



## Why I . . . teach mindfulness

Newcastle based GP and coach Lucy Harrison tells **Helen Jones** how teaching and practising mindfulness has helped her support other doctors and provide better patient care

Helen Jones

London, UK

Lucy Harrison was first prompted to research mindfulness when she experienced recurring depression. “There is an evolving and impressive neuroscientific background on its effectiveness, so in 2015 I signed up for a local eight week course,” she says.

The results were striking. “It was beyond what I had been expecting,” she says. “I became less prone to rumination and had less fear of relapsing into depression. I was kinder and more compassionate towards myself and I opened up to the more joyful aspects of life, which I had neglected.”

Harrison now regularly practises mindfulness by carrying out formal sitting practice—often described as meditation—for 20 minutes or so, four times a week. She supplements this with mini practices or breathing spaces of about three minutes, once a day.

These, along with informal mindfulness such as “paying close attention to activities such as brushing my teeth or being aware of nature when I’m outside,” are useful in times of stress and potential relapse, she says. “Inevitably, practice waxes and wanes a little,” she adds. “It’s important to recognise when it becomes difficult, not to be too self critical, and just start again.”

Harrison believes that, as well as helping her to manage her mental health, mindfulness gives her the ability to detect work stresses early on and to identify their cause.

“It has given me a sense of enhanced wellbeing and I bring a more balanced, calm approach to work,” she says.

Harrison also believes that mindfulness has helped improve her relationships with patients. “Certainly, I find encounters more rewarding and I hope patients feel that they have been listened to,” she says.

Harrison now runs mindfulness courses for other doctors. She specialises in mindfulness based cognitive therapy, having completed a masters in the therapy at the University of Oxford.

“I naturally gravitated towards training doctors,” she says. “My own mental illness started at medical school and has affected my career. I understand the pressures of trying to work as a doctor with a mental health condition and the stigma that comes with it.”

So far she has trained over 60 doctors from a range of specialties. Around a third come to her with a clinical need, such as burnout, stress, or anxiety. The remainder include trainees looking for tools they can use in their future careers and doctors who are simply curious. “Most of the people who attend arrive by word of mouth—usually because a colleague has talked about the benefits,” she says.

In an increasingly demanding work environment, Harrison says that what she has learnt from mindfulness could benefit lots of doctors. “There’s a tendency to just put your head down, hope it will go away, and see the next patient,” she adds. “In mindfulness we use the analogy of an oxygen mask—we have to put ours on first. It’s important for us as doctors to look after ourselves in order to best serve our patients.”

### How to introduce mindfulness into your life

- Use an app such as Headspace or Calm to talk you through mindfulness exercises
- Try a self directed course, for example, *Mindfulness: Finding peace in a frantic world* available in print and as an audiobook
- Go on a group based public course. Try <https://bemindful.co.uk> for a course near you
- Look out for group based doctors’ courses

For more information visit [www.mbct-northeast.co.uk](http://www.mbct-northeast.co.uk)

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