**Mindfulness, blog by Silvia Riva, Mental Health First Aider**

In this month’s Mental Health First Aider blog we’re focusing on the theme of taking time to reflect. August is the perfect time to take some time to pause and reflect in preparation for the year ahead. Silvia Riva, Senior Lecturer in Psychology and St Mary's Mental Health First Aider, contributes this month's blog on the topic of Mindfulness.

Mindfulness, by Silva Riva

Mindfulness can be defined in many ways: it is a practice, a philosophy of life, an exercise that attracts more and more people and that brings together ideas and notions from meditation, psychology and yoga.

*The origins of mindfulness*

Mindfulness is about “full awareness”. This term is a translation of the Buddhist term *Vipassana* which means “meditation of awareness”, and it is an ancient practice within Indian religious tradition. Today, this practice has become more and more popular thanks to the contribution of the famous American clinicians Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn (University of Massachusetts) who first identified a way of reducing stress based on mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn’s contribution had an enormous effect on people because he founded a simple method that everybody could use to recover from stress and difficulties in life.

The best-known definition of Mindfulness is:

Mindfulness is the awareness that comes from paying attention - in the present moment, in an intentional and non-judgmental way - to the unfolding of the experience, moment after moment. (Jon Kabat-Zinn)

*What is Mindfulness?*

In simple words, Mindfulness is a way to train the mind. It is about learning to observe ourselves through our senses - not only in a mental/rational way. It is about learning to make contact with all the aspects of ourselves (pleasant and unpleasant) and what surrounds us, without the intention of changing ourselves. This is an essential principle of mindfulness and its most interesting, simple and difficult element at the same time.

In our everyday life, our minds are distracted — we are constantly thinking about life, worrying, about the past or the present, and imagining the future. Meditation brings us back to the present moment, and gives us the resources we need to reduce stress, and to be more serene and gentle with ourselves and others.

Approaching this practice means accepting our feelings, emotions and thoughts. It means taking note of things as they are, even when they cause us suffering and pain.

Research has shown this is a reliable method for reducing stress, both at home and at work.

As a Mental Health First Aider and psychologist, I have gained many benefits from Mindfulness practice. When I first started approaching this technique, I never imagined that I would experience such a variety of benefits:

1. You can become a more active listener, less distracted by thoughts on past, present or future concerns when you’re listening to others.
2. You learn to have a more profound sense of connection and appreciation for things and people around you.
3. You can recognise what you value most and what your goals for your life are.
4. You may be less irritated or angry about small problems. Mindfulness can help you to improve your ability to overcome problems, take a deep breath and see a new horizon to cope well with your issues.
5. You can also receive practical benefits in terms of every-day-life activities. The sense of connection and attention on yourself may help you to sleep better, eat healthier and adopt healthier behaviours for your life.

*Mindfulness @ work*

There are many strategies to cultivate mindfulness at work, from walking during a break to taking purposeful pauses when eating. One of the most reliable ways is simply meditation; essentially taking time for self-observation.

In this difficult period due to the pandemic, workdays can be organized using a mindful eye on your job, which can be an important source stress and anxiety. Paying attention to how you are feeling throughout the day can help you find better ways to manage feelings of stress or anxiety.

This period of online work at a distance can be a “consuming context”, with emails, virtual chat tools and social media constantly competing for our attention, and often eating into the hours we would normally have a pause.

If you are interested in trying Mindfulness, there are many books and digital resources that describe the different ways that help us develop this type of awareness:

Useful resources to practice Mindfulness (UK):

* <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/mindfulness/>
* <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/drugs-and-treatments/mindfulness/about-mindfulness/>

Other resources (International)

* <https://www.mindful.org/>
* <http://www.freemindfulness.org/>

Apps for practicing Mindfulness

* <https://positivepsychology.com/mindfulness-apps/>