Four-week ‘Introduction to mindfulness for students’ group

Introduction

Before facilitating any mindfulness group, you need to have established your own mindfulness practice so that you can speak and lead from experience. Mindfulness is not an intellectual exercise in acquiring knowledge and unless you have wrestled with some of the challenges of the practice, you may not be in a place to guide others well. You should also bear in mind that some people in any group are likely to have mental health concerns; are you really able to support a diverse group of students, ranging from undergraduates to PhD level, of mixed nationalities and with different expectations? Leading such groups is not something to undertake lightly or without appropriate supervision and professional liability insurance. The facilitator should be a mature (in experience) person who can handle difficult situations (someone bursting into tears or becoming angry) without risking other participants’ safety. Some will come to the group hoping for a quick fix to anxiety or depression and you will need to gently educate them about the limitations of mindfulness as well as its possibilities. There may be a significant drop-out rate in the group from week 1 to 2 as often people expect something more immediately transformative than the actual reality, and this is something to bear in mind when recruiting for a group. Aim for a minimum of 6–8 participants, and a maximum of 12. Anything smaller than 6 risks becoming too intense if people do drop out, and anything larger than 12 may be hard to handle and, for some, intimidating to attend.

When recruiting for the group it is essential that you clarify with each participant that the group is *not* suitable for anyone who is coping with certain mental health issues (see Chapter 1 in the book for more guidance on this). It is irresponsible to present mindfulness as a panacea.

For each session you will need:

* A large, quiet space where you won’t be interrupted
* Comfortable chairs (not armchairs as participants need to be able to sit with their back self-supporting) and/or meditation stools/cushions
* PowerPoint facilities
* A bell/Tibetan chime for mindfulness practice
* A copy of *The Student Guide to Mindfulness* for each participant
* Name tags/pens
* A good supply of stick-it notes/pens
* A stuffed monkey toy
* Enough raisins for everyone in the group (this will only be applicable to session two)
* Water for participants
* Tissues available.

Each session lasts approximately up to 90 minutes but can be shortened/lengthened as desired. Timings given are approximate and depend on group size. You may find that – especially if the number of participants approaches the higher range – you need less material per session than what is outlined above. Adapt the session outlines to your own local situation and to the level of participation that emerges in the group.

It can be tricky to find a good time to hold such groups. At the end of a day, many people will be tired and find sitting in mindfulness too difficult with a tendency to fall asleep; midday might work, but beware people may want to eat their lunch while they practice. A good option, if possible, is to have an early-morning start, about 8am. Although many people say that students won’t attend such an early start, my experience is that this was the best time of all and attracted most participants who wanted a good start to their day.

It’s important to remember that many people are attracted to mindfulness because they are looking for a way of dealing with some internal distress: anxiety, depression, loneliness, etc. Also, that some people who attend a course like this will have already read something about mindfulness or used an app. There is likely to be a level of anxiety simply about attending a group with people they have never met before, or concern that they might meet someone they *do* know.

For each session, therefore, the facilitator must take time to welcome everyone. Be in the room a good 30 minutes before the start of the session. Maybe have some relaxing music playing to avoid awkward ‘sitting in silence’ moments; make the room as attractive as possible – clear up any papers/books lying around; clear whiteboards of postings from previous groups; arrange flipchart/pens; open a window a little for fresh air; adjust lighting so that it is not too harsh. Give people a name tag so that you can remember names and address people personally; spend time in the first session establishing ground rules/boundaries for the group so that it is a safe space for everyone. Have copies of *The Student Guide to Mindfulness* available for people to read while they are waiting. It is also important to remind everyone to turn off their mobile phone or set it to flight mode at the start of every session.

Suggested ground rules for mindfulness groups:

* attend on time; if you arrive late, come in quietly and sit down
* if you cannot attend, please let the facilitator know
* turn your mobile phone off for the duration of the session
* the group is confidential: what we talk about here stays here
* it is OK to disagree with the facilitator: please express disagreement respectfully
* if you need to leave early, please let the facilitator know at the start of the session – try not to leave during any mindfulness practice to avoid disruption to others
* it is fine to ask questions as we go along
* no pressure to participate in any way that makes you uncomfortable; it is OK to sit and observe
* listen to others respectfully
* do not give advice unless requested
* other?

Week 1

Aims of this session:

* to welcome everyone, help students relax a little and get to know something about each other
* to introduce the theme of mindfulness and begin to clarify what it is and isn’t
* to learn about how our brain (monkey mind) can both help and hinder our mindfulness practice
* to try formal mindfulness together as a group.

1. Welcome! [slide 1]

The facilitator introduces him or herself; who they are, a little about their own experience of mindfulness (keep this short), and the timings of this group (so that people are clear about when it will end).

* in pairs or threes: participants share their name, what they are studying (year/subject), what attracted them to come along to this group (5 minutes)
* after, participants briefly introduce their partner(s) to the rest of the group (10 minutes)

2. Ground rules for the group: [slide 2]

Either elicit rules from the group or simply put up a slide with the rules outlined and ask for comments/feedback/suggested additions/changes from the group (5–10 minutes).

Emphasise that the four weeks of this group are simply a taster of some of the concepts and practices of mindfulness. There is much more than can be explored in this timeframe. These sessions are intended to give participants a flavour of what mindfulness offers.

3. What is mindfulness? [slide 3]

Pose this question to the whole group and write up their feedback on a flipchart. Don’t censor or disagree; write up whatever is offered. (10 minutes)

4. Defining mindfulness: [slide 4–6]

Key words for defining mindfulness are *awareness*, *acceptance*, *allowing*. Mindfulness has emerged in the West from Eastern philosophy, notably Buddhism, but the fundamental concepts are found in many other philosophical and religious traditions. These sessions are secular but you can apply what you learn in the context of your own philosophy or faith tradition. (5 minutes)

5. Mindfulness as *falling awake*: [slide 7]

Coming off autopilot; the experience we all have had of walking or driving somewhere and wondering how we got there. Being present for more of our lives – in touch with our senses and training ourselves to notice more – and appreciate more. *Falling awake* is also about recognising when we are getting lost in unhelpful/unrealistic thoughts which take us away into a scary future, or a regretted past. We come back into this moment as fully as possible – out of our thinking mind and into our bodies and awareness. (5 minutes)

6. Mindfulness is *not*… [slide 8]

Mindfulness is not clearing our minds; stopping thoughts; being peaceful and calm all the time; a relaxation technique; never experiencing anxiety or sadness. Ask for feedback here: anything that is clear/unclear/different from what expected? (5 minutes)

7. A short mindfulness practice [slide 9–10]

Introduce this to the group as a very short taste of what it’s like to intentionally sit and come into the present moment as fully as possible, using the breath as an *anchor* to the here and now. Guide participants in a short mindfulness practice, no longer than 10 minutes (you can use one of the shorter scripts from *The Student Guide to Mindfulness* as guidance). Ask them to sit comfortably, feet flat on the floor, their back self-supporting (not leaning against the chair-back), bags/water bottles on the floor. Reiterate that mobile phones should be turned off or in flight mode. Tell them this is simply a taster; there is no right or wrong, and you are interested in what they experience as you guide them. Start and end the practice with the sound of a bell and let participants know that this is a typical way for signalling the start and end of formal mindfulness practice. Encourage them to listen to the sound of the bell until it has completely died away.

When the practice is finished, allow a few moments of silence, just allow people to ‘come to’. Then ask: ‘How was that?’. Wait for their answers and see what comes from the group. Typical responses that you may get include: I loved it; I hated it; I couldn’t concentrate; my mind was all over the place; I was tired. Whatever responses you get, it is fine. (10 minutes)

8. Monkey mind [slide 11–12]

Introduce the idea that our minds are always thinking, remembering, fantasising, worrying, regretting, planning, obsessing. This is the Buddhist concept of monkey mind. Bring out the toy stuffed monkey and sit it somewhere prominent. Explain that this is what our mind is like (keep the toy on view for each session from now on). (5 minutes)

It is important to emphasise that monkey mind is *not* an indication that you are ‘not good’ at mindfulness. This is what we *all* experience. Sometimes the monkey is very active, other times less so. It’s all OK. A key part of mindfulness is getting to know how your monkey mind works and what it tends to think about (with awareness of conditioning/personality) *not* about silencing, taming or controlling it. (5 minutes)

9. Second short mindfulness practice [slide 13–14]:

Introduce the second short mindfulness practice, but encourage participants to simply notice every time the monkey mind emerges and carries them away – and whenever they notice this, to gently say to themselves ‘monkey mind’ – and then return to the meditation practice. If this happens 100 times, this is fine; that’s how it is. This is a new skill and it takes time, persistence, patience and self-compassion.

Lead a second meditation of around 10 minutes, but leave some longer gaps of silence (45 seconds minimum) for people to have the opportunity to notice their monkey mind at work.

At the end, take some more feedback. Did you notice any difference? How was monkey mind for you all?

It’s important to tell everyone that they did well; they have made an important start – a commitment to themselves – and that you are glad that they came and that you are really looking forward to seeing them next time.

10. Home practice [slide 18]

Encourage participants to practice 3–5 times before the next session and simply notice what happens when they do. Suggest that they keep a simple record (you might want to produce a handout with space for them to record their practice and any comments about the experience). Suggest that they read Chapters 1 and 2 of *The Student Guide to Mindfulness* for more background to mindfulness.

Ask everyone to be on time and if possible to arrive 5–10 minutes early so that you can all start each session together. Tell the group that next time you will be doing some walking meditation.

Week 2

Aims of this session:

* check-in with the participants about how they got on since last session
* expand understanding of monkey mind with introduction to tripartite model of brain
* differentiate between formal and informal mindfulness practice.

1. Welcome! [slide 1–3]

Take time to welcome everyone as they arrive and then collectively as a group. Don’t rush this, be genuinely interested in how their week/day has gone and in how they got on with the practice during the week. Spend some time reminding the group why they should practice mindfulness, what it is and what is not.

Put the monkey toy somewhere prominent. Remind participants that the monkey mind is always active and we are learning to familiarise ourselves with it and how to direct our attention back to the present moment.

2. Formal mindfulness practice [slide 4–6]:

Ask if anyone would like to tell the group what they understand mindfulness to be now. Recap on the notion of *falling awake* – directing attention to our sense-perception rather than drifting along in thoughts/monkey mind. Introduce the concept of breath/bodily sensation as an *anchor* to the present moment. In formal mindfulness we often focus on breath and body because what we find there is happening right now.

Lead a formal mindfulness meditation (10–15 minutes) starting and ending with bell/chime. (You can use the script from book in Chapter 9 as a guide. Leave gaps in the script as you guide.) Establish at the outset that you encourage participants to be curious about their experience: whatever they experience is fine. If they find anything difficult or too hard, it is fine to open their eyes, or sit back in the chair and wait until the group finishes.

After meditation, everyone can stretch. Allow some silence and then enquire into participants’ experience. What did they notice? What commentary did their own minds create for them? You might get some responses that include ‘This is boring’; ‘I can’t do this’; ‘What’s the point?’

3. Mindful brain [slide 7–8]:

Spend a few moments outlining the triune brain model described in *The Student Guide to Mindfulness* (see Chapter 2) – viz: reptilian brain/limbic/higher brain. Points to emphasise:

* fight/flight/freeze response to perceived risk
* we are not in conscious control of reptilian brain
* the reptilian brain’s main purpose is to ensure our survival
* it is not good at distinguishing between real and imagined threat
* notion of *threat* system (like a smoke alarm – useful, but potentially disruptive if it keeps going off all the time).

4. Distinction between formal and informal mindfulness [slide 9–10]:

Present the notion of formal mindfulness as sitting for a set period of time and the basis for other forms of mindfulness. It is important to stress that informal practice is not a substitute for formal practice.

5. Walking meditation (20 minutes) [slides 11–12]:

Lead a period of walking meditation for about 20 minutes. Clear chairs away so that everyone can stand in a large circle; shoes off if people are comfortable with that. This is not about getting somewhere, this is about using body-movement as a way to come into the present moment.

Start with some gentle stretches: shaking out of arms/legs, gentle arm raises and body twists/turns. Then stand with legs hip-width apart and (if possible) close eyes and allow attention to move to the soles of the feet. Feel pressure of body through legs, into feet, against the floor. Shift weight of body gently to left leg – notice the feeling – and then over to right leg – notice the difference.

Now demonstrate the speed of walking meditation. Underline again that this is not about getting somewhere, it’s about noticing something we usually don’t even register: our body moving, keeping balance, pressure, sensations.

Lead a few ‘laps’ of the circle with everyone following along – keep things slow. Then stop and ask for feedback.

Now say that you are going to do the same, but this time varying the speed. When you clap your hands, the circle will either speed up or slow down, maintaining distance from the person ahead. As you walk, occasionally remind people of what they are doing and why: ‘Feel the movement in your legs and arms’; ‘Notice whenever you are focussing more on thoughts than body – and just come back to focussing on the movement in your body’ etc. End with a complete lap at slow speed.

Then sit back down and ask for feedback. How was the monkey mind during this practice?

6. Daily mindlessness and mindfulness [slide 13]

Daily mindlessness happens, for example, when we are in autopilot and barely noticing what we eat. The taste, smell, texture and temperature are largely missed. Emphasise the idea that mindfulness is something that applies to anything and everything we do, including having a shower, eating, etc.

7. Mindful eating: Raisin practice [slides 14–15]:

Introduce the idea of mindful eating, the opposite of mindless wolfing down of food. Tell the group you are going to ask them to eat something mindfully. Go round the group and give each participant a raisin but tell them not to eat it until you guide them to. (You can substitute raisins for another food, but avoid things that are likely to trigger anxiety in some people such as chocolate or high calorie foods). You can use the following script as guidance on how to lead this exercise:

When everyone has a raisin, ask them to look at it (sight). What do you notice? Colour? Appearance? What do you notice happening in your mouth – saliva being produced? What thoughts do you have about the raisin? Some common responses might include: ‘I hate raisins’ ‘This is weird’, etc. Just allow everything to be.

Now really explore the feel of the raisin (touch). Gently rub it, squeeze it. What do you notice about its texture? Can you stay with the sensation without creating a story or getting lost in thoughts? Then explore the aroma of the raisin (smell). Lift it to your nose and smell it. What do you notice? And again, what’s happening in your mouth?

Do raisins have a sound? (sound) Bring the raisin to your ear and squeeze it gently. Do you hear anything? And what do you notice your mind saying about doing this? (This part of the exercise often raises laughter and that is fine. Just carry on with the script.)

Now get ready to eat the raisin. Bring it slowly to your mouth and put it on your tongue but don’t bite or swallow. Just let it rest there for a few moments. What’s happening now in your mouth? Is there any taste? (Taste) Is there an impulse to chew?

Now slowly begin to chew the raisin; notice the feel, the taste, the smell; notice what your tongue is doing as you chew. Notice the urge to swallow, and when you are ready, go ahead and swallow the raisin. Now just notice how your tongue is moving around your mouth, cleaning up after you swallow the raisin.

When you have completely swallowed the raisin, just notice any thoughts, feelings that arise.

Ask for feedback from the group: what happened for you? What was the experience like? How is mindful eating different from mindless eating?

8. Summarising the group and home exercises

Now we have experience of formal and informal mindfulness.

The task for the coming week is to continue with formal mindfulness practice 3–5 times for around 15 minutes, either using scripts or recordings from *The Student Guide to Mindfulness*, or from another source, and add in at least one activity such as brushing teeth, eating lunch, having a shower that you will bring mindful attention to. One example from the book is the ‘tea ceremony’ described in Chapter 5 and could be used as a guide for some. Go round the group and get people to say what activity they intend to practice mindfully this week.

Week 3

Aims of this session:

* check-in with the group: how are they finding things? How are they getting on with formal practice? And informal?
* focus on thoughts as just thoughts: mindfulness as awareness
* longer formal practice.

1. Welcome! [slide 1]:

Spend some time checking in and allowing space for people to feed back on how they are finding things so far. What questions/doubts do they have? What has been enjoyable? Less so? Are they able to make the time to practice between sessions? What kind of thoughts/excuses do people find their minds producing for them when they think of sitting for some formal mindful practice? Get some feedback about the informal practice which people selected at the end of last session.

2. Review triune brain model [slides 2–7]:

Have the monkey toy visible again. Explore thoughts with the group. Some questions might include:

* Where do thoughts come from?
* Can we stop thoughts from occurring?
* What’s the difference between a thought and a dream?
* If I have a thought, does that mean it is ‘the truth’?

Often, people say that they ‘think too much’. However, our brains are always thinking – when we are awake we identify thoughts; when we are asleep we identify dreams. Thinking is what our minds do. To ‘stop thinking’ is a ‘dead person’s goal’.

Focus now on negative bias. We seem to have evolved to imagine the worst/believe the worst – some have a stronger negative bias than others. Often our thoughts are self-bullying/self-critical. We can get stuck in a rut of negative, unhelpful and unrealistic thinking. Ask the group: what kind of negative/unrealistic/unkind thoughts does your mind tend to produce for you about yourself?

Hand out stick-it notes and ask people to write one thought per note that is typical of the kind of thoughts they have about themselves. Stress that these will remain anonymous but will be seen by others in the group. Perhaps give a few examples to help them get started such as ‘I wish I was cleverer’, ‘I don’t have many friends’, etc. Emphasise that this is not about criticising anyone, but simply about becoming more familiar with their monkey mind.

After 5 minutes or so, collect the stick-it notes and put them up on a board and invite everyone to come and read them.

After that, ask people to sit down and give you feedback.

Why are we so self-critical? Are these thoughts ‘the truth’? If not, what are they?

Most of the time we are lost in our thoughts, cut off from the reality of what is going on around us. We become convinced that our thoughts *are* reality. Mindfulness invites us to notice our thoughts and see them as *just* thoughts – habits of the mind rather than the *truth*. Over time, as we sit and observe our monkey mind at work, we can allow these thoughts – we may not be able to stop them – and learn to let them be. Thoughts (and stories) can be very powerful, especially if we have rehearsed them over years. We need self-compassion as we recognise the way our monkey minds have been conditioned, and evolved with a negative bias. Also, we may need professional support if our stories are particularly negative and powerful.

Ask for feedback or if the group has any questions.

3. Introduce the concept of self-compassion [slide 8]:

Two ‘wings’ of *awakening*: mindfulness *and* self-compassion. We need both. What is self-compassion? Explain that self-compassion is being as kind to ourselves as we would be to a vulnerable child. This may take practice.

4. Longer formal meditation [slides 9–10]:

Use the script from Chapter 9 in *The Student Guide to Mindfulness* as a guide for a longer formal meditation. Take time to set this up: allow participants to make themselves comfortable, mobile phones on silent, and encourage them to *just notice* every time their mind creates a critical thought about themselves, others, the facilitator, etc. Just notice and then return to the meditation.

Ask for feedback or if anyone in the group has questions.

5. Home practice [slide 11]:

The task for the following week will be to read Chapters 5 or 7 of *The Student Guide to Mindfulness* on depression and anxiety, and Chapter 4 on self-compassion.

Encourage the group to continue in formal and informal practice and simply notice every time they recognise a self-denigrating/self-critical thought. Ask them to make a list of their ‘top 10’ obsessive/self-critical thoughts and to see this list as the result of habit/conditioning, rather than ‘the truth’.

Inform them that in the next session, you will start by recapping the previous week and allowing time for questions. You will also spend a longer time on informal and formal practice together.

Week 4

Aims of this session:

* review/consolidate the basics which have been introduced so far
* experience a mixed format mindfulness practice session
* think about how to develop mindfulness practice in the future (resources).

1. Welcome! [slide 1]

Keep attending to this, allowing some time at the beginning of the session to welcome the group and ask about their week, how their mindfulness practice has gone and to raise any queries. The people who are still coming now are clearly invested in the group and it is important to recognise and acknowledge their commitment.

2. Re-visit concept of self-compassion [slide 2–3]:

Underscore how important this is in the practice of mindfulness – without this, we may be discouraged by monkey mind and feel that we are no good at the practice. This is not a competition and it is not a self-improvement project; this is a way of waking up to what is already here and greeting it, as far as possible, with acceptance and compassion. This is quite counter-cultural. Many of the values of Western society emphasise pushing ourselves, striving to achieve more all the time, and our exposure to the internet can drive feelings of low self-esteem.

3. Short guided meditation [slides 4–5]:

This short guided meditation should last around 15 minutes. Use the script from the mindfulness exercise in Chapter 4 of ‘The Student Guide to Mindfulness’ as guidance. You can lengthen this, if you like, by guiding participants through a body-scan exercise first. Ask participants to simply notice their reaction to each of the statements as they silently repeat them in their own mind.

Take some feedback after the exercise: what came up for people? What did they notice? Is it easier to be compassionate to others? What feels like a useful belief to remind themselves of during the day?

4. Longer guided meditation [slides 5–6]:

Now lead a longer, 30-minute meditation (starting and ending with a bell) comprising of the following parts:

*Walking meditation (10 minutes)*

Use the walking meditation exercise in session 2 as guidance, a way into coming into the body, bringing attention to the body as it walks, balances, moves.

*Sitting meditation (20 minutes)*

Have 5 minutes meditation focusing on *sounds*, inside and outside the room. Sounds are like thoughts – they come and they go; we do not control them; some are pleasant, others unpleasant, others neutral. We sit and notice them – not trying to change or control them; letting go of any stories our minds create about the sounds we hear – just staying with the actual sounds themselves’.

Then spend 7 minutes focusing on *body*: a guided body-scan, and 8 minutes focusing on *breath*. During these final 8 minutes, allow participants to establish a focus in their body where their breath is most vivid and simply keep returning their focus every time their mind wanders. Just an occasional input from you to guide people back to their breath. Gently let people know (about 30 seconds before the end) that you are coming to a close. Use the sound of the bell to signal the meditation is over.

Allow some silence and then ask for feedback.

5. Taking your practice further [slides 8–9]:

It’s helpful to give participants a hand-out with some resources they can explore for developing their practice further. If there are local, on-campus groups that you can suggest that will be helpful. Some groups would like to continue to meet after the four initial sessions are over – this could be self-led, or if you are able to commit to leading a mindful half-hour once a week/once a fortnight that could also be useful. Point participants to the resources/ideas mentioned at the end of *The Student Guide to Mindfulness* and ask for any other suggestions that they may have.

Emphasise that the four-week group has simply been a toe in the water of mindfulness practice and that there is more to explore and experience. Reading is not a substitute for practice, but can be a very helpful addition.