**Session 1**

**Being open to all of our experience has the possibility of leading us to greater health and well-being.**

*‘Life was meant to be lived, and curiosity must be kept alive. One must never, for whatever reason, turn her back on life’ Eleanor Roosevelt (1992).*

In a car we can sometimes drive for miles on ‘automatic pilot’, without really being aware of what we are doing. In the same way, we may not be really ‘present’, moment by moment, for much of our lives. We can often be ‘miles away’ without knowing it.

What neuroscience tells us is that the parts of the brain we exercise become more fully developed. For example, research using London taxi drivers revealed that the taxi drivers have a larger posterior hippocampus than most of us, their neural pathways have been strengthened because part of their job is to memorise the many routes around London. We too may have developed neural pathways that mean we react automatically to situations or events. Automatic pilot may be useful at times, but it can mean that we miss the detail of good experiences and even exaggerate the negative ones. These automatic reactions may be the same pathway we took in the past when we experienced a similar situation; previous paths taken may or may not be helpful. We can have our ‘buttons pressed’ and our thoughts, feelings and sensations (of which we may not be fully aware) can trigger off habits of feeling, thinking and behaviour that can be unhelpful, and may lead onto worsening mood, or to physical and emotional symptoms of stress.

By becoming more aware of our bodily sensations, feelings and thoughts from moment to moment, we give ourselves the possibility of greater freedom and choice; we do not have to play out the same old patterns that may have caused problems in the past. We do not have to go down the same well-trodden mental route or rut.

The aim of this course is to increase awareness so that we can respond to situations with choice, rather than react automatically. We do this by becoming more aware of where our attention is, and deliberately bringing the focus of attention back into our body and senses over and over again. Mindfulness is not about trying to be somewhere else, but simply being aware of where you are, and letting yourself be just as you are.