy. Many of us are anxious at the moment and I was wondering why this was until I read:

- Anything can be a trigger for worry. Even when things go right, you might manage to think to yourself "but what if it all falls apart?".

However, there are particular situations where worry becomes even more common. Strong triggers for worry are situations that are:

- **Ambiguous** – open to different interpretations.
- **Novel and new** – so we don't have any experience to fall back on.
- **Unpredictable** – unclear how things will turn out.

Does any of this sound familiar at the moment?

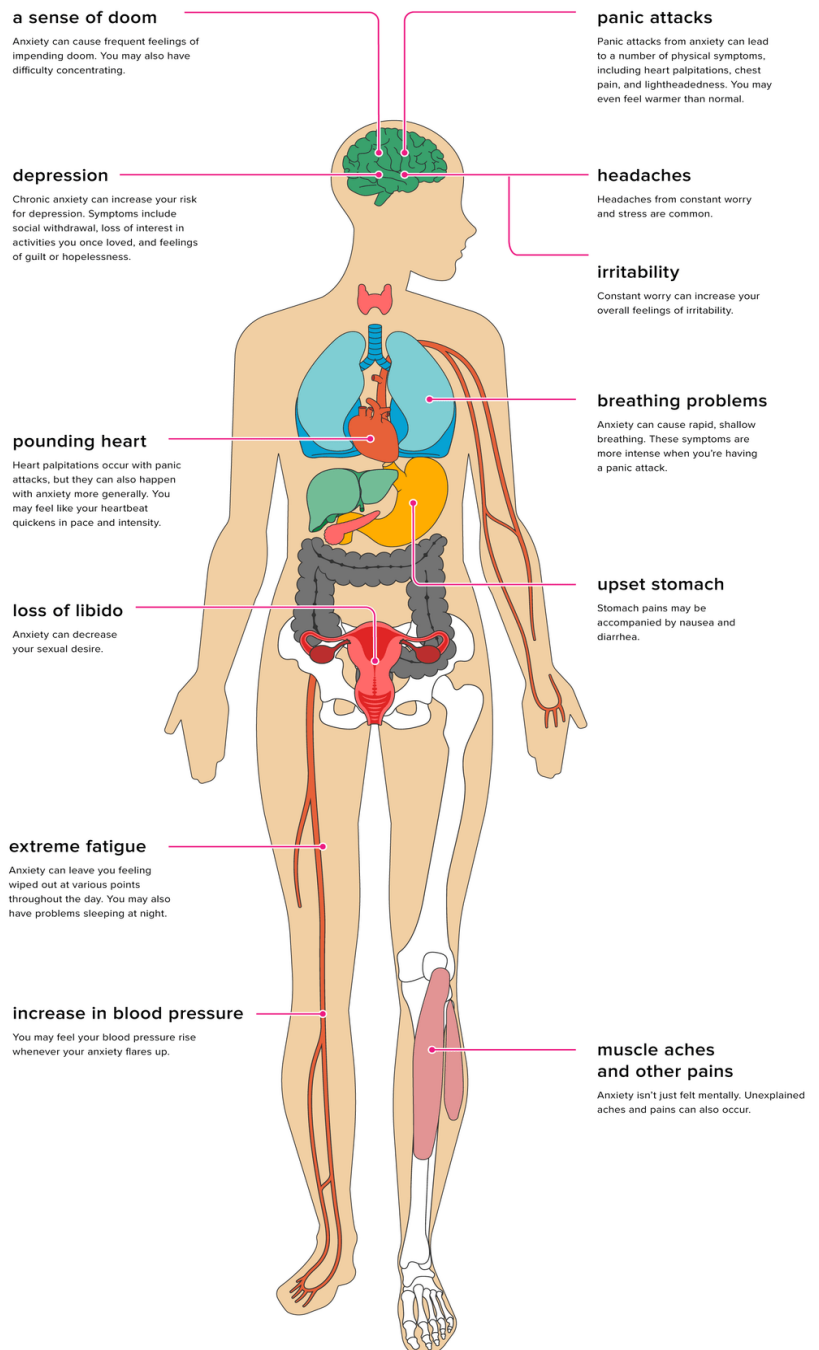
The current worldwide health situation ticks all of these boxes, and so it makes sense that people are experiencing a lot of worry. It is an unusual situation with much uncertainty, which can naturally lead us to worry and feel anxious

Feeling anxious to some degree is normal for everyone. Anxiety and fear are adaptive and helpful emotions which allows us to notice danger, keeps us safe and helps us adapt to our environment. However sometimes anxiety levels can become severe or longstanding and beyond our abilities to cope, which can pose a risk to our mental and physical health.

So how does worry/
anxiety affect us:

**It can be in our mind
AND in our body** →

Many of us will have low level anxiety, we may not even think of ourselves as 'anxious, just get a bit irritable when we have to go to the supermarket, for example some may get nightmares, someone else may get migraines or have a sense of distance from reality etc. We carry on, but we may have a sense of general unease.



For many of us with ME/CFS/FM

We will often start to notice that we have more symptoms again. We may feel more fatigued, or more pain, our sleeping may become disrupted again. These are all small signs that we may be experiencing low level anxiety. It is important that we do not compound this anxiety by then thinking that we are becoming more unwell again.

We need to be very aware of what our bodies are experiencing and respond quickly to the signals from our body and give ourselves what we need to recover from this small blip and not catastrophise that it's a relapse.

But how can mindfulness help?

Mindfulness as we could see from the definition: *Mindfulness is the quality of being present, in a non-judgemental or kind way, and fully engaged with whatever we're doing at the moment — free from distraction or judgment, and aware of our thoughts and feelings without getting caught up in them repeat, is part of ALL of our life...we can be mindful:*

Washing dishes

Having a cup of coffee

Going for a walk

AND it can help us NOTICE become aware that our mind is going round and round, our body is tensing etc these could also be anxiety. Once we become aware we can think:

What would help in this moment? What can I do right now to help me feel better?

Get up look out the window or go outside? Support that flagging system of the body with your tools? Listen to some calming music or talk to a friend? Pat your pet.

But for many people it is helpful to start with a meditation practise which helps us begin to settle our bodies and minds.

What meditation is not:

- It is not sitting like a yogi – many people sit in chairs or lie flat, be comfortable.
- If you need to move while you sit do it mindfully, your comfort is the most important thing.
- It is not about a silent mind, it is about the action of bringing the monkey mind back to the point of focus be it breath etc.

Websites:

www.breathworks.org.nz – specifically around mindfulness and pain

www.meditation.org.nz

<https://www.tenpercent.com/>

Apps:

Headspace – good starter

10% happier – good but expensive

Calm

Insight timer

Books

Mindfulness for Health

Vidyamala Burch

The Mindful way through Depression

Mark Williams

A Mindfulness Guide for the Frazzled

Ruby Wax

A Path with Heart

Jack Kornfield

Compiled by Kate Fyfe, image of anxiety from Anxiety NZ.

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