

MINDFULNESS MADE EASY

50 simple practices to reduce stress,
create calm, and live in the moment
—at home, work and school

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Introduction

Simply put, mindfulness is moment-to-moment awareness. It is cultivated by purposely paying attention to things we ordinarily never give a moment's thought to.

—Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*

After ten years of practicing mindfulness, I am convinced that if you practice regularly, you will not only be able to better deal with life's stresses, but you will also become a better person. You will feel more alive, more joyful and even more productive. You will be able to truly smell the roses, no matter how busy you are.

I want to do only one thing with this book: I want to give you a taste of what mindfulness is so you want to do it more and more. I don't want you to wait to experience the benefits of mindfulness until you have turned fifty, read thirty books on the topic or attended several workshops or retreats (like I have). I wish to make mindfulness practices accessible, among others, to teachers, counselors, parents and lawyers, to both young and old, so they can experience its many benefits.

My story

A few years ago I had a wake-up call while attending a talk on stress and anxiety at my teenage daughters' school. I was greeted with shocking statistics showing that anxiety disorders and depression are impacting record numbers of teenagers. In one local school, eight teenagers had attempted suicide in the previous year. This information hit me particularly hard, having just completed my doctoral research and having found the same problem among lawyers, doctors and other professionals. Could it be that stress is not a personal problem and that we are all suffering in ways never seen in prior generations?

Anxiety is an epidemic

According to recent research, anxiety is the number one mental health problem in North America today. Many of us move constantly at breakneck speed under enormous strains, pressures and expectations. As a result, we are frenzied, frayed, disconnected, and filled with anxious thoughts. We rarely allow ourselves to slow down.

Worse yet, most people suffer with their anxiety alone in silence. Only a few seek therapy and learn a handful of coping strategies. Others obtain anxiety medications or are urged to exercise and eat better. But those who seek help are few and the therapies can be costly, to individuals, families and workplace.

Research shows mindfulness works

Yet the newest research on anxiety shows that mindfulness-based therapy is completely shifting the way psychologists and counselors look at the human condition and our responses to life pressures. The research reveals that mindfulness helps people deal with both physical and emotional pain, stress, anxiety, depression and attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). And this research began more than thirty-five years ago.

In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn, a molecular biologist, founded the now-popular Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. His early research on anxiety and chronic pain showed significant reduction in stress. That rigorously tested program is now being taught at over 250 hospitals across the United States.

In addition, physicians such as Dr. Daniel Siegel have developed cutting-edge therapies such as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), which is being used extensively by psychologists and counselors across North America.

Adding to this research on mindfulness is the data gathered by teachers about social and emotional learning (SEL) and its profound impact on learning, thinking and emotional intelligence. In recent years the Hawn Foundation, established by the actor Goldie Hawn, introduced the successful MindUP program to hundreds of schools in the United States and Canada, a program based in neuroscience, positive psychology and mindful awareness training. In other parts of the world, scholars and sages continue to refine ancient philosophies and practices, such as Buddhism, making them more accessible to the general public. Pema Chödrön, Sharon Salzberg and Jack Kornfield are such leaders, and their books are well worth reading.

But to the general population, mindfulness is still somewhat foreign and few people know about the powerful impact it can have on stress, anxiety and everyday life. Although it has found its way into hospitals and therapists' offices, it is almost non-existent in workplaces.

I wrote this book not to tell you about all the amazing research in this field, but rather to give you a quick and practical introduction to mindfulness so you can experience it for yourself.

Here is the secret

Even after ten years of practice, I still find it difficult to sit still and meditate. Luckily, I now know you do not need to sit on a pillow in order to become more relaxed, calm and focused. The secret is to commit to trying your best to stay completely awake to all that is happening. This means staying in the present moment, here and now. Although learning this skill is quite easy, making it a habit is not so simple. In fact, being mindful is often more about *unlearning our bad habits*, like rushing, panicking and clinging, and replacing them with new habits, like accepting and loving.

Frequently asked questions

Before reading the practices described in this book, it's useful to know a bit about mindfulness. Here are answers to some frequently asked questions.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness means being fully aware or awake. It means being aware of your body, of your thoughts, of your senses and all of your experiences. It also means being awake to your reactions, your emotions and the impact you have on those around you. Mindfulness is about *paying attention on purpose* in a friendly, nonjudgmental way, so you can experience life more fully. Through mindfulness you get in

touch with your body, pay attention to your “monkey mind,” and reconnect with your emotions and with those of others.

The mindful approach to stress and anxiety is to understand what is happening and then approach it with a new perspective. It is about being conscious of what is happening within your body and mind and noticing how your thoughts and emotions are controlling you.

Mindfulness is not about being right or wrong; it’s about practicing techniques that will allow you to see yourself and your world more clearly, so you can respond more appropriately. It’s about admitting that everyone experiences difficulties (not just you) and everyone can learn by being mindful of how to relate and respond to those troubles.

What are mindful practices?

Mindful practices include both formal and informal techniques to help you to be more aware. From meditating on a cushion to day-to-day practices, each of the practices in this book is designed to help you be more awake to what is here right now, in the moment. Through mindfulness practices, you become attuned to your body, thoughts, emotions and all of your life experiences so you can better use this information to embrace life and live with more ease. By being mindful, you can reduce stress, but more importantly, you can develop powerful habits and healthier ways of thinking, feeling and responding.

Where did the practices come from?

Mindfulness practices are rooted in 2,500-year-old meditative and contemplative traditions. Although originally only permitted to be practiced by a chosen few, these practices are now available to all, regardless of religion. For many years and all around the world, researchers, doctors, therapists, teachers, nurses and educators have been developing and testing the effectiveness of hundreds of different mindfulness practices.

Isn't mindfulness a Buddhist practice?

Mindful practices are not related to any formal religion, although many are based on ancient Buddhist meditation practices. Most formal religions embrace these contemplative practices, particularly silence, prayer and meditation. Many modern body-based practices also involve mindfulness, such as yoga, tai chi and qigong.

What are the benefits of mindfulness?

Research shows that mindfulness has significant benefits, including the following:

- Mindfulness reduces anxiety, creates a state of calm and builds resilience.
- Mindfulness enhances the ability to concentrate and focus.
- Mindfulness makes us feel more alive and more empathetic.
- Mindfulness promotes acceptance, less judging and more open-mindedness.

Over time, mindfulness can create positive states of mind that allow greater insight into and understanding of ourselves and the world around us.

Isn't mindfulness just meditation, relaxation or zoning out?

Mindfulness-based meditation does involve sitting still and being silent, but it does not equate with zoning out. Indeed, it entails the opposite. Although your body is relaxed during mindfulness practices, you are directly relating to all of your experiences. You are not running away from your problems or sitting in a trance.

Unlike basic relaxation techniques, mindfulness heightens your awareness of the present moment and encourages you to embrace—not avoid—all of your experiences, whether positive or negative, moment by moment.

How does mindfulness work?

In Western culture we tend to think of anxiety and stress as a disease or something that needs to be cured. We are told that anxiety is a personal problem, that it is temporary and that it will often go away. We believe we simply need to be stronger to be able to cope with day-to-day stresses. , we take pills and drink alcohol, and we read books about how we can be tougher, more tolerant, not so sensitive to “normal” difficulties.

If you visit a Western-trained counselor, you will likely be urged to deal with your stress in three overlapping ways. You will probably be told that you need to *think differently* and could benefit from cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or by replacing your problematic thoughts with better ones. You might be told that your emotions are out of proportion and you could learn to *feel differently* by learning body relaxation and mind control techniques. Finally, you might be told to *behave differently* by learning how to control your physical or verbal responses.

Under this Western ideology, people experiencing anxiety and stress are told there is something wrong with them and then told what they need to do to “get better.” In other words, if you are

suffering, you are told not only that you are the problem, but also that you must change—often immediately. Although it sounds strange, you are told that you are not good enough just as you are.

But the truth is that anxiety and stress are by-products of living in this world. They are human conditions that never really go away. We all experience illness, aging, death and uncertainty. They are unavoidable facts of life. We all suffer stress from these events to some degree; the only difference is how wisely we respond. In other words, do we freak out, panic and have knee-jerk reactions, or do we approach difficulties with mindfulness, wisdom and a sense of calm?

Mindfulness is not about telling you how to change or to be better. It is about acknowledging and being open to all that is happening. It is about noticing, observing and accepting yourself completely so you are able to eventually respond in ways that are more skillful.

How to use this book

Each of the fifty practices is easy and fun. Each introduces a creative way to explore and experiment with a fresh way of being in your life. As you try out these practices, you will feel more at ease and alive, you will feel calmer and at peace, and you will enjoy more compassionate relationships.

Here are some general guidelines when using this book.

- Each practice is a separate exercise designed to enhance your ability to be mindful.
- Each practice should take only a few minutes, but many can last longer if you wish.
- You can select any practice in any order, although the body practices tend to be the easiest.
- You can do one or more practices in a sitting.
- Feel free to tailor the practices so they are truly your own.

These practices are not things to be added to your chores list and should only be done when your curiosity is piqued. Most of all, you cannot do any of them “wrong.” There are no mistakes. They are just practices. You may want to do them over and over and may find that each time something else shows up.

If you like this book—next steps

If you enjoy this book and are keen to be even more mindful, I would suggest the following three strategies: read lots of books in mindfulness and meditation, watch online videos, and listen to podcasts and audios. For some suggestions, check out the list of resources at the end of this book. I love reading Pema Chödrön’s books over and over. You might also enjoy taking a basic course in mindfulness meditation, like MBSR, or join a regular sitting or study group.

I sit with a group once a week, which is lovely, and I attend retreats and lectures whenever I can. Life is hard and it requires practice to respond in an enlightened and skillful way. The most important step is the commitment to continually work at becoming more skillful, admitting you are not as skilled as you might like, but that you will keep trying. Whatever you do, do not let your friends or your ego tell you that all of this is a waste of time. Changing ingrained habits is difficult, and being mindful will at times feel like a bit of a drag, but you can do it, and the practices are most definitely worthwhile.

I feel honoured and blessed to be able to travel in the footsteps of masters including Jack Kornfield, Tara Brach, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Daniel Siegel, Pema Chödrön, Mark Epstein, Ellen Langer, Thích Nhất Hạnh, Amy Salzman, Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein, Bob Stahl and so many more.

Although life seems to be zooming by, the real richness of life becomes available when you are present for it. The more you pay attention to what is happening here and now, the more you can enjoy life and not dwell on the future or the past. When you are being present, you feel a sense of peace and ease. You relax and release stress. You don't have to stop what you are doing. You just have to mentally shift and say, "I am here. I am mindful."