

## **Comments from participants on the Breathworks Living Well with Pain and Illness course**

I came across the Breathworks programme over three years ago. After completing the course I have regularly attended the weekly drop in group ever since. I have learned to be more accepting of my pain and less reactive towards it, diminishing the mental and emotional suffering that was very much part of my experience. By trying to live in the moment, in a mindful way, I now recognise that my physical condition is only part of my overall experience in any given moment. There is so much more to my life than just the pain. Furthermore, I have learned that I have a choice about responding rather than reacting to my pain. I find it a daily challenge to live with this sense of mindfulness, but my life is considerably richer and fuller. I have found that it is possible to differentiate between how I physically am in any one moment, and how I feel emotionally. I can therefore be in a great deal of pain but at the same time experience a deep sense of being well in myself. My physical condition has not changed but my experience of it has, and in practising the techniques offered by the programme, I have changed my life.

*JF, Fibromyalgia.*

Since learning of my kidney disease in my twenties, I tried to forget about it and “get on with my life”. However, when infection after infection kept coming along and hitting me in the face (or abdomen!) I realised it couldn't be ignored and wanted to find a pro-active way to “do” something about it. I feel very grateful to have come across Breathworks and attended a course with Vidyamala. This has helped me learn how to manage my stress, energy and pain levels in ways that allow me more balance in my life. I experience much wider gaps between hospital admissions, less reliance on orthodox drugs to “stay well”, decreased stress levels and don't have the high blood pressure often associated with, and a risk factor of, my condition. Now, in my thirties, I actually see doing a body scan and practising pacing as acts of kindness towards myself, that will, I believe, help me live longer, or at least delay the onset of end-stage renal failure, through kindly self-management.

*AS, Chronic renal failure (Polycystic kidney disease), intracranial aneurysms*

Following a diagnosis of Hodgkin's lymphoma in 2003, I underwent four years of chemotherapy, radiotherapy, a stem cell transplant and deteriorating health. I felt as though my life was spiralling out of control. Last year I was informed of more complications and told I needed further treatment followed by a bone marrow transplant later this year. Having encountered mindfulness and the Breathworks approach as taught by Vidyamala and her colleagues, I am amazed at how I am coping with this new round of treatment. Now that I am more able to be present with my experience as it is, I feel more peaceful, more confident, and can enjoy being alive right now. My attitude is profoundly different. In fact, I would say I am no longer waiting for light at the end of the tunnel. Thanks to Breathworks the tunnel has fallen away.

*AG, 32, ME / Chronic fatigue syndrome*

I have been living with back pain since a lifting accident (aged sixteen), followed by a diagnosis of spondylolisthesis and a spinal fusion operation (aged eighteen). I have tried many therapeutic approaches - both medical and complementary - to help manage my symptoms over the years. Having been told by one consultant that my pain was “normal given my abnormal spine” and that I would “never work”, I have since completed three academic degrees and am looking to build a career in teaching and research. The Breathworks course has been very instrumental in my recovery and in my ability to cope with the pressures and deadlines of academia, as it has provided me with a set of tools such as pacing and meditation which I have integrated fully into my life. What made the course unique was its philosophical stance towards pain and suffering being less about “resisting”, “fighting”, or “removing” the pain and instead to foster an awareness and acceptance of the pain in

any given moment. Having attended the Breathworks courses both as a researcher and a fellow participant, I have seen that through adopting a “moment to moment” approach to chronic illness and pain, the grief or panic which can all too often attend the fear that one may be in pain for life, can be reduced if not removed entirely. Rather than feeling all consumed by pain, the methods and approaches which this course provides, can be positively utilised as a means of coping in one’s everyday life.

*Dr NJD, 34, Spondylolisthesis and post-operative pain*

I had been meditating for some years before learning about Breathworks. The Living Well with Pain programme opened my eyes to how I was managing and being “managed by” my illness. The programme and continued practice and use of the tools, techniques, and insights gained has changed my life. I am more active and feel more in control, responding better to day to day difficulties which also benefits my family and work. A key part of the programme for me is also the attitude and example set by Vidyamala Burch herself. That someone can take her own pain, experience and condition and use it to help others in a practical and sustainable way is an inspiration to anyone with a chronic condition or involved in helping others.

*SJ, 54, Diabetes and peripheral neuropathy, Lecturer and health practitioner*

I discovered the Living Well with Pain course two years ago. Although referred by my GP I was wary at the beginning having no understanding of mindfulness or meditation. The course was great, it has given me tools to help me manage pain and associated anxiety much more effectively. I get so much more out of life now and the continuing support of the Breathworks community, through the web, meditation days and retreats is a lifeline. Vidyamala is speaking from personal experience as well as using her understanding of meditation and mindfulness to live a full and enjoyable life, she is an inspiration.

*CC, 58, Hyper mobility and fibromyalgia, Artist and trainer*

Incorporating what I have learnt from Vidyamala and the Living well with Pain Course has literally changed my life. I've learned that listening to my body and taking regular rest periods is not the same as “giving in” as I'd feared. In fact I can actually do a lot more and enjoy what I am doing. I've also learned to accept help rather than stubbornly battling on which has made life a lot easier, both for me and others – I am a much nicer person to be around now I am practicing mindfulness!

*SO'B, 46, Rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis (MS)*

I did the Breathworks pain management course which helped me cope with the problems of having an arthritic spine. The skills and insights I learnt really came to the fore when I had a stroke. They helped me deal with the shock and trauma of having a stroke and to adjust to the life changes a stroke brings.

*FR, 65, Arthritis and stroke*

I arrived at the pain management course at the Manchester Buddhist Centre in 2001, after having two surgical interventions for spinal disc protrusion and a cyst. I had also had a course of postural re-training from my physiotherapist. I lost my job as a result of my condition and suffered with depression. After the surgery my symptoms had improved in that I wasn't spending my whole time having to lie flat. However, I was still experiencing pain and was reliant on a high dose of analgesics, which only helped by leaving me “zombie-like”. I was introduced to the pain management course by a friend of a friend and my expectations were not high. I was desperate

enough to try anything that might help. I found the experience invaluable. The key for me was to accept my condition and work with the pain- not fight against it. I was encouraged to keep a diary of my daily activities and pain levels- yes it does sound sad! But I was able to use this information eventually to pace my activities in advance, bringing my pain to a manageable level as well as identifying activities that caused a flare up of my condition. Another important element of the course was practising meditation using the body scan and mindfulness of breathing and to incorporate this into everyday life. Three years on, I am now able to go on holiday, go out with friends and family, and work on a part time basis. Am I pain free? No, certainly not. However, I feel more able to cope with the pain using the tools from the pain management course. I am grateful to Vidyamala and the team for their continuing support and encouragement.

CJ

I had had chronic fatigue for about 18 months when I went on the Breathworks course. The things I found particularly useful were the ideas around pacing, including the three minute breathing break, Body Scans, which really helped me to be much more with my bodily experience of fatigue, rather than moving away from it, and the tools for looking at my experience of fatigue and my attitude towards that experience in a loving way. Although I consider myself to be recovered from chronic fatigue, the learning from the course is still with me and very helpful in my life.

*FC, ME / Chronic fatigue syndrome*

I can't thank you enough for...teaching of techniques I will have all my life which I can use anywhere.

*JS, 34, neck muscle spasms*

I have found the relaxation particularly useful, especially for secondary pain caused by tension. Mindfulness has been a revelation! I wish this...could be more widely available to people in a similar situation.

*CH, 52, Arthritis in thoracic spine*

I found Mindfulness of Breathing extremely valuable, because when I experience pain, my body normally starts to shock and panic and then I start over-breathing and tension starts to increase in its painful area. The Mindfulness of Breathing helps relax the breath and then the body, providing the mind with a focus away from the pain.

*J, 36, Temporal mandible disorder, retired 11 years ago due to illness*

Although I found the Mindfulness of Breathing and Kindly Awareness meditations very difficult to do, it has made me very aware that these have to be included in my everyday life to enable me to cope with my pain and also get positive.

*MB, 54, Back pain, arthritis, ME, depression*

It has been the best help for me without a doubt, not only my husband has noticed the difference in me but others have mentioned that I seem different.

*JO, 52*

I am a practising Christian and had no difficulties at all with the slight Buddhist view (of the program). In fact, I find that the meditation techniques have helped with my prayer life.

*DR, 40*

Being introduced to meditation has been very helpful along with the idea that it is possible to gain some peace of mind through the act of meditation.

*JH, 34*

The mind is a really powerful tool...I can turn the most negative aspect of my situation into a real positive.

*BB, Fibromyalgia, Marfan's syndrome*

Great increase in confidence in meditating – A very much greater awareness of all the world, of all the little things!

*JA*