

Weston Park Cancer Charity Podcast

Episode 3 – Mindfulness

Ruby Osborn: Hello and welcome to the Weston Park Cancer Charity Podcast, sharing stories about our work, what we do, and the people we support. From funding life-saving research to providing practical help and emotional support, it's our job to care in every sense for our patients and their families. I'm Ruby, and in today's episode I'm talking to one of our healthcare professionals about mindfulness, what it is, and how it can help people affected by cancer. Plus, we'll have a mini mindfulness taster.

Fran Ball: My name is Frances Ball. I work for Weston Park Cancer Charity as an information and support nurse.

Ruby: Well, let's start at the beginning, what is mindfulness?

Fran: Well, mindfulness is a tool, really, for people to use as a way of helping them to bring themselves into the present moment. Basically, it's about being in the here and now, with the "what is" rather than the "what if." Most the time we spend either thinking about, you know, what's further down the road in the future or dwelling on the past, and when we find ourselves in either of those camps that can often bring anxiety, depression, fear, so it's really it's a kind of grounding tool to bring our mind, bring our busy minds, down into our five senses, into what's present, what's actually happening right now.

Ruby: Who might find it useful? Who would benefit from mindfulness?

Fran: I think most people find some benefit from it. It's basically, you know, a very natural way of being for most people. Children are naturally mindful, you know, when they're playing that's what they're doing, they're really focused on their play. I think most people can get some benefit from it because there are different ways of practising it. It might be something that we encourage people to do whilst out walking. It can be something that you can integrate into your life in a very natural way, so for example if you're having to go for a hospital appointment it can be something that you can practise whilst you're in the waiting room, or it can be like a practise where you say, "I'm going to sit down for half an hour a day before I get involved in the day," so you could approach it from different levels according to what suits you really. And that's what I always try and aim to do with clients who come to the centre really, is find out a bit about them and where they're at, what would work best for them.

Ruby: And so people who are affected by cancer, whether they're patients or whether it's one of their loved ones who's had the diagnosis, how can mindfulness help them?

Fran: I think fundamentally it just helps people with all the "what ifs," 'cause you know, as you are well aware, that, you know, when you've been diagnosed with cancer and you're really thrown onto this whirlwind journey where you're waiting around for test results, it's a kind of conveyor belt of, you know, ongoing anxious

stressful events, that you feel like they're out of your control. And I think mindfulness just helps with all the "what ifs," that the lying awake at night, thinking into the future. It's a really helpful tool and I've seen how it's worked really effectively for a lot of people. It just helps to, you know, when the mind spirals into all the stories that we tell ourselves in our head about what we think is going to happen next, it helps take the edge off some of that. Certainly with anxiety it can really help just bring it down a notch or two. And also for people who dwelling a lot on the past or thinking "why me," "what's happening to me," "I wish I'd gone to the GP before," you know, people can be often plagued with those kind of thoughts, and I think it just helps those kind of people too. So really the focus is about being with the "what is," "well, what is happening right now," "what can I do right now to help myself in this situation that I find myself in" rather than thinking ahead of myself like "what's going to happen next month or in six months time."

Ruby: So if someone is listening to this and they've got a cancer diagnosis themselves, or someone in their family, and they think that mindfulness might help them, how can they access it?

Fran: They can give us a ring. Our telephone number is 0114 553 3330 and that will get them in touch with one of the helpline nurses and they should then be able to contact me. So we can either organise a one-to-one session, often that's really helpful, you know, if people have never practised mindfulness before or they or they just want to know a bit more about it, a bit more detail of how it might benefit them, then that can be useful just for a one to one mindfulness session. I do do up to four sessions with people. We also have course that we run, a mindfulness course, which is a six week course, that's run by one of my colleagues Diane Walker, who's a mindfulness practitioner. And also from that we have a follow up mindfulness group which, if people have really got benefit from doing the mindfulness course, there is the option to carry on and have top up sessions then every two weeks, 'cause it's one of those things, it sounds very simple on paper but it's not necessarily easy to do, and I think sometimes having that kind of group support to do it gives you that bit of encouragement, so we do have that ongoing support to offer people.

Ruby: The fact that there's a course and multiple sessions and then the option of a follow up, is mindfulness something that you can get better at and that you need to keep practising?

Fran: Definitely. It is a practise, and it's a bit like, I suppose, going to the gym, you know, the more that you work out the stronger your muscles get and it's the same with your mind that the more that we practise something the better we get at it. So yes, I would say it is a practise and that's why it's really good to have other people or groups that you can connect with to give you that kind of support.

Ruby: Is there anything that people need to know before they come to a mindfulness session?

Fran: I would say not particularly because how I operate with mindfulness is people often come and they haven't got a clue what it's about and whether it's gonna work for them, and often part of that first session is just getting to know the person. It might be that they feel that it's not for them and it's not appropriate, but it might have been really helpful for them to come and have had a chat with me 'cause then we can then look at what other things might be helpful for them, be it doing some exercise or looking at their diet or just looking at their lifestyle in general, or their social and situation. So, so many things can come out of that first session that are really helpful for people and they're not always about mindfulness.

Ruby: Thank you for listening to this episode of the Weston Park Cancer Charity Podcast, that's all from me, but if you want to give mindfulness a go, Fran will now guide us through a short session.

Fran: Let's get started. Find yourself a comfortable position and closing the eyes if that feels okay. Let's just begin by checking in with the body, adjusting your position if you need to, bringing into your mind's eye the whole of the body, right from the crown of the head down to the tips of the toes. Noticing the support from the chair and the ground beneath your feet, noticing the sensation of contact with the ground, and giving yourself over to the support of the chair, allowing the body to rest. Now, let's take our attention to the breath, tuning in to the sensation of breathing. Notice the rise of the belly on the inbreath, and observing how the body relaxes down towards the chair on the outbreath. You don't have to manipulate the breath in anyway, it's simply about noticing the felt sensations in the body and you breathe in and out. Following the natural flow of air in, and following the breath out. You may notice the coolness of the air as you breathe in, and the warmth of the air as you breathe out. So allowing your full attention to rest on the rhythm and flow of your breath. Gentle rise of the belly on the inbreath and observing how the body relaxes down on the outbreath. And now once again moving away from the breath and broadening that attention out once again to incorporate the whole of the body, feeling the support of the chair and the contact with the ground beneath the soles of the feet. Having a sense of the body as a whole. Allowing your attention to rest here for a few more moments. Now opening the eyes, having a stretch if you need to. Thank you.