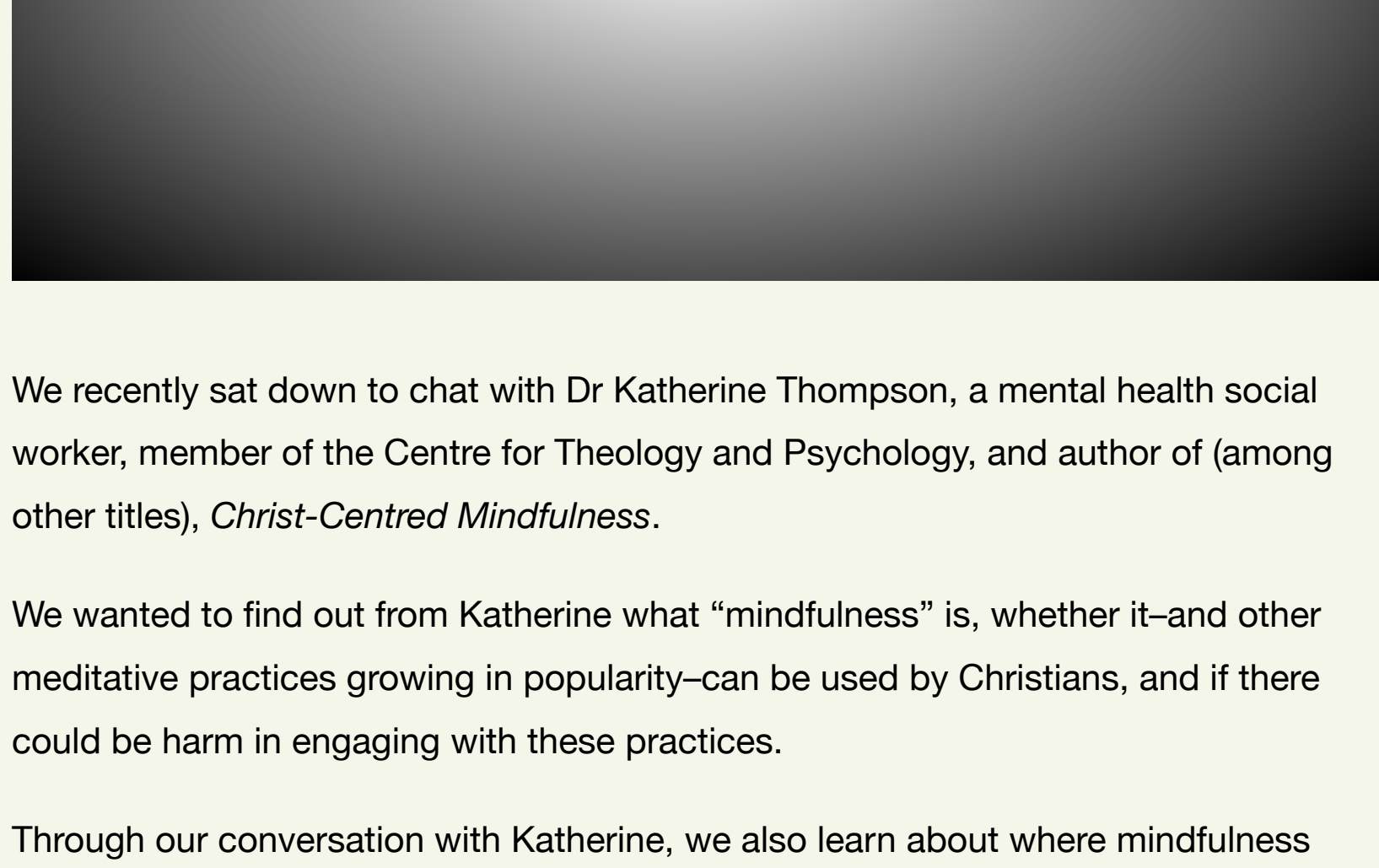


What is Mindfulness and How Can It Help Us?



We recently sat down to chat with Dr Katherine Thompson, a mental health social worker, member of the Centre for Theology and Psychology, and author of (among other titles), *Christ-Centred Mindfulness*.

We wanted to find out from Katherine what "mindfulness" is, whether it—and other meditative practices growing in popularity—can be used by Christians, and if there could be harm in engaging with these practices.

Through our conversation with Katherine, we also learn about where mindfulness comes from, and she even takes us through a scripture-based meditative exercise that you can do with us towards the end!

Where Does Mindfulness Come From?

Katherine's interest in exploring mindfulness began many years ago when she and a fellow Christian mental health colleague began wondering whether there was a way to capture the benefits of mindfulness without basing it on Buddhist roots.

You may have heard that there's a commonality between Buddhist mindfulness and Christian meditation or meditative practices. Both branches use all of our senses to connect to what's happening around us and focus on a particular thing, using the quiet part of our mind to focus on something external to us *without* focussing on our thoughts.

The main difference between practising mindfulness and meditation from a Buddhist and a Christian perspective, Katherine says, is the *why* behind what you're doing. As a Christian, you're trying to connect to your inner world and to God at the same time, whereas a Buddhist approach is more about 'emptying' your mind.

Katherine explained to us some of the history behind meditation. She notes that the spark of 'The Enlightenment' in the late 17th century marked a shift in values in the West. Society began to value science and logical, rational thinking over the preceding mystic traditions that had been around for much longer. Some of these mystic traditions were practices such as contemplative prayer and meditating on scripture.

Within the monastic tradition, for example, Brother Lawrence spoke about trying to spend every day focussing on God in everything he did; whether it was washing dishes, doing chores or going about his work, there was no start or stop to his prayer time. Brother Lawrence's reflections on this continual awareness of God's presence were published a year after his death in 1692 in a book called *The Practise of the Presence of God*.

"Now that mindfulness is becoming more popular," says Katherine, "we're starting to rediscover what we already knew as a church. We [the church] have a rich tradition of meditating on scripture and praying in silence, in a meditative way rather than speaking or thinking the prayers."

What Is Mindfulness All About?

Although mindfulness is not simply a relaxation exercise as many of us might think, Katherine explains that it does work through a similar pathway in our bodies. Some of its helpful physical effects include reducing our blood pressure, slowing our heart rate and breathing down, and changing the connectivity in our brains.

Mindfulness can also help us sustain attention so that we can concentrate more easily and for longer periods of time, and it also helps us regulate our emotions so that we're more aware of them and able to better control them. In short, Katherine says: "You don't need to have a mental health problem to benefit from mindfulness."

So, how does it work? Mindfulness uses your 'observing' self – the quiet part of your mind, versus the thinking/rational part which is active all the time. The difference between those two states of your mind is like the sky, Katherine explains. The sky is always there and it doesn't change, but what changes is how it looks and what's in it, based on the weather and time of day.

If you've got depression or anxiety, for example, you're often ruminating or worrying about something, so that rational part of your mind is overactive. One way to quieten it down is to develop your ability to use the quiet, observing part of your mind. And that's why mindfulness is so powerful, Katherine says.

Elijah learned the importance of quietness in [1 Kings 19:11-12](#). He's waiting on a mountain for God to pass by, not sure in what form that will be. A powerful wind comes, but God isn't in the wind. Then comes an earthquake; but God isn't in the earthquake. Next, a fire, and – you guessed it, God wasn't in the fire. Finally, "*after the fire came a gentle whisper*". Elijah then speaks with God, who is in the whisper. It's a powerful reminder for us that oftentimes it takes slowing down and quieting our minds for us to be able to hear God's "gentle whisper".

For Katherine, mindfulness that focuses on being still and pondering scripture or noticing the things around us achieves this quiet state. "I would really encourage people to learn how to do Christ-centred mindfulness because it opens us up to God's Spirit," she says. Although it's His Spirit that transforms us and not the practice of mindfulness itself, mindfulness can help open us up to hearing what the Lord might be saying to us.

"It's like God is walking through our mind holding a candle, showing us different bits that need to change. And that's what can happen in the quiet space. The goal of Christ-centred mindfulness is to become more Christ-like," Katherine continued.

How Can We Get Started With Mindfulness?

In terms of how to get started with mindfulness techniques, Katherine says that it depends on why you're doing it. If you're struggling with a particular mental health problem, it's wise to see a counsellor or therapist who can give you advice on what method might work best for you. Otherwise, Katherine says most people can teach themselves from a book or other resource. (You can find Katherine's book, *Christ-Centred Mindfulness*, [here](#).)

There are different variations and types of mindfulness and meditation that we can use, with some exercises aimed at achieving different things. "As humans we don't like to have to do something 'boring' all the time," says Katherine. "It's more about understanding the concept and learning to do it in different ways so you're able to apply it in a way that suits you as a person."

Katherine went on to say that for her, as an outdoorsy person, she connects with God easiest in nature; so practising mindfulness for her needs to be in her garden or a park or on a walk. For others, they might be the opposite and can focus best in the comfort of their own home. According to Katherine, it's about figuring out what method will work best for you.

Most mindfulness exercises start by focussing on one or more of your senses, and the idea is to keep focussing on that thing. If you get distracted – which you *will*, Katherine assures us – you gently redirect your attention back to what you're focusing on. It's important to accept that we'll all get distracted from time to time, and that we're not a failure when we do get distracted, Katherine says. "It's about refocusing and persevering."

"Christ-centred mindfulness is a discipline; it requires perseverance because it's hard," Katherine told us. "No matter how many years you've practised, you're still going to struggle with getting distracted."

"The other thing that's important is the attitude you bring," Katherine goes on to explain. "Jesus tells us our faith should be like a little child ([Matthew 18:3](#)), and that curiosity and openness to experiences is the attitude we need to bring to practising mindfulness."

Let's Do a Mindfulness Exercise Together

In her podcast interview, Katherine took us through two mindfulness exercises from her book. You can listen to that episode [here](#). Why don't you try one of them in your own time now?

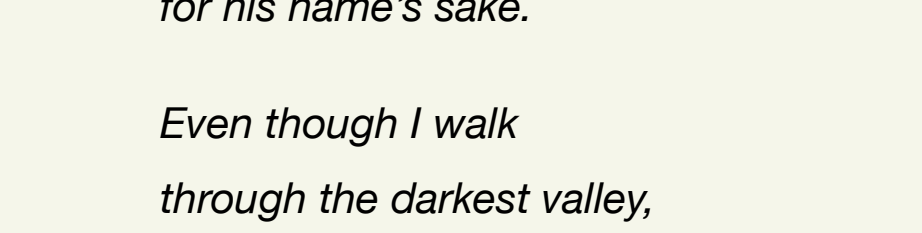
For this exercise, Katherine stepped us through what it would look like to repeatedly focus on the same passage of scripture; she used Psalm 23 because it's often familiar to people. We'll write out Katherine's instructions down below for the exercise so that you can try it, too:

First, shut your eyes (after you're done reading this part!).

Now, what you can notice in your environment? You might be able to hear different noises. Maybe you can smell something in particular, or you're feeling the chair you're sitting on or your clothes against your skin. Take time to be aware of each of your senses, and focus on them.

Now bring your focus to your breathing, without trying to change it.

Next, you're going to read (or listen to us read using the audio player below) Psalm 23:



*The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.*

*Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff,
they comfort me.*

*You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.*

*Surely your goodness and love will follow me
all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.*

After reading the passage, we're going to read it a second time – but this time, pick a word or phrase or even an image in the passage that stands out to you. The trick is not to choose it consciously, says Katherine, but to allow God's spirit in the silence to choose it for you and bring it to your attention.

[Read or listen to passage a second time]

This time as we read the passage, we're going to reflect on the thing that came to our attention. Pray and ask God how whatever stood out to you applies to your life today. As you're quietly listening, ask God to reveal what He's trying to say to you through it.

[Read or listen to passage a third time]

Now, we're going to read (or listen to) this passage one last time. As you do, you can say a prayer of thanks or ask God something in response to what has been revealed to you.

[Read or listen to passage a fourth time]

After reading it this last time, you can sit in silence for as long as you feel comfortable.

Katherine finished by explaining to us that Christ-centred mindfulness is a variation of this sort of contemplative prayer, and that it's all about getting us to be still in God's presence. "It can be such a good practice to do not just on your own," she says, "but in the company of others, because everyone will have something different stand out to them and it's encouraging to be able to share that with each other."

What do you think, are you familiar with mindfulness and Christian meditative prayer? Did you try the exercise above? If you're comfortable, let us know what stood out to you in the comments – we'd love to know and be encouraged by one another!

If you're interested in trying some of your own meditating on God's Word, we'd love to introduce to you to a podcast produced by our colleagues in the UK office of Our Daily Bread Ministries. ***Evening Meditations*** are short, 10-minute daily episodes that encourage us to refocus our hearts on God and to untangle ourselves from the busyness of life.

You can [listen to Dr Katherine's episode](#) with us or [watch the full video interview](#) on YouTube. *If you're interested in learning more about Christ-centred mindfulness, check out Katherine's book [here](#).*



Katherine Thompson • rest • self-care

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