



# Health Promotion and Mindfulness

A joint paper from the Mindfulness Initiative  
and the Institute of Health Promotion and  
Education

## Concepts of Health and Wellbeing

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Definitions of health have changed over time. Perceptions differ substantially across and within societies: ideas about health are cultural. There is considerable literature on the concepts of health and their meanings to different people. Lay and professional views can vary.

A widely quoted definition can be found in the constitution of the World Health Organisation:

**“Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.”** *WHO, 1946*

This definition has been praised because it provides a holistic view of health - crucially, incorporating mental and social elements. However, it is important to note that it has also been criticised, for example, for implying that health is a static position to be reached.

There are several reasons why it is important to look at different perceptions of health, so that we may have a better understanding of why people behave in certain ways, and because it has implications for the way practitioners undertake health promotion.

## International Health Promotion Declarations and Charters

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Over many decades, declarations and charters have clearly created a vision and focus for [health promotion](#). A seminal document is the [Ottawa Charter](#) (1986) and it produced a [definition of health promotion](#) that has been widely adopted:

**“Health promotion is the process of enabling people to increase control over, and to improve, their health.”** *WHO, 1986*

The Charter lists five action areas central to the conceptual framework of health promotion:

1. Build healthy public policy.
2. Create supportive environments.
3. Strengthen community action.
4. Develop personal skills.
5. Reorient health services.

This shifted the focus upstream away from merely concentrating on individuals who are ill and towards organisations, systems and the environment that can be used to prevent ill-health and promote health.

Supportive environments are about influencing our living and working conditions in order to maintain and promote health. The settings approach was given a substantial boost by the [Ottawa Charter](#) and, internationally, examples of a wide range of settings can now be found including health promoting schools, health promoting workplaces, and health promoting hospitals.

The influential [Jakarta Declaration \(1997\)](#) states:

**“Health is a basic human right and is essential for social and economic development.”**

Important principles running through the international declarations and charters and seen as central to health promotion practice are:

- Equity
- Empowerment
- Participation

Health promotion should not concentrate on individually focused activities without also addressing the underlying social determinants. Health promoting environments help to empower individuals and communities to act. Therefore, it is vital to invest in settings-based health promotion, to reach marginalised communities in places such as prisons, asylum centres and low-income neighbourhoods.

## Levels of Intervention

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Preventative activity can take place on three levels:

### Primary

Preventing ill health arising.

### Secondary

Directed at people who are already ill, to prevent ill health progressing. It may restore people to their former state.

### Tertiary

Directed at people who cannot be cured or restored. This is concerned with helping patients and their carers make the most of their potential for healthy living.

## Mindfulness

Mindfulness is a mode of awareness that is natural and trainable. It can help to bring attention and awareness to all experiences with ourselves, with others and with nature in a compassionate way. The ensuing relationships form the bedrock of our behaviour towards the world and underpin our [agency](#) to effect meaningful change.

### Mindfulness definitions:

**"I define mindfulness as the practice of being fully present and alive, body and mind united. Mindfulness is the energy that helps us to know what is going on in the present moment."** Thich Nhat Hanh

**"...Instead of being on automatic and mindless, mindfulness helps us awaken, and by reflecting on the mind we are enabled to make choices and thus change becomes possible."** Daniel Siegel

[Mindfulness research has continued to grow exponentially](#) over recent decades. In 2015, the Mindfulness All Party Parliamentary Group (MAPPG) [reported on the evidence](#) for mindfulness, making recommendations for implementation, resourcing and further research across different sectors.

In 2022, The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) updated recommendations for the use of mindfulness for [mild, as well as recurrent, depression](#) and also its value in improving [wellbeing in the workplace](#).

Neuroscience research has identified [four 'core dimensions' of emotional wellbeing](#), trainable aspects that result in positive changes in the brain through neuroplasticity. This work provides evidence of the mechanisms through which mindfulness and related qualities enable human wellbeing and health.

Trainable dimension of emotional wellbeing	Definition
1. Awareness, or mindfulness	<i>'A heightened and flexible attentiveness to perceptual impressions in one's environment and internal cues, such as bodily sensations, thoughts, and emotions.'</i>
2. Connection	<i>'A subjective sense of care and kinship that promotes supportive relationships and caring interactions.'</i>
3. Insight	<i>'Self-knowledge concerning the manner in which emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and other factors are shaping one's subjective experience and sense of self.'</i>
4. Purpose	<i>'Clarity concerning personally meaningful aims and values that one is able to apply in daily life.'</i>

Mindfulness training is offered in a variety of formats, of varying intensity, with the most extensively researched interventions being Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). Aspects of mindfulness are also found in other widely used psychological interventions such as Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT) and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

## Mindfulness and Health

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It is increasingly clear that health promotion is intricately linked to a sustainable future. [The Shanghai Declaration](#) on promoting health for Sustainable Development addresses this global vision for health promotion in the 2030 Agenda. Public health can no longer be considered separate from planetary health. With critical challenges affecting health across the world, especially those resulting from the [climate emergency](#), the key qualities of mindfulness, such as [the development of agency](#) and [re-connection to ourselves and the environment](#), may provide the vital inner changes essential for us to respond effectively.

In addition to [contributing to social change](#) and the creation of supportive environments and communities, mindfulness can help empower individuals to [better manage their own health](#). This could provide an important component of preventative approaches centred around 'personalised care,' such as '[supported self-management](#)', a developing area in the UK, with a move towards forming part of the [long-term plan](#) for the National Health Service.

Connection is a critical dimension of emotional wellbeing and an important factor for [longevity](#). Mindfulness can deepen the sense of [connection to other people, living things and nature](#), mitigating [the toxic impact of loneliness on health](#), which has recently been highlighted by the [US Surgeon General](#).

Stress reduction is one of the most robustly evidenced impacts of mindfulness, and thus logic suggests that any condition caused or exacerbated by stress could potentially benefit from practice. Early research has focused on the management of long-term conditions such as [chronic pain](#), [IBS](#) and [cancer](#). There are many trials underway into the value of mindfulness-based interventions for a [range of other illnesses](#), for example the [Mindfulness Center at Brown University's work on hypertension](#). Mindfulness-based interventions are effective in improving [mental health and wellbeing](#) and have been shown to improve health outcomes [across a range of clinical and non-clinical populations](#). The Oxford Mindfulness Centre provides updates of resources including [key research findings](#).

Mindfulness can add considerable value to the promotion of good health and wellbeing, impacting all 3 levels of health intervention, from prevention to the management of long-term conditions. As a primary intervention, mindfulness practice has the potential to improve important [health behaviours](#), including healthy eating, good sleep and physical activity, in addition to reducing reliance on [medication and health services](#).

Interestingly, research is also demonstrating [changes in gene expression and epigenetics](#) with mindfulness practice, including the expression of inflammatory markers. With many diseases linked to chronic inflammation, these are encouraging findings. However, robust research needs to be funded, and has been recommended, for example, by [NICE in the field of pain management and relief](#).

There is also evidence of benefit across the lifespan. Given the strong evidence base of the criticality of [‘the first 1001 days’](#) development period, it is encouraging to see evidence of benefit of mindfulness interventions in pregnancy, with [long-term impact on both maternal and child health](#). At the other end of life, the neuroscientific findings that mindfulness-related interventions could reduce [stress in dementia and age-related cognitive decline](#), warrant further investigation.

Participants of mindfulness courses report the helpful management of the fear and uncertainty of a difficult diagnosis, through compassionate acceptance and “friendly curiosity”. Arguably, one of the most important facets of mindfulness is that it offers [tools to navigate suffering](#). It can therefore also be very supportive during investigative procedures and difficult treatment regimens, such as chemotherapy.

It is important to note, however, that mindfulness is not a panacea or a “one size fits all” approach. More research is needed to work out what works best for whom and where adaptations may be needed.

It is also important to recognise that mindfulness interventions might sometimes only reach the people who have the resources, time and social circumstances to make use of the initiatives and to take action. As a society, this could lead to widening inequalities. Hence there is a [new drive to guide innovation in practice](#) to reach diverse communities and conditions and to test the effectiveness of apps, online, recorded and book-based models. NICE recommendations to include mindfulness-based interventions in the treatment options offered by the NHS to patients, also extend benefits to the communities who experience the greatest health inequalities.

A recent [review](#) highlights that “both mindfulness and public health initiatives are in need of efforts to promote intercultural, interreligious, and inter-contemplative competencies, in developing interventions to address pathogenic factors in the collective attentional environments in society.” Interventions must continue to develop an inclusive approach, which embraces the rich diversity of society and ‘do no harm.’

In the UK, the British Association of Mindfulness-Based Approaches (BAMBA) produces [good practice guidance](#) for mindfulness teachers and registration for those engaged in regular continuing professional development, supervision, attendance on retreats, and with insurance. As new mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) emerge, experts within BAMBA assess alignment with the evidence base, including daily practice requirements.

## Summary

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Mindfulness, a human capacity, can help achieve recommendations for health promotion made in the Ottawa Charter, through reconnection to ourselves, each other and the world, enabling the development of agency and pro-social behaviour. The empowerment of individuals, communities, and policy makers could help to bring about much needed change to ensure a sustainable future. However, there is an ongoing need for advocating, enabling, and mediating by health promoting coalitions, as defined in the Charter.

Given the 'urgent times' we are currently experiencing, access to evidence-based mindfulness interventions, with ongoing research in-situ, should be resourced to widen access. Particular care should be taken to ensure that existing inequalities are reduced and not widened due to lack of accessibility, cultural adaptation or affordability.

There is an ongoing need for these interventions to be advocated, enabled, and shared more widely. Implemented in the right way, mindfulness could be both foundational and transformational in its impact on global health and wellbeing.



## Recommendations

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1. MBCT (Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy) should be provided in all areas by the NHS, in line with NICE guidelines.
2. NICE should consider the evidence for how the qualities that mindfulness can strengthen could help support a range of public health issues across the lifespan. Individual issues, from diagnosis onwards, and multimorbidity should be examined.
3. Research funding should be identified to develop the evidence base for mindfulness-based interventions to support health and wellbeing across different communities, with priority for those experiencing greatest health inequalities.
4. Appropriate forms of mindfulness training should be developed to reach different communities, in partnership with those communities.
5. Supportive environments should be created. These would comprise dedicated space, training, and management backing for mindfulness practice. Health promoting settings, for example schools, workplaces, and local community centres, should be encouraged.

## About The Mindfulness Initiative

The Mindfulness Initiative grew out of a programme of mindfulness teaching for politicians in the UK Parliament.

We work with legislators around the world who practise mindfulness and help them to make capacities of heart and mind serious considerations of public policy. We investigate the benefits, limitations, opportunities and challenges in accessing and implementing mindfulness training and educate leaders, service-commissioners and the general public based on these findings. Visit [www.themindfulnessinitiative.org](http://www.themindfulnessinitiative.org) to find out more.

## About the Institute of Health Promotion and Education

IHPE is a charitable organisation whose membership consists of Health Promotion and Education professionals and academics from public, private, and voluntary sectors. It has a proven track record of influencing policy and has been at the forefront of developments in Health Education and Health Promotion since 1962.

Visit [www.ihpe.org.uk](http://www.ihpe.org.uk) to find out more.

## Getting in touch

If you have any questions, suggestions or other feedback on this document please get in touch by emailing [info@mindfulnessinitiative.org.uk](mailto:info@mindfulnessinitiative.org.uk).

## Supporting our work

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