

“Most people aren’t looking for spiritual enlightenment or therapy – they just want a way to switch off when they get home at night”

Andy Puddicombe, the face and voice of mindfulness, takes Sally Brown through his journey from Buddhist monk to meditation master

An ancient Eastern technique called mindfulness is having a moment. It has become mainstream, with companies like Google and the Home Office offering in-house mindfulness courses, and the Government talking about developing it in schools. Even US marines use it to improve their mental focus – for good reason, scientific evidence shows that practised regularly, mindfulness can boost your mood, reduce stress and sharpen memory and concentration. Since 2004, it has been recommended by NICE (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence) as a treatment for recurrent depression.

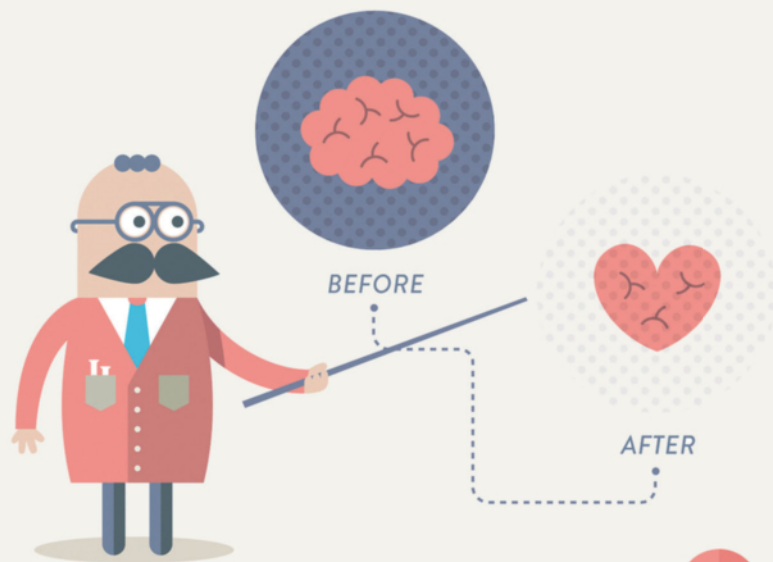
And one of its highest-profile practitioners is Andy Puddicombe, co-founder of Headspace, which is currently surfing the wave of the zeitgeist by producing the world’s most successful meditation app Headspace On-the-Go, free from iTunes and Googleplay, that’s downloaded by one million people around the world, including celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Emma Watson (who called it a “kind of genius”). Companies as diverse as Roche, Goldman Sachs, Reuters and Credit Suisse employ Puddicombe to teach mindfulness to their employees, and Virgin Atlantic has its own ‘Headspace Channel’

for air passengers. Last year, Headspace was the subject of a BBC *Horizon* documentary. When I spoke to him on his mobile, Puddicombe was at Munich Airport, waiting to fly home after launching his latest partnership venture, providing a Headspace programme for every guest and employee of Westin hotels worldwide.

Despite his phenomenal success, Bristol-born Puddicombe remains resolutely normal. Although he has lived in LA for two years, there are no signs of a mid-Atlantic lilt. He’s refreshingly unguarded, with a relaxed, easy laugh. And a strange thing happens after you’ve talked to him for a while – any tension seems to gently unravel and you feel calm, but somehow brighter too.

Puddicombe famously abandoned his sports science degree at university to join a Buddhist monastery. In retrospect, he says he was very unhappy at the time, after living through a series of traumatic events during his teens – the accidental death of his step-sister, the death of an ex-girlfriend and witnessing a car mounting the pavement and killing several people. Having suppressed the trauma for several years, by the time he got to university his emotions “were most definitely coming to the surface”. Joining a Buddhist monastery made perfect sense to Puddicombe, who »





had been introduced to meditation at the age of 11, when his mum took a six-week course, and had used it on and off throughout his teens.

THE BALD-HEADED-MAN-IN-A-SKIRT THING

At first, he struggled to 'get' meditation: as someone who was used to being very active, it was a massive leap to spend up to 18 hours a day immobile. He spent the next 10 years travelling from monastery to monastery in India, Nepal, Burma and Thailand searching for the 'right' teacher. He was fully ordained as a monk in 2001 at the age of 28. After four years teaching meditation from a monastery in Russia, he began to think about leaving. "I thought, am I passionate about being a monk, or am I passionate about teaching meditation? I knew some people wouldn't get the 'bald-headed-man-in-a-skirt thing'."

Although his dream of bringing meditation into the mainstream was taking shape, he was at a loss as to what to do next and settled on a degree in circus arts in London. But, after two years, he badly injured his neck during a trick that involved a woman standing on his head and he had to drop out. By this time, mindfulness was being prescribed by the medical profession for stress, and suddenly there was a demand for teachers. So, in 2007, Puddicombe started a clinic in London teaching meditation which soon ranked government ministers and athletes among its clients. Another client was Rich Pierson, a burned-out marketing exec who spotted the business potential in both Puddicombe and mindfulness. They became business partners, and Headspace was launched in 2010.

MEDITATION FOR MODERN LIFE

The company started as an events business, running meditation workshops, and the On-the-Go app was created as an add-on to help participants meditate at home. No one predicted the level of its success. "I don't think anyone imagined we'd end up having one million people downloading it," says Puddicombe.

Headspace is designed to be meditation for modern life; the company mission statement is to "get as many



Andy Puddicombe has written numerous books on mindfulness – find out more in Personal Insight on the opposite page



people in the world as possible to take 10 minutes out of their day to practise a simple meditation technique." When you download the app or sign up to the website (www.headspace.com), you'll get 10 daily, 10-minute guided meditations free. If you wish to continue, you can sign up for the full programme and get a new guided meditation every day, from £3.74 a month.

The irony is that despite being a fully-ordained Buddhist monk, the secret of Puddicombe's success is that he has repackaged mindfulness for a secular audience, removing all its religious overtones. Most people, he says, aren't looking for spiritual enlightenment or therapy – they just want a way to switch off when they get home. "I found that many people desperately wanted to find a way to relax, but were uncomfortable with the religious element that robes imply," he says. "They just wanted a way to cope with life."

He thinks it's the growing bank of science that proves meditation works that is partly behind its massive popularity. "The research has built up over the years. I think if people see the science in black and white, all these factors play into mindfulness being seen as accessible," says Puddicombe. "With mindfulness there is no chanting and no mantras. It's a safe and secular approach that gives people the confidence to try it."

And whereas mindfulness was originally seen as an existential study – the answer to the question of what life is about – today it's about relieving symptoms, says Puddicombe. "Due to the sheer volume of mental chatter, both externally and internally, to which we are exposed, we are turning to meditation as a way to cope." He believes that in seven years' time, it will be on the school curriculum. "Ten or 15 years ago, it was hard to say the word yoga without people sniggering, yet going to the gym to take a yoga class is now no more strange than going for aerobics," he says. "There will undoubtedly come a time when sitting down to get some headspace for 10 minutes a day is no more unusual than going for a walk."

However, that '10 minutes a day' is not without controversy – traditionalists question whether it's really long enough to make a difference. Puddicombe himself was taught that meditation should last no less than an hour. But part of the success of Headspace is that it feels achievable – everyone can find 10 minutes, even on the busiest of days. He points out that mindfulness only works if you do it – simply knowing the theory or believing that it works won't make any difference to you.

"At the moment, 60 per cent of users use the app every one to three days, and we'd like to see that reach 80 per cent," he says, sounding like a businessman rather than a meditation teacher. "We're launching a new version in a few months that will include a buddy system, so you can see when your friends are meditating and give them a nudge or say 'well done'. We're aiming to make it more bespoke and relevant."

“In becoming more AWARE of EVERYTHING, you inevitably become more aware of OTHERS”

THE BEACH AND YOGA LIFESTYLE

Puddicombe still starts each day with an hour-long meditation, but says “that is not for everyone, especially if you’re just starting out”. Afterwards, he heads for Venice Beach for a “sunrise surf”. Andy and his wife Lucinda have been LA residents for two years while Puddicombe establishes the US arm of the business; and although they miss friends and family, they love the beach and yoga lifestyle of LA. “Being by the sea is massive for me. There’s something about not being able to see anything between you and the horizon but sea,” he says. “Being in the ocean every day – it affects me on a physical, emotional and spiritual level.” He then walks or cycles to the Headspace offices nearby.

I wondered if his years of living as a monk had left him with an inclination towards living minimally, or indeed to do the opposite and acquire lots of possessions. “I don’t feel a huge need to collect lots of things,” he says. “As a monk you give everything away except the clothes you are wearing, which instils a feeling that it doesn’t matter what you have in life. I can enjoy having nice things but I don’t worry about not having them.”

When he’s not travelling or in business meetings, Puddicombe writes blogs, records guided meditations and runs corporate meditation workshops. As well as its high-profile ‘brand’ ventures, Headspace also funds research into meditation, which is overseen by its chief medical officer, Dr David Cox, and runs the Headspace Foundation, which provides free mindfulness programmes for charities and organisations like Kids Company. But he tries to leave the office by 6pm every day. “In the US and on the East Coast especially, it’s accepted that you work until 8pm. We encourage our employees to leave by 6pm. I go home to spend time with my wife. [He met Lucinda in 2006 when he was injured in the circus – she was the physiotherapist who helped him recover.] We’re not big socialisers so we tend to cook and hang out at home,” he says. The couple are expecting their first child.

COURTEOUS ATTENTION

Puddicombe passionately believes that mindfulness improves relationships with partners, parents, friends,



PERSONAL INSIGHT

The Andy Puddicombe CV

- 1994** Abandons a sports science degree to become a monk
- 2001** Is fully ordained as a Buddhist monk at a monastery in the Himalayas
- 2004** Returns to the UK to study circus skills
- 2006** Drops out of circus school due to injury; meets his wife-to-be Lucinda in hospital
- 2007** Is the meditation consultant to Government ministers and a host of elite athletes
- 2009** Meets business partner Rich Pierson. They found Headspace a year later
- 2011** Publishes his first book *Get Some Headspace* (£9.99, Hodder)
- 2012** Launches Headspace (On-The-Go) meditation app
- 2012** His second book *The Headspace Diet* (£9.99, Hodder) is published
- 2012** Gives his first TED talk, called Take 10 Mindful Minutes (www.ted.com)
- 2013** Features in BBC *Horizon* documentary
- 2013** Moves to LA to set up the US business
- 2013** Is treated for testicular cancer
- 2014** Expects his first child

www.headspace.com

children and colleagues. “When meditation came from the East to the West, for some reason it quickly became about ‘me, myself and I’. But the way it is traditionally taught, and the way it was taught to me, is that mindfulness is not about you,” he says. “The relationships I have now have a greater sense of ease, calm, patience and understanding. Don’t get me wrong, I have days when work can be stressful and I bring it home with me, but I now have a greater willingness to let it go. Mindfulness is a way of creating enough space in the mind to allow you to be less irritable, and more patient and clearer in how you communicate. And in becoming more aware of everything and everyone, you inevitably become more aware of others. You listen to what they’re saying, rather than think about what you would like them to say or what you’re going to say next.” He has also credited mindfulness with helping him deal with the physical and mental effects of treatment for testicular cancer last year.

After I’ve been talking to Puddicombe on his mobile for an hour, he starts to cut out. He apologises, and explains he’s walking to the gate as his flight has been called. I’m struck by the fact that he really does ‘walk the talk’ – he’s pressed for time and trying to find his way through a strange airport, but he still gives me his courteous attention. Even in a stressful environment, he sounds as calm as if he’s sitting on a deckchair on the beach. And if that’s not a recommendation for the powers of mindfulness, what is? **S**