

CASE STUDIES

CLEAN AND CLEAR

A surprising number of crossroads in our lives can be approached with a clean sweep of a brush, be it literally or figuratively. We meet three people who tell us how decluttering helped change their lives for the better...

INTERVIEWS ALI ROFF PHOTOGRAPHS LOUISE HAYWOOD-SCHIEFER

“Could a calmer mind really come from not trying to achieve a calmer mind?”

Ed Halliwell is a mindfulness teacher and writer who is also on the faculty of The School of Life

‘When I first tried mindfulness, I’d been struggling with depression and anxiety for years. Desperate for peace of mind, I’d given virtually every treatment a go, but none shifted my symptoms – a racing mind full of negative thoughts, and lots of emotional pain. Several people had suggested I learn to meditate, so this was next on my to-do list. I approached it in the same way I had every other feel-good strategy – hoping it would be a quick-fix way to clear the mind of clutter.

When I’d tried to meditate, I found it hard to follow the instructions – gently pay attention to sensations of breathing and come back to the breath when you notice the mind wandering. All the time I was trying to make things better through hard work, striving, pushing frantically for solutions. Yet there was something different about mindfulness. I learnt to notice what was happening at that moment; to observe thoughts and feelings, and let go of trying to change, even of trying to feel better. Something intuitively made sense about this – the more I battled with depression, the worse it seemed to

get. Here, I was being taught to take a different approach – to practise awareness, stillness, curiosity and acceptance. Could a calmer mind really come from not trying to achieve a calmer mind?

Practising meditation gave me the chance to see my restlessness, my driven nature, my endless thinking and problem-solving and my constant judgements of myself, others and the world. You might think that was unpleasant – and in a way, it was – but the more I saw these patterns, the less I was actually in them. And the less I was in them, the better I felt.

Gradually, my mind has become less cluttered. I still have lots of thoughts, but I’m not as caught up in them. It’s been a long time since my last episode of depression. Learning how to work with my mind in meditation has given me the confidence to change career (I now teach mindfulness), and settle into a relationship – I am married and have two children. It enables me to manage the ups and downs of life more gently, and, I think, more skilfully.’

‘Mindfulness: How To Live Well By Paying Attention’ by Ed Halliwell (Hay House, £8.99) is out on 5 January >>>