

Can mindfulness practices help us lead more creative lives?

Clare Barton-Harvey, an artist, tutor and freelance workshop leader, explores mindfulness and creativity.

Mindfulness practice involves becoming more aware of our experience in the present moment. We can learn to become aware of our body, how we feel (both physically and emotionally), our thoughts, imagination and how we respond or react to each moment in life.

When we become more aware of our experience, a freshness of perception can arise as well as a process of discovery moment by moment. We have never actually lived this moment before and by creating pauses in our everyday life we can connect to the wonder of that, and consequently the wonder of all life.

Mindfulness and creativity are intimately linked. We can think of creativity as something we (or other people) 'do', but it can also be regarded as a state of mind or way of 'being'.

When the mind is functioning creatively, we are open to learning rather than being dominated by habitual or routine ways of thinking and feeling.

Mindfulness practices give us the opportunity to create spaces in our day when we consciously suspend habitual/routine ways of thinking and step into a more open inquiry of how our experience actually is, free from assumptions.

Engaging mindfulness with art can be very enriching. Guided Mindful or Slow Looking can help us to see and appreciate individual artworks more clearly and fully. In this practice we not only spend time looking and seeing the artwork afresh, but also listen to our responses and learn to trust them

so that we can discover our own relationship to the artwork and any meaning or significance it may hold for us.

Guided mindful writing and drawing exercises can take this one step further by creating a context for us to let our own creative interests and directions unfold in response to the artwork.

There are many ways of practising mindfulness and it is an activity that everyone can do.

It's not a matter of whether you are any good at it or not, it's about discovering which mindfulness practices work best for you, be that seated mindfulness meditation, mindful walking, drawing, eating, looking.

It's also worth considering that some environmental conditions may be more supportive for you e.g. a particular place or time of day.

Over the years, mindfulness has become one of the most effective ways for me to access new perspectives, energy and inspiration for my creative work and my life generally. I highly recommend giving it a go.

Try this at home: Slow Looking

Find an object around your house or garden that you find interesting and that is small enough to hold in your hand, e.g. a pine cone, rock, flower, piece of scrunched up paper(!), and set aside 10 minutes in a quiet place where you won't be interrupted.

1. Pick up your object and spend 5 mins looking at it and 'taking it in'. Feel free to move the object around in your hands, looking at it from a variety of directions, notice colours, patterns, shapes, textures etc.

If your mind wanders off then bring your attention back to the object that you're looking at. Don't try too hard.

If you notice yourself tensing up, consciously encourage your body to relax, connect to your breath and encourage the tension to release on the out breath. Then look again at your object, letting your eyes move freely over it in any direction.

2. Notice if you start to get bored or if your attention skips off elsewhere and if this happens very gently and firmly bring your attention back to your object. Approach your object with the attitude that you have never seen it before

3. Does your perception of what you are looking at remain the same? Does it change? If so, in what ways?

4. After approximately 5 minutes close your eyes and become aware of the whole of your body, breathe into the whole of your body and encourage yourself to let go of any unnecessary tension. After a few breaths, open your eyes and note down anything that you learnt.