Mindfulness in the Time of Coronavirus Epidemic

Manual

Organised by: PandA
Jockey Club “Peace and Awareness” Mindfulness Culture in Schools Initiative

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Preface

Jon Kabat-Zinn, a renowned mindfulness teacher once said, “You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.” This is a positive way to cope with adversity. Today, as we face the coronavirus epidemic, we have to stay cautious and vigilant. Many of us may feel panic, angry, and helpless in fighting against the epidemic. Kabat-Zinn’s words are particularly meaningful in the present moment when many of us have to stay home during the class suspension and office closure. Instead of cocooning in panic, why not start taking good care of ourselves through practising mindfulness? The great surge has already been built, let’s learn how to surf!

For thousands of years, mindfulness had been practised in different religious and spiritual traditions. For Buddhists, it is “Zen” and “Sati.” For Catholics, it is “Hesychasm.” For Christians, it is “Spirituality Formation.” For Taoists, it is “Sitting Meditation.” Confucianism is not a religion but it also has teaching in mindfulness practice. In the past, mindfulness practitioners did not conduct empirical research to prove the effectiveness of mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn is a pioneer in studying mindfulness with modern scientific approaches. He found that mindfulness practices helped to relieve anxiety and chronic pain. Later, it was discovered that mindfulness could treat depression and diseases of the immune system, and could even increase antibodies against influenza in saliva. Mindfulness is not a panacea. It certainly cannot cure the coronavirus disease. Nevertheless, in the helpless days of home quarantine, mindfulness practices might be beneficial for emotional regulation and self-care.
Content of the Package

The Jockey Club “Peace and Awareness” Mindfulness Culture in Schools Initiative (JC PandA) hosted by the Faculty of Social Sciences of The University of Hong Kong has developed this resources packages. The package includes a manual and audio guides of four 5-minute mindfulness practices. Both English and Putonghua versions are available.

1. Mindful Stretching
2. Mindful Sitting
3. Body Scan
4. Three-step Breathing Space

How to use the package?

A common way to learn mindfulness is by taking an 8-week mindfulness course, such as the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), Mindfulness Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) or .b Foundations, etc. Before having the opportunity to take formal mindfulness courses, we can still create mindfulness space by following the audio guides on mindfulness practices.

We recommend that beginners practise according to the sequence of the audio guides in the package. It is easy to start with Mindful Stretching, a practice with concrete body movement. If you have trouble in falling asleep due to anxiety, Body Scan may be helpful.
Preparations before Practice

Please scan the QR code or click the link below to obtain mindfulness practice audio guides:

www.jcpanda.hk/ms2020/en

Venue
Please find a quiet place to practise at home. If your family is also interested, you may invite them to practise together. One of the best ways to avoid interruption from children is to practise together with them as a game.

Sitting posture
We usually sit for mindfulness practice, but it is not necessary to sit cross-legged on a cushion or floor. In fact, sitting on a chair is a common posture. However, it is important to pay attention to the posture while sitting. Please sit away from the backrest so that you can sit comfortably with the spine naturally upright. Please refer to the diagram below.

Yoga mat
To practise Body Scan, you may lie down on a bed or a yoga mat. Please make sure that the yoga mat is laid safely on a flat surface.
Frequently Asked Questions about Mindfulness

What is mindfulness?
Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally. It is the attention to the internal and external experience of the present moment. An internal experience can be your breath, bodily sensations, emotions and thoughts. An external experience can be the surrounding environment, people and things. Mindfulness is “being mindful” to the present experiences without preconception or judgement. Being judgmental would elicit emotional interference, hence we would not be able to calm down and observe clearly.

Is mindfulness practice the same as emptying the mind or stop thinking?
Being mindful is not emptying the mind. During mindfulness practice, we pay full attention to a specific target. It can be the breath, bodily sensations, emotions, thoughts or difficulties encountered, and it won’t be nothing. We are not “mindless” but “mindful.” However, if we pay attention judgmentally, it is easy for us to become biased and emotional, and that we cannot see and think clearly. Mindfulness is composed of three elements A, B, and C. A is Awareness. B is Being. C is Choice. Being aware of the present moment non-judgmentally is a way to calm ourselves down. Therefore, we can see the reality and make the right choice with wisdom. A Chinese Confucian Classic “The Great Learning (Da Xue)” offers similar notion of ABC: “When you know where to stop, you have stability. When you have stability, you can be tranquil. When you are tranquil, you can be at ease. When you are at ease, you can deliberate. When you can deliberate you can attain your aims.” Only if one is calm will he think clearly and make the best decisions.

Why practise mindfulness?
There are different reasons for people to practice mindfulness. Some enjoy practising mindfulness as it offers space to pause and breathe in a busy day. Studies revealed that attending a formal 8-week mindfulness course helps coping with anxiety, stress and depression, etc. Other research studies found evidences that practising mindfulness boosts one’s positivity and kindness. Furthermore, some found that mindfulness practice improves attention, memory, learning ability as well as music and athletic performance. This resources package is not a formal 8-week mindfulness course. It offers only audio guides of short mindfulness practices. As such, the positive effects might not be as powerful as mentioned in the research findings. Nonetheless, the short practices provide practical guides and offer some resting time for us to calm down and take good self-care.
Is mindfulness zen practice in Buddhism?
The practices provided in this resources package are non-religious. Different religions may have their own mindfulness practice. For example, Buddhists refer mindfulness as “Zen” or “Sati” while Catholics and Christians refer it as “Hesychasm” or “Spiritual Formation.” Some Christians and Catholics would practise mindfulness to calm their mind before praying. As such, one does not need to view mindfulness as exclusive to a particular religion. In fact, mindfulness is a cultural heritage shared by different races, cultures, and spiritualties for thousands of years.

Is mindfulness sitting meditation?
There are many forms of mindfulness practices. Sitting meditation is one of them. You can practise mindfulness sitting, standing or even lying down. Mindful Stretching is also included in this resources package. You may learn more forms of practices in an 8-week mindfulness course.

Are mindfulness practices just a way of relaxation?
Although mindfulness practices do help us relax, that is not the only purpose they serve. In fact, mindfulness is also a life attitude which helps us learn to live in the present moment, to enjoy and appreciate the good things in life, and to respond skillfully to the difficulties we may encounter. However, what we provide in the current resources package is some short mindfulness practices that do not go deep to the level of life attitude. A formal 8-week courses will explain more on how mindfulness practices offer not just relaxation but transcends into a life attitude.

Does the longer the mindfulness practice have the better outcome?
Some may enjoy doing a 40-minute mindfulness practice every day, others may prefer joining a week-long mindfulness retreat and practise continuously throughout the entire retreat. For beginners, we recommend starting from short practices. We offer practices of 5 or 6 minutes, or even 3 minutes. Actually, short practices can be effective. For example, the Three-step Breathing Space is short but still has the calming effect. Nonetheless, it takes practices to reach the desired outcome. Practising mindfulness is similar to learning any sports: regular practices lead to better outcome.

If I want to try longer practice, where can I get the audio guides?
You may get the free audio guides by Professor Mark Williams from http://franticworld.com/free-meditations-from-mindfulness/

Is practising mindfulness safe?
Like most sports, the benefits of mindfulness are best achieved through progressive practices. If you have not tried mindfulness before or feel vulnerable at the moment, we do not recommend you to undergo long or intensive mindfulness practices. In general, short practices allow you to explore mindfulness safely. Nonetheless, if you feel uncomfortable during the practice, please do not continue.
Are mindfulness practices suitable for everyone?
Although the mindfulness practices we offer are not long and are quite safe, mindfulness practices are not for everyone. For example, for those who have experienced trauma, the traumatic memories may flash back during mindfulness practice. In this case, insisting on practising does not help. Even if they wish to continue, they should only keep practising under the supervision of a mindfulness teacher with psychotherapy training and experience.

What should I do if I can't concentrate while practising mindfulness?
It is normal if your mind wanders. When your mind wanders, please do not blame yourself or think that you have done something wrong. Being aware of your wandering mind is also an awareness! You should celebrate your achievement. When you find yourself getting distracted, please be aware of where your mind has gone, then gently but firmly bring it back to your focus of attention. No matter how frequent you are distracted, you simply bring it back to the present moment. With repeated practices, you will learn to embrace yourself with an accepting, open, loving and firm attitude.

What if I feel bored and irritated while practising mindfulness?
If you feel bored and irritated during practice, please pay attention to your feeling at the moment. See if you can observe the anxious feeling without trying to get rid of it. Please breathe with the feeling without judgement. This is a great opportunity to experience how to focus at the present non-judgmentally with love and firmness.

What if I feel sad while practising mindfulness?
If you feel sad while practising mindfulness, please observe these feelings with love and acceptance. However, if these feelings are too intense that the practices do not help, please do not continue. More importantly, if you are facing huge difficulties, please talk to someone, may it be your friends, family members or helping professionals. Please share and don't bear it alone. Having a companion is helpful.

If I want to learn more about mindfulness, what books can I read?


I would like to participate in the free courses and events hosted by the Jockey Club “Peace and Awareness” Mindfulness Culture in Schools Initiative (JC PandA). Whom should I contact with?
Please write to us (jcpanda@hku.hk) and we will put your email address on our contact list. You will be notified when we offer free courses and events.
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