

# **REVISED PROOF**

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Danny Penman is a qualified meditation teacher and an award-winning writer and journalist. He currently writes features for the *Daily Mail*, having previously worked for the BBC, *New Scientist* and the *Independent* newspaper. He is co-author of the bestselling *Mindfulness: A Practical Guide to Finding Peace in a Frantic World*. He has received journalism awards from the RSPCA and the Humane Society of the United States. In 2014, he won the British Medical Association's Best Book (Popular Medicine) Award for *Mindfulness for Health: A Practical Guide to Relieving Pain, Reducing Stress and Restoring Wellbeing* (cowritten with Vidyamala Burch). His books have been translated into more than 25 languages.



# CHAPTER ONE

# Hole in the Head

The buzz of creativity always hit Jess around 10 a.m. For some reason, she'd spend the first hour or so of each day batting away pointless emails and staring blankly out of the window. But then her mind would suddenly clear, almost as if a veil had been lifted from her awareness. She'd straighten up in her chair, her pupils would dilate and she'd feel tingly all over. After a sigh, she'd begin typing furiously.

Nothing compared to that magical hour when everything flowed quite naturally. She didn't consciously think or plan. The words seemed to pour through her fingers and on to the computer screen. All of her fears, worries and problems simply melted away, leaving her in complete control of her life and work.

But then something would shatter her concentration: the phone would ring, a text would arrive or a 'vital' email would flash on to her screen. The veil would then draw across her mind and that would be the end of her creativity for the day.

Why can't I just think clearly like that all of the time? she'd snap at herself when her creative bubble had just burst. Resentment would begin gnawing away at her soul. Clearly I am creative. Nobody achieves as much as me when I'm in the flow. I do more in that hour than the rest of the day put together ... Even if I could work and be as creative as that for just another hour or two each day, then life would be so much better. I'd get a pay rise. I could get a decent car, maybe a house ...

Jess would then sigh before starting to deal with the pointless dross that cluttered up her workday as a copywriter for a marketing agency.

It's not just copywriters who battle against the mental clutter that destroys their creativity. We all do. And it comes at a huge but largely hidden price. Designers and engineers fail to see cheap and elegant solutions to problems. Doctors miss subtle but important symptoms that cost patients their lives. Managers and entrepreneurs are too frazzled to take advantage of evolving markets. Writers, artists and performers fail to connect with their audiences' souls. Even those who work from home inadvertently strangle their own productivity by forcing themselves into a creative black hole.

This is a book about how you can enhance your own creativity and retake control of your life. It will teach you how to sweep away the barriers that are clouding your mind and throttling your creativity. It will help you make better decisions and deal more effectively with problems. In short, it will help to extend your own magical hour of creativity into two, three or four hours... or perhaps into whole days. The techniques aren't only



used by 'creatives', but also by major businesses such as Apple, Google, and Intel Financiers at J.P. Morgan, HSBC and Deutsche Bank have adopted them to help them make better decisions. Even the US Marines use them. Truth is, we're all creatives now – whether we want to be or not.

To enhance creativity and problem solving you need to cultivate three skills. Firstly, you need an open but disciplined mind that can gather and then integrate new ideas, concepts and information. This is known as 'divergent thinking' and it happens on both the conscious and unconscious levels. Secondly, you need to consciously notice the new ideas created by your mind and to realise their significance (otherwise they will simply pass you by). And thirdly, you need the courage to follow your ideas wherever they should lead – and the resilience to cope with the inevitable attacks and setbacks.

The practices in the following pages foster all three skills. They are based on ancient traditions dating back at least 2500 years, and were originally developed by the Stoic philosophers of ancient Greece and the early Buddhists. Over the centuries they have been adapted to suit the times, but the core principles have always remained intact. The state of mind they cultivate is known as 'mindfulness', but it has also been called 'awakening', 'presence' or simply 'awareness'. Mindfulness is a state of calm, open-hearted, non-judgmental awareness. It's a state of mind where you are paying full attention to whatever is happening in the present moment, rather than living in the past or worrying about the future. Although it is traditionally developed through mindfulness meditation, other, less formal practices can also be used. This book teaches both.



4

### INSIGHT ...

In recent years, scientists have discovered that practising certain forms of mindfulness meditation for ten to twenty minutes a day can enhance creativity, problem solving and decision making (see box on pages 5-6). They also dissolve anxiety, stress and depression, while enhancing happiness, wellbeing and resilience. A typical ten-minute meditation consists of focusing your attention on the sensations the breath makes as it flows into and out of the body (see page 59). This creates a calm mental space from which you can observe all of your thoughts, feelings and emotions as they bubble up from your deep subconscious. It allows you to watch as they appear in your mind, linger for a while and then dissolve. In effect, your mind becomes less frantic and 'noisy' and this, in turn, means you can notice your quieter thoughts and ideas. So it helps foster great clarity of thought. In this way, mindfulness smoothes the path of ideas as they arise from the deepest reaches of your mind. This enhances divergent thinking – the purest form of creativity – and the type that most of us would recognise as 'creativity' itself (more about this in Chapter Two). Divergent thinking is the most mysterious state of mind because it appears to conjure up ideas from nowhere – often out of the blue, and frequently without bidding. It's the form of awareness that gave rise to Archimedes' 'Eureka' moment, Isaac Newton's insights into gravity, Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity and many great novels, such as Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. In short, it's the state of awareness that allows you to spontaneously 'see' the solution to a problem, to conjure up new ideas and to create a work of art or design with true insight and flair.





# The benefits of mindfulness meditation

Thousands of peer-reviewed scientific papers prove that mindfulness improves mental and physical wellbeing while also enhancing creativity and decision making. Here are some of the main findings:

- Mindfulness improves creativity.<sup>1</sup>
- Mindfulness improves attention span, working memory and reaction speed. It also enhances mental stamina and resilience.<sup>2</sup>
- Mindfulness enhances decision making.<sup>3</sup>
- Meditation enhances brain function. It increases grey matter in areas associated with self-awareness, empathy, self-control and attention.<sup>4</sup> It soothes the parts of the brain that produce stress hormones<sup>5</sup> and builds those areas that lift mood and promote learning.<sup>6</sup> It even reduces some of the thinning of certain areas of the brain that 'naturally' occurs with age.<sup>7</sup>
- Mindfulness is a potent antidote to anxiety, stress, depression, exhaustion and irritability. In short, regular meditators are happier and more contented, while being far less likely to suffer from psychological distress.<sup>8</sup>
- Mindfulness is at least as good as drugs or counselling for the treatment of clinical-level depression. One structured programme known as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is now one of the preferred treatments recommended by the UK's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. 9





6

#### MINDFULNESS FOR CREATIVITY

- Meditation improves the immune system. Regular meditators are admitted to hospital less often for cancer, heart disease and numerous infectious diseases.<sup>10</sup>
- Meditation improves heart and circulatory health by reducing blood pressure and lowering the risk of hypertension. It also reduces the risks of developing and dying from cardiovascular disease and lowers its severity should it arise.<sup>11</sup>
- Mindfulness is very beneficial for chronic pain. Studies show that pain 'unpleasantness' can be reduced by 57 per cent. Experienced meditators can reduce it by 93 per cent.<sup>12</sup>
- The benefits of meditation begin to take root in the brain after just a few minutes of practice.

#### DIVERGENCE . . .

Mindfulness enhances such divergent thinking on another level too. It progressively dissolves the mental habits that force us to think along the same tired, old lines over and over again. These habits exert immense control over our lives, but we are largely unaware of their influence. In fact, scientists estimate that around 45 per cent of the choices and decisions we make each day are governed by habit. Such habits have their uses, but they are very much a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they allow the mind to outsource routine matters to its 'autopilot', so that we can focus on the more important things. On the other hand, they can lock in place the ways in which we approach the world and think about ideas and problems. In short, they can stifle creativity.







And here's the rub: because habits allow you to outsource certain forms of thinking to your autopilot, often without you realising it, thinking itself can become increasingly habitual. Certain thoughts can become habits in themselves. Negative, self-defeating thought patterns are particularly habitual. Ones such as Why can't I do this?, What's wrong with me today? or He's got it in for me can turn into mental soundbites that the autopilot throws into your mind just as easily as it helps you brush your teeth or find your way to work. The same is true for countless other thought patterns too.

The way that we tackle problems at work and at home is often governed by thought patterns laid down many years before. They originally served a purpose, but do they still? Technology may allow us to tackle problems in new ways, but do our patterns of thought and behaviour? Circumstances may change, but our patterns of thought and behaviour often do not. This is why it is so easy – and so seductive – to think along the same tired, old, familiar lines and to make the same decisions over and over again. In this way, habitual thought patterns can progressively narrow the mind and ensure that we consciously think less and less, while ceding more and more control to our mental autopilot.

This is why around half of the choices and decisions we all make each day are governed by habit. If this figure seems a little high, cast an eye over your own life: do you always sleep on the same side of the bed? Have sex on the same nights of the week (and in the same positions)? Do you wake up at the same time each day? Always take the same number of footsteps to the bus stop, station or car? Take the same route to work? And when you're there, do you always sit in the same chair at meetings, drink out of your 'favourite' cup and have the same polite conversations with the same people?

8

When it comes to approaching problems, habitual ways of thinking can make it very difficult to create innovative solutions or to spark a chain of new or original ideas. But there is an alternative. Habits aren't destiny (unless you allow them to be). You can progressively disentangle yourself from the web of habits that controls your life by using the meditations in this book. And when you do so, you'll find it increasingly easy to think clearly, spot new ideas and adapt to changing circumstances. In the long run, this will allow you to consciously 'jump the tracks' into more fruitful ways of thinking.

# Mindfulness is ...

- paying full conscious attention to whatever thoughts, feelings and emotions are flowing through your mind without harsh judgment or criticism
- being fully aware of whatever is happening in the present moment and not being trapped in the past or worrying about the future
- living in the moment, not for the moment.

Thinking is not a problem. Thinking while being unaware that you are thinking can become a major problem.







### RESILIENCE ...

It is not enough to think clearly and to produce original ideas. You also need the courage to follow them wherever they should lead and the resilience to withstand failure, hardship and cynicism. The scientific evidence is clear: mindfulness helps build such courage and resilience.<sup>14</sup> It does this by encouraging the mind's harsh 'inner critic' to fall silent for a while. Your inner voice is an essential part of your identity, but if it becomes too dominant, then it can stifle free-flowing creativity and experimentation. Left unchecked, your mind can start baiting itself with such bitter and angry thoughts as, This is pointless. I'm just not up to it any more ... I can't come up with anything new at all. Why can't I just make a decision and get on with it? Your inner critic can all too easily consume all of your energy, leaving behind a burnt-out shell. You can start to become paralysed with indecision and even the smallest of problems can seem insurmountable. This not only further erodes creativity, but left unchecked it can lead to anxiety, stress, depression and exhaustion.

But it doesn't have to be this way. As you read through this book you will come to understand that your inner voice is not always correct. The mind's running commentary on the world should not be mistaken for the mind itself. In short, thoughts are not always facts (even those that claim to be). Simply understanding how this aspect of your mind works can reinvigorate creativity and grant you the courage to experiment, to make decisions and to risk failure in pursuit of your goals.

Such courage, especially in the face of failure, is essential. After all, you simply cannot create something new or make a difficult decision without risking failure – and taking such risks requires

great courage. Creativity, problem solving and effective decision making all require a special type of quiet, persistent courage. It's not the flavour of courage that is bold or arrogant. It's far more subtle than that. It's the type that you feel when you are standing on solid ground; when you have a sense of wholeness, certainty and strength; of trusting that there is a path to your goal, even though it might not be obvious at the time. Mindfulness cultivates such courage by broadening your mental horizons so that everything falls naturally into perspective. It's as if you can see the world for miles around and all of your fears, worries and problems simply dissolve. You come to understand that most problems, no matter how difficult they might at first appear, are often akin to bumps in the road, rather than life-and-death scenarios. This, in turn, fosters the courage necessary to create new ideas and follow them wherever they should lead.

# Mindfulness is not a religion

- It is simply a form of mental training.
- It will not deaden your mind, but will instead make you more creative, less stressed and more effective at decision making.
- It does not take a lot of time (around ten to twenty minutes a day is enough).
- It is not difficult or complicated.
- You can meditate virtually anywhere; on buses, trains, aircraft, offices – even in a queue at the supermarket.







# FREE THINKING ...

HOLE IN THE HEAD

Mindfulness for Creativity operates on two levels. Firstly, there is the four-week meditation programme, which takes around ten to twenty minutes a day. This clears the mind and allows innovative ideas to take form and crystallise. It also soothes the mind and dissolves stress. This, in turn, allows the mind to work more effectively, so that you can begin to solve problems faster and more intuitively. Mindfulness also helps decision making by dissolving anxiety, stress, frustration and depression. Even if you have none of these problems, you will still find yourself feeling happier, sleeping better and becoming fully engaged with life once again.

Secondly, mindfulness creates a mental vantage point from which you can observe just how much of your life is controlled by habitual ways of thinking and approaching the world. Such renewed clarity will help you tackle the habits that constrain creativity and effective problem solving. Habit breaking (or habit releasing) is as simple as taking a different route to work or spending a little time walking around the park soaking up the sights, sounds and smells. Or it might mean listening to your favourite music with fresh ears or drinking a cup of tea or coffee with your eyes closed. Such simple things broaden awareness, spark curiosity and open the doors to serendipity.

If you want to start the four-week programme right away, you can begin at Chapter Three. If you'd like to understand how the programme works, and the latest scientific discoveries that support it, then carry on reading. I strongly recommend that you do read the following chapter as it