Mindfulness in Behavioral Health
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Mindfulness for Everyday Living

A Guide for Mental Health Practitioners

Springer

Mindfulness in Behavioral Health

Series Editor

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Mindfulness-based therapy is one of the fastest evolving treatment approaches in psychology and related fields. It has been used to treat many forms of psychological and psychiatric distress and medical conditions as well as to foster health and wellness. Early empirical studies and meta-analyses of current research suggest that mindfulness-based therapies are effective and long lasting, but much more data from research and training studies are needed to fully understand its nature and effective practice. The Mindfulness in Behavioral Health series aims to foster this understanding by aggregating this knowledge in a series of high-quality books that will encourage and enhance dialogue among clinicians, researchers, theorists, philosophers and practitioners in the fields of psychology, medicine, social work, counseling and allied disciplines. The books in the series are appropriate for upper level undergraduate and graduate courses. Each book targets a core audience, but also appeals to others interested in behavior change and personal transformation.

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ISSN 2195-9579 ISSN 2195-9587 (electronic)
Mindfulness in Behavioral Health
ISBN 978-3-030-51617-8 ISBN 978-3-030-51618-5 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51618-5

This Springer imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Preface

The need for mental health practitioners is as great as it has ever been. We live in difficult times. Rates of depression and anxiety are increasing in the younger generations. Stress is at high levels as people attempt to cope with ever-changing life demands and expectations. Effective interventions are crucially moving forward to address these growing needs.

Mindfulness provides important principles and skills for both therapists and clients. Psychotherapy involves learning new ways of thinking, interacting, and living, whereas mindfulness provides a strong foundation for developing new ways of thinking, interacting, and living. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that mindfulness principles are integrated into most psychotherapy approaches, and there are a number of books addressing effective mindfulness practice in psychotherapy. There are not as many books, however, addressing how mindfulness can be employed with the diverse clientele that mental health practitioners see on a daily basis. The purpose of this book is to address how mindfulness can be integrated into a number of different contexts and client populations.

In this book, we discuss different ways clients can integrate mindfulness principles more fully into their everyday lives in a variety of contexts. We begin the book addressing the broad concerns of stress reduction, positive living, and the power of compassion. Interestingly, stress reduction was one of the first ways that mindfulness was introduced to Western societies. Jon Kabat-Zinn integrated mindfulness into a stress reduction program used in medical settings to help people cope with chronic pain and difficult diagnoses. Mindfulness is also closely linked to positive psychology and the idea of positive living. In fact, mindfulness is at the core of most approaches to positive psychology. Similarly, compassion is closely linked to positive psychology and is a key aspect of Buddhist meditative practices. Problems with self-compassion in particular are tied to perfectionism and shame which are important issues to address in therapy.

In the middle of the book, we focus on children and parenting issues. We begin with pediatric health and discuss how mindfulness is a powerful tool for helping children cope with chronic health conditions. Although mindfulness practices tend to be more simplistic when working with children, children are more open minded

to new approaches than adults and early exposure to mindfulness training can provide excellent habits for life. We then move to autism and how learning basic mindfulness principles such as body awareness can have a powerful impact on people who struggle with this condition. People with autism benefit significantly from learning how to be more mindful and increase their awareness of self and others. Addressing parenting in this section provides powerful mindfulness tools for parents wanting to build a better approach to working with challenging children as well as their own personal skills as a parent.

The last part of this book focuses on marital relationships and general counseling and mindfulness from a clients' perspective. The two chapters on marital relationships focus on being in the moment with your significant other and present key skills and ideas on how to build positive relationships and intimacy. The last chapter presents mindfulness in a general counseling context but takes a unique approach in that it is written directly to the client. The focus is first understanding mindfulness in a person's life and then providing a number of exercises and examples to guide the client as they develop important life skills.

Three key ideas tie the chapters of this book together. First, avoidance is an incredibly common problem that all people deal with at some level, particularly those who come in for psychotherapy. Avoidance is a common response to pain, but it is not a long-term solution and frequently makes the matter even worse. Mindfulness practice helps us to be with the pain without being overwhelmed, allowing us to get out of the pattern of avoidance and being stuck. Helping clients understand how the brain and body work can help them understand why avoidance frequently happens and why mindfulness can be so therapeutic. Our brains are built to help us survive by avoiding danger. Avoidance, however, can become overgeneralized and people avoid things that are unpleasant but still necessary. By learning to be more mindful, we can work through unpleasant or difficult situations and be with our lives as they happen.

Second, the Buddhist concept of the "Middle Way" is addressed in many chapters. The "Middle Way" emphasizes avoiding extremes and walking the middle path. For example, avoidance can be one extreme with excessive rumination being the extreme on the other end. However, we want to be present with things as they happen, not avoiding or getting overly stuck in our worries about any given situation. In regard to avoidance and rumination, it is very common for clients (and therapists) to feel that they are not being successful with mindfulness practice. It is incredibly helpful to emphasize this fact and let them know that most everybody (including therapists) feel this way at times. The important thing is to keep trying and know that things will improve.

Third, we emphasize the importance of tailoring the intervention to the client in front of you and the context in which they live and experience life. Some interventions take a "one size fits all" approach, but it is more effective to adjust the approach to the needs and understanding of each client individually. One classic example addresses working with clients with minimal mindfulness experience. It is helpful to begin with brief mindfulness exercises such as being aware of the experience of brushing your teeth for 2 min. A 2-min exercise is simple, straightforward, and can

be a positive experience for novices, whereas a 45-min meditation homework assignment might be overwhelming. For those who come with more mindfulness experience, therapy can move more directly into how mindfulness principles can be used. Additionally, how you incorporate mindfulness into therapy varies greatly depending on whether you are working with children, working with distressed couples, or doing general adult counseling. Use the client's language, specific mindfulness terms are not required. Helping clients to put things in their own words can be incredibly stress reducing.

We are excited to share this book with you and the good news that anybody can learn to be more mindful and be in the moment. We hope you enjoy it.

Provo, UT, USA Patrick R. Steffen

Contents

Mindfulness and the Middle Way of Stress Reduction

Patrick R. Steffen, Sheilagh Fox, and Brodrick Brown

We are in the midst of a stress epidemic. Stress has increased in recent years with over one-third of people reporting high levels of stress with which they feel they cannot adequately cope (American Psychological Association, 2017a; Keller et al., 2012). Stress plays a significant role in disease and disability, and it is estimated that over 75% of physician visits are for stress-related symptoms and complaints. Because of the high prevalence of stress, major health organizations have called for increased treatment resources to address the stress epidemic. Not surprisingly, most respondents in national surveys state they need help in reducing stress (American Psychological Association, 2017b). From money and financial problems, to relationship issues, to problems with health, people report high levels of stress and difficulties coping with that stress.

Fortunately, there are effective treatments for stress, with a large body of research finding that mindfulness interventions are particularly effective at helping people reduce and manage stress (Chin et al., 2019; Kabat-Zinn, 2013). The purpose of this chapter is to explain why stress can be so bad for us and how mindfulness can be so good for us as we cope with stress. By learning how to be with and respond to our life stressors in a mindful and balanced way, we can live a rich, fulfilling life.

What Is Stress and How Does It Impact Health?

Stress involves strain and tension from dealing with difficult life circumstances (Shields & Slavich, 2017). When we are stressed by life difficulties, our bodies activate the "fight or flight" response, and hormones involved in the stress response are increased in the bloodstream preparing the body for action (Sapolsky, 2004). In

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P. R. Steffen (ed.), *Mindfulness for Everyday Living*, Mindfulness in Behavioral Health, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51618-5_1

our modern world, however, we rarely need to punch someone in the nose or run away screaming. Although our stress response prepares us for physical action, we rarely do anything physical to cope with stress. Rather, our stressors are often social in nature, and the response is to sit there and try to cope mentally. If we frequently perceive high levels of stress, our stress response is chronically activated which can lead to health problems. Physiological resources are chronically diverted to maintain the stress response at the expense of key bodily systems such as the gastrointestinal and immune systems, resulting in physical health problems, including issues with digestion and inability to cope with disease, as well as debilitating mental health issues such as depression and anxiety (Steffen, Austin, & DeBarros, 2017).

Fortunately, we do have some control over how stress impacts us. The impact of stress on our health is directly related to whether we perceive stress as a threat or a challenge. A large national study found that people who perceived stress as a *threat* that they could not adequately cope with were more likely to die early, whereas people who perceived stress as a *challenge* that they could adequately cope with did not have negative health consequences (Keller et al., 2012). This idea is supported by a number of researchers and philosophers (Sapolsky, 2004). Hans Selye, a pioneer in stress medicine, said that the impact of stress on our health depends on how we perceive it. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus taught that it is not what happens to us in life that matters, so much as our perception of what happens. Both Viktor Frankl and William James taught that we have the power to choose our attitudes and our attitudes directly impact how stress affects us. This is wonderful news! We have the power to change how we perceive our lives and our circumstances, and this directly changes the impact of stress in our lives. And, as we will discuss in this chapter, mindfulness is an excellent way to change our perceptions of the world and our response to stress.

To understand how stress leads to physical health problems, let us look at what happens during the stress response. Robert Sapolsky (2004), in his highly engaging book *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers*, notes that there are five key things that happen in our bodies to help us respond to stress. These are (1) get energy out of storage; (2) move that energy to where it is needed, especially the muscles; (3) turn off or reduce longer-term projects such as immune surveillance and digestion; (4) blunt the pain response; and (5) enhance mental functioning to focus on coping with the current situation. In the short term, this is a wonderful, adaptive response that helps us focus and cope effectively.

Long-term activation of the stress response, however, wears the body down. People who are chronically stressed never in turn seem to be able to turn off their stress responses. They are physiologically dysregulated and prone to disease and chronic health problems. Let's look at what happens at each step of a chronically elevated stress response to explain how this happens. In step 1, getting energy out of storage, chronic stress activation can lead to problems with metabolism and diabetes as insulin and glucose levels are dysregulated. In step 2, moving energy where it is needed, blood pressure moves to hypertensive levels, and the risk for heart disease increases. In step 3, turning off or reducing longer-term projects such as immune surveillance can make us more prone to disease. In step 4, blunting pain leads to

pain sensitivity in chronic stress situations. In step 5, chronic stress is correlated with decreased mental functioning over time and poorer memory performance. In short, chronic distress leads to increased problems with metabolism and diabetes, high blood pressure and heart problems, immune suppression, pain difficulties, and memory problems.

The Middle Way of Stress Reduction

Healthy stress is about healthy balance or balancing between excessive responses. This has been called "living the middle way" because health often involves balancing between the extremes of over-engagement and avoidance (Britton, 2019). To understand why mindfulness and living the middle way are powerful approaches to stress reduction and stress management, we want to understand the underlying physiology of the stress response. In fact, understanding how the stress response works is the first step to having healthy stress in our lives. To survive and thrive, we need to balance our internal needs, such as digestion and immune function, with external demands, such as dealing with other people and difficult life situations (Sapolsky, 2004). In biology, the term "homeostasis" is used to define balance, the fact that physiological parameters like body temperature need to be maintained within a specific range for the body to function in a healthy manner. We also need homeostatic balance between our internal needs and our external demands to function in a healthy manner. The more energy we spend on dealing with external demands such as coping with other people and difficult life situations, the less energy we have for internal needs like digestion and immune function.

Having a healthy balance and living the middle way lead us to an important point. Stress reduction and stress management are not about reducing stress to zero but moving it to a healthy, happy balance. In fact, having no stress at all would be boring. In the famous Yerkes-Dodson law (Yerkes & Dodson, 1908), our best performance occurs when we are moderately stressed and engaged. Too much stress, of course, is debilitating and leads to poorer performance. Too little stress, on the other hand, is also related to poorer performance as we are not really engaged in what we are doing. Perhaps surprisingly, enjoyment and happiness come from engaging fully in the moment and experiencing a moderate amount of stress.

One more important point is people often get confused by the term "stress hormones." The term 'stress hormones' leads some to believe that these hormones are only released during times of stress, leading to an incorrect belief that we want to turn off "stress hormones" in order to be relaxed and happy. However, there are no hormones in the body that are purely "stress hormones." Even though the hormones cortisol and adrenaline (also called epinephrine) play key roles in the stress response, they are found flowing through our veins even on our most relaxed days. Cortisol is primarily a metabolic hormone which makes it an ideal part of the stress response because it is involved in energy regulation, but we still have cortisol flowing through our veins even when we are not stressed. Adrenaline is a key part of the sympathetic

nervous system which regulates energy in the body, but we still have adrenaline flowing through our veins even when we are not stressed. Instead of turning off "stress hormones," we want to have a healthy balance of hormones involved in energy metabolism and regulation. Healthy coping then is not stress elimination or stress avoidance, but healthy stress engagement.

What Is Mindfulness and How Can It Help with Stress?

Mindfulness involves being in the present moment in an open and nonjudgmental way, being aware of and accepting our current experience (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Kabat-Zinn calls this "paying attention on purpose" (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 145). Common responses to stress include overreacting or avoiding and not accepting our current experience because it is difficult, painful, or boring, so we focus our minds elsewhere, living in the past, the future, or an escapist fantasy world. As responses to stress, however, these are not effective coping methods and can make our stress even worse because we avoid dealing with life problems. When we respond in a balanced, mindful way to our stress instead of overreacting or avoiding, we are actually doing the opposite of the stress response. As we increase our awareness and acceptance of stress, we put ourselves in a better position to more effectively cope with and reduce our stress response (Chin et al., 2019; Creswell, Pacilio, Lindsay, & Brown, 2014; Lindsay et al., 2018).

We might think that accepting our current experience is "giving in" to life difficulties, but that is not what acceptance means. Acceptance means being aware of and open to what is happening right now. If something negative or harmful is happening, we can use this awareness to make informed decisions in how to best respond to the situation. When we avoid accepting the reality of our situation, we are less able to accurately assess and then appropriately respond in a helpful way. It may seem counterintuitive, but acceptance is often the beginning of change.

Mindfulness is about process instead of content, a way of relating to one's experience without attempting to create a certain type of experience or reaching a specific state. This makes it fundamentally different from stress management approaches which seek to reach a specific mental state and relaxation. Relaxation is often a result of mindfulness practice, but that is not the primary goal. The primary goal is changing our awareness and engagement with life, and as we improve awareness and engagement with life, our stress response will improve also.

We all have the ability to develop a more mindful approach to life and to become more aware of our present experience and to explore it with an open-minded attitude. We develop mindfulness as we voluntarily focus our attention on our lives and on what is occurring now. We direct our attention to what we are actually and currently experiencing, beginning with bodily sensations and eventually moving up to emotions and thoughts. Mindfulness is a process that takes time to develop in our lives, and most mindfulness practitioners will devote at least 20 min a day to regular practice, with many mindfulness interventions such as mindfulness-based stress

reduction (MBSR) and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT) recommending 45 min of practice each day. Although mindfulness skills take time to develop, the physiological impact can be immediate, with novice meditators showing significant reductions in blood pressure after just 15 min of practice (Steffen & Larson, 2015).

Stress and Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)

Because stress is a universal experience and causes a multitude of problems, people often spend a great deal of time and money on attempts to cope with their stress. There are many approaches to stress reduction, but the most researched and successful approach comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013). Kabat-Zinn is a pioneer in mindfulness-based approaches to coping with stress. He developed a highly effective mindfulness-based program that led to a significant shift in the treatment of stress. In his book, *Full Catastrophe Living*, Kabat-Zinn details how mindfulness, a set of traditional Buddhist techniques, can be used in order to change how people interact with their bodies and surroundings. Mindfulness involves being aware of your moment-to-moment experiences without trying to change anything or trying to fill your moments with anything else (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). In other words, individuals who practice mindfulness learn to pay attention to what they are experiencing in the present rather than what might happen in the future or what has happened in the past. One's attention is entirely focused on what they are currently perceiving, including all of the five senses.

For example, one common and simple mindfulness activity is called mindful eating. In this type of practice, an individual takes time to slowly observe what a small food item (like a strawberry, raisin, or cracker) looks like, smells like, feels like in their hands and mouth, and tastes like. The item might even be held up to an ear while moved through the fingers in order to detect any sound it makes. This type of small, short practice is an example of something physical that can be done to help individuals focus on the moment at hand. However, those who engage in mindfulness meditation focus on "being" rather than "doing," in general. The applications of mindfulness reach significantly farther than placing undivided attention on small snacks.

An important key to mindfulness is awareness of the present moment in a nonjudgmental way. This means that the sensations and experiences that are brought to awareness are not judged as positive or negative; they are simply observed. In addition, while other thoughts that distract from the current experience are bound to come up, it is counterproductive to be frustrated with oneself or attempt to force those thoughts out of the mind. Instead, these thoughts are noticed, and attention is simply brought back to mindfully considering the present moment.

Elements of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction

Kabat-Zinn created an 8-week course called mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) that originated in the stress clinic at the University of Massachusetts in Worchester, Massachusetts. This course, which is described in detail in *Full Catastrophe Living*, attracts participants who are struggling with physical illnesses and injuries, chronic pain, anxiety and other mental health concerns, and many other stressors. Kabat-Zinn asserts that success comes from participants taking an active role in their own health care and learning to take care of themselves. This is not meant to be a replacement for adequate medical care, but a complement to it. Many individuals who would not typically be willing to practice meditation find themselves participating in MBSR when they felt they had attempted every other course of action. This includes those with complaints such as headaches, high blood pressure, chronic pain, heart disease, cancer, and other disorders usually considered medical in nature (Hoge et al., 2018).

The MBSR protocol consists of 2-h weekly group meetings and a full-day Saturday retreat for practice between session six and session seven. The general approaches that are taught in these group meetings include mindfulness meditation, body scanning, and simple yoga postures. While a great deal of practice occurs in the group classes and the Saturday retreat, one of the most important parts of the class is the development of a personal practice of these strategies. Initially, the practice is divided into formal and informal activity. The informal practice includes "dropping in" to mindfully pay attention to what is happening at a variety of times throughout the day. Daily formal practice consists of 10 min of focus on breathing and a 45-min body scan that consists of focusing on different parts of the body systematically. Throughout the 8 weeks, other activities are included in the formal practice, including yoga and other mindful activities. Ultimately, the participants learn these strategies in order to develop their own practice and engage in mindfulness in the ways that are most effective and enjoyable for them. MBSR has been extensively researched as an approach to decrease stress and help individuals live their lives in more meaningful ways (Hoge et al., 2018; Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)

Mindfulness is a key practice in psychotherapy today. Cognitive behavioral therapies (CBT) are the most commonly used psychotherapeutic approaches in the United States, with the cutting-edge "third wave" CBT approaches of dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), all incorporating mindfulness principles as core elements of their approach (Tolin, 2018). We focus on MBCT specifically in this chapter as it has the strongest integration of both mindfulness principles

and mindfulness practice, as well as a strong research base documenting its effectiveness (Philipott & Segal, 2009).

MBCT was developed for people suffering from recurrent depressive episodes, combining MBSR, psychoeducation, and cognitive therapy elements designed to specifically address depression. MBCT consists of eight weekly sessions lasting two and half hours each. Sessions begin with direct mindfulness practice, having clients focus their attention on present experience nonjudgmentally in various exercises, followed by a discussion of what was experienced during the exercise. The therapist then addresses the specific topic of the session, rooting it in the comments and experiences just shared. Finally, homework is assigned (including 45 min of daily practice), and the session is closed with a short mindfulness exercise. Exercises and homework cover a range of topics from body awareness and sensation, accomplishing daily routines with mindful focus such as brushing one's teeth, and being aware of thoughts and emotions. MBCT also integrates psychoeducation and cognitive therapy components specific to depression, specifically focusing on symptoms of depressive relapse, irrational thoughts common in depression, and concrete strategies to counteract the development of depression.

An interesting side note on depression and stress, the famed stress researcher Robert Sapolsky (2004) argues that depression and severe chronic stress are really the same thing. He provides three lines of research to back up his position. First, both depression and chronic stress lead to hippocampal damage seen on brain scans. In both cases, the hippocampus is smaller compared to matched controls. Second, elevation in the hormone cortisol predicts hippocampal damage, and cortisol is significantly elevated in both depression and chronic stress. And third, the single strongest predictor of the first major depressive episode is a significant stressor that severely impacts life. Given that MBCT is an effective treatment for recurring depressive episodes, it is likely that MBCT is also an effective treatment for ongoing chronic stress.

MBCT, as well as other "third wave" approaches, differs from classical CBT in in how maladaptive thoughts are addressed. In classical CBT, maladaptive thoughts are directly challenged, and a key goal is to change irrational beliefs into more rational beliefs. MBCT, however, emphasizes changing client's attitudes toward thoughts. From a mindfulness perspective, thoughts are a product of mind activity and are not objective reality. Instead of trying to change thoughts, the focus is on changing our relationship with our thoughts by nonjudgmentally being aware of thoughts as they occur. By nonjudgmentally observing our thoughts and emotions as they arise without trying to change them or avoid them, we come to recognize that our thoughts are distinct from who we really are. The realization that we are more than the sum of our thoughts is powerful and can shift our perception and awareness of the world.

MBCT and classical CBT also differ in the therapist/client relationship. In classical CBT, the therapist is considered an expert with knowledge to impart. In MBCT, therapists act more like coaches who encourage clients to be their own experts by exploring their personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions. Working from the idea that "you teach what you are," therapists have their own personal practice,

applying mindfulness in their own lives before prescribing it to clients. In MBCT, the goal is not to convey knowledge but to help guide clients as they explore personal experiences. The goal is developing self-awareness instead of simple symptom reduction, to facilitate rather than direct.

Integration

The impact of mindfulness approaches such as MBSR and MBCT on stress may occur through at least three different mechanisms (Baer, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 2013; Philippot & Segal, 2009). First and foremost, mindfulness helps people increase awareness and acceptance. This is an important first step in stress reduction. To be able to cope effectively with stress, we need to be aware of what is happening and accept the reality of our lives and not avoid stress because it can be difficult. Being mindfully aware of difficult emotions is similar to exposure therapy where clients learn to be with and not avoid painful experiences, learning that being with difficult emotions does not result in the feared outcomes or catastrophic consequences. Practicing mindfulness in a therapeutic setting helps clients to develop the psychological skills that are key to healthy mental and emotional regulation.

Second, mindfulness approaches such as MBCT help clients change how they relate to thoughts and feelings, helping them recognize that thoughts are a creation of our minds and not a reflection of truth or reality. A key maladaptive belief addressed in CBT is that we are our thoughts and that thoughts represent truth; if I have a thought, then it must be true (Tolin, 2018). For example, if I think I am an unlikable person, then I must be an unlikable person. Mindfulness practice helps clients recognize that they are more than the sum of their thoughts. Practicing being with thoughts as they occur without judging them and accepting them whether they are good, bad, or otherwise are tremendously therapeutic.

Third, a key goal of CBT is increasing awareness of and changing automatic thoughts. This process is greatly facilitated by mindfulness practice. Practicing mindfulness helps clients develop "psychological mindedness" where they can create distance between themselves and their automatic thoughts and responses. Mindfulness strengthens voluntary attentional control as clients practice focusing awareness on sensations, emotions, and thoughts. With practice, clients are then able to become aware of and then disengage from negative automatic patterns. Over the course of therapy, clients develop the capacity to withhold automatic responses by learning to observe and develop awareness of automatically activated action tendencies without acting on them. Instead, clients develop adaptive responses built on voluntary choice as they consciously reflect on their life and experience.

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Mindfulness and Positive Living

Jared S. Warren

The present moment is filled with joy and happiness. If you are attentive, you will see it.

—Thich Nhat Hanh

What first piqued your interest in mindfulness practices? For most people in Western society, interest in mindfulness begins with an intention to get help with a specific challenge like stress, anxiety, depression, physical pain, or insomnia. Clearly, research over the past 30 years supports mindfulness practices in working with these and other challenges, and most of the chapters in this volume explore how mindfulness can be helpful in many of these specific contexts. However, many are pleasantly surprised to find that their efforts to establish a regular mindfulness practice also have broad crossover benefits to numerous other aspects of everyday life. While there is nothing wrong with learning about mindfulness to find help for a specific challenge, perhaps the greatest potential of these practices lies in the many ways mindfulness supports positive living in general. This chapter explores how mindfulness practices contribute to many aspects of human flourishing studied in the positive psychology literature, including gratitude, savoring, optimism, positive relationships, and personal agency.

Mindfulness is often introduced as *present-moment awareness with acceptance*. A challenge with this succinct and accurate definition is that for those new to the concept, it may not communicate the remarkably broad and practical applications of mindfulness for everyday life. For newcomers, it may be helpful to understand mindfulness as *a healthy awareness of thoughts, emotions, and experiences that we can apply to everyday circumstances to live a rich and joyful life*. To illustrate, consider the contrasting scenarios in the following vignettes:

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P. R. Steffen (ed.), *Mindfulness for Everyday Living*, Mindfulness in Behavioral Health, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51618-5_2

Danielle's Drive

Scenario A: *Danielle's morning commute is taking longer than expected due to traffic. Feeling impatient, she starts to ruminate over several stressors she's facing in her new director position at work. She gets increasingly frustrated with every dead stop on the freeway, worried that being late will throw off the rest of her day. She gets to her office only 5 min late but feels exhausted as she sits down to her desk and ends up spending 30 min reading lifestyle news online to try to settle her mind. She finally resolves to get to work but feels guilty for having wasted time when there were urgent tasks in her inbox.*

Scenario B: *Danielle's morning commute is taking longer than expected due to traffic. She notices some feelings of impatience and decides to take a couple deep breaths, paying attention to the subtle sensations that are part of each inhalation and exhalation. She notices a number of stressful thoughts come to mind about challenges she's facing in her new director position at work. She decides to let those thoughts go for now, aware that she can attend to those issues when she gets to the office. Instead, each time she's stopped in traffic, she brings her attention to the sensations of her hands on the steering wheel while reminding herself that the traffic isn't something she can control. She soon begins to notice other things, like the beautiful morning light on the nearby mountains, which reminds her how grateful she is to live where she does. This prompts a related thought of gratitude about her new position at work, something she's trained hard for and is thrilled to have in spite of the stressors involved. She takes a moment to let this feeling of appreciation resonate and sink in. She gets to her office only 5 min late and takes the next 5 min to prioritize her task list, feeling a sense of purpose and motivation as she dives in to the most urgent task in her inbox.*

Collin's Conversation

Scenario A: *Collin is at lunch with his brother. He reflexively pulls out his smartphone to scroll through social media. Collin is half-listening as his brother starts making small talk but is caught off guard when his brother snaps at him,* "Are you even listening?" *Collin responds defensively,* "Dude, I'm listening; why are you barking at me? If you're stressed you don't need to take it out on me!" *Deflated, his brother mumbles* "Nevermind…" *and pulls out his own smartphone.*

Scenario B: *Collin is at lunch with his brother. He notices the urge to pull out his smartphone but decides to wait until later. His brother is making small talk, and Collin notices that he looks a little subdued. Collin asks,* "Hey, you look a little down; what's up?" *His brother takes a deep breath and starts to tell Collin about a potentially serious health concern. Collin listens attentively and with a sincere sense of compassion for his brother. The news is sobering, but Collin is appreciative that his brother will let him share some of this burden with him and grateful for the renewed sense of closeness they feel as they discuss this sensitive issue.*

What did you notice in these contrasting scenarios? Scenario B in each vignette demonstrates how a mindful approach to a common situation can have positive cascading effects and that a subtle shift in awareness can make a big difference in the quality and outcome of a given experience.

Mindfulness practices complement many of the skills and topics that fall under the umbrella of *positive psychology.* Simply stated, positive psychology is the study of human flourishing and optimal experience—a science of happiness and

well-being (Sheldon & King, 2001). Mindfulness shares much in common with positive psychology, including interests in cultivating awareness of thoughts and emotions, increasing psychological flexibility and emotional intelligence, taking effective action, developing healthy relationships, and facilitating compassion toward self and others (Kashdan & Ciarrochi, 2013). Mindfulness practices include a broad range of formal and informal activities, from meditation (e.g., sitting and attending to the sensations of the breath and/or other experiences), to physical awareness exercises (e.g., yoga, tai chi, body scan exercises), to simply giving your full attention to whatever you're doing at a given moment during the day. Similarly, a number of complementary strategies have emerged from research in positive psychology that contribute to well-being, such as keeping a gratitude journal, practicing self-compassion exercises, and learning to cultivate optimism through noticing and examining thoughts. Ultimately, both mindfulness and positive psychology are concerned with deepening our capacity for peace, joy, and awareness. The following sections explore how mindfulness supports a number of components of positive living that have been the focus of study in the positive psychology literature.

Gratitude

> *The miracle of gratitude is that it shifts your perception to such an extent that it changes the world you see.*
>
> —Robert Holden

Take a moment to think of something that you wanted very much in the past and now is a reality in your life. It could be forming a relationship with a specific person, getting a job you really wanted, having a child, or maybe buying a new home or vehicle. Think of how you felt when that thing came to pass in your life. How easy is it to bring back the strong positive emotions that were part of that initial experience? How often do you do so? It's interesting to consider that most of us are already "living our dreams" in many respects and that many of the things we once worked for and hoped for are now our daily reality, yet we tend to focus on what we don't have. In a similar vein, how often do you pause briefly and bask in appreciation for a simple, everyday comfort or convenience—like motorized transportation, electricity, or internal plumbing? No "guilt trip" is intended here, just the emphasis that at any given moment, there are countless aspects of our experience that, if we are paying attention to them, could bring an increased sense of well-being.

Positive living includes cultivating the habit of gratitude: a felt sense of appreciation and thankfulness for positive life events and circumstances. Gratitude isn't just the social convention of remembering to say "thank you" to others; it is a habit of awareness and an orientation to life that significantly enhances our well-being. It includes the habit of recognizing that things could be very different and not in a good way. Dr. Tal Ben-Shahar, author and positive psychologist, emphasizes that the word "appreciate" has two meanings: to be grateful for something and to

increase in value. When we appreciate the good in our lives, the good appreciates—it increases in value.

A wealth of research indicates that gratitude promotes other positive emotions and outcomes, including happiness, hopefulness, increased energy, improved life satisfaction, and decreased levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Emmons & Shelton, 2002; Emmons & Stern, 2013). In addition to promoting personal well-being, gratitude prompts us to act in prosocial ways to benefit those around us. As gratitude researcher Robert Emmons observes, gratitude is important not only because it helps us *feel good* but also because it inspires us to *do good* (Emmons & Stern, 2013).

Gratitude works against the normal human tendency to become accustomed to positive circumstances and to take positive events for granted. Neuropsychologist Rick Hanson often notes that the human brain is like Teflon for good experiences and Velcro for bad ones. Instead of focusing on what's going well, the brain is primed to look out for potential threats to our well-being. This default orientation was valuable in our evolutionary history, as it helped our ancestors survive in much more threatening environments than we experience today. However, we don't have to settle for what our default wiring offers; our everyday experience can be enhanced by *learning not to forget* the many fortunate aspects of our experiences.

This is where mindfulness comes in. Mindfulness promotes gratitude because it increases awareness of our moment-to-moment experience and facilitates remembering. More specifically, mindfulness promotes a more frequent returning to the perspective that nothing is missing from this moment and that this very moment carries opportunities for joy and wholeness. The English term *mindfulness* is a translation of the word *sati* from the Pali language (one of the primary Indian languages from which mindfulness practices have been passed down). Scholars have explained that the term *sati* emphasizes three components: awareness, attention, and remembering. Applied to the concept of gratitude, mindfulness practices help increase our awareness of the positive aspects of our experience, bring our attention to the good things happening right now, and help us remember that circumstances could very well be less fortunate for us. Similarly, the concept of *beginner's mind* is often emphasized in mindfulness practices. This means not letting previous experiences or expectations get in the way of what is happening now and having an attitude of openness and eagerness toward an experience, just as a beginner would. Mindfulness practices facilitate gratitude by helping us "see with new eyes" the circumstances and experiences that we might otherwise take for granted.

Importantly, mindfulness can even facilitate gratitude for challenging events and circumstances. A mindful approach to difficult experiences emphasizes openness and acceptance, which minimize the distress we might otherwise create for ourselves by wishing that things were different or resisting the reality of the situation. From a mindfulness perspective, acceptance doesn't mean resignation, nor does it mean necessarily liking the experience; it is simply a recognition that this is the way things are right now. It's acknowledging, "Ok, this situation is really hard" and not fighting the difficult emotions that might be part of the experience. Because we're less likely to be wrapped up in resistance against the experience and our own

emotions, we can see the situation more objectively, and we will be more likely to learn from it and to notice the positive aspects of the event (like a friend's kindness and support). As a result, we can find that there is just as much value in a moment of suffering as in a moment of joy and feel sincere gratitude for what we learn from any experience.

Gratitude Practice Pause and ask yourself, "What do I have to be grateful for right now?" Reflect on the gifts, benefits, and positive circumstances in your life right now. These could be simple conveniences or pleasures, people in your life, opportunities, good health, possessions, personal talents, or experiences you've had. We might not normally think of these things as gifts, but for this exercise, see what it's like to think about them in this way. Take some time to really appreciate these gifts, and think about their value. Let this sense of appreciation for these gifts "sink in" to you, as if you are a sponge absorbing and becoming full with these positive emotions. Then, take the next 5 min to write your thoughts about these gifts.

To learn more about research-based strategies for cultivating gratitude, visit www.mybestself101.org/gratitude

Savoring

> *An average human looks without seeing, listens without hearing, touches without feeling, eats without tasting, moves without physical awareness, inhales without awareness of odour or fragrance, and talks without thinking*.
>
> —Leonardo da Vinci

It's sobering to think how many times we may have devoured a delicious meal so quickly that we barely tasted it or missed a moment of sublime beauty because our mind was busy ruminating over some past event or planning what we were going to do next. The human brain habitually sacrifices awareness of seemingly routine experiences in the present so that cognitive resources can be used for other tasks like evaluating and pursuing opportunities in the future. This isn't always a bad thing; you don't have to take time deliberating about which shoe to put on first or weighing the pros and cons of brushing your teeth in the morning—you just do it. But there's a risk that if your mind is always on "autopilot," cruising inattentively through the present moment so you can get to the next thing, valuable positive experiences can be missed. What would it be like to look back at the end of your life and realize that you weren't really "there" for most of it?

Our fast-paced, consumerism-oriented culture also puts us at risk for missing many positive experiences in the present moment. Unfortunately, Western culture generally fails to appreciate the normal human phenomenon of *hedonic adaptation*: the fact that we quickly adapt to positive new events and circumstances. A new car, a promotion at work, cosmetic surgery, or our favorite sports team winning the championship may bring a short-term burst of happiness, but the benefit to our overall well-being ends up being much smaller than we anticipated and wears off

quickly. This can result in a life of exhaustion on the "hedonic treadmill," spurred on by modern culture's pervasive messages that some other shiny new thing is out there for us to pursue and that more is always better. Unfortunately, we're not very good at noticing when we have enough, nor are we usually aware that pursuing the next thing can cause us to look past all that's available to us right now. Fortunately, stepping off the hedonic treadmill and being more aware of the opportunities inherent in the present moment are skills that can be learned.

Savoring involves bringing a mindful awareness to positive experiences for the purpose of prolonging and amplifying their value. It means learning to slow down and fully appreciate the depth available in a given experience. Savoring increases positive emotions and life satisfaction, promotes an optimistic perspective, and protects against depression and stress (Bryant & Veroff, 2007; Lyubomirsky, 2007). Savoring can be applied to practically any experience: viewing a sunset, conversing with a friend, listening to music, taking a shower, or watching a sporting event. Although savoring is most often applied to present-moment experiences (e.g., slowly enjoying a piece of fresh fruit), one can savor the past (e.g., purposefully reminiscing on a happy memory) as well as the future (e.g., allowing oneself to experience joyful anticipation of a coming event). In any of these cases, the task is the same: bringing one's full awareness to the positive experience to explore its depths, carving out a greater capacity for joy.

There are many ways in which mindfulness practices promote more frequent and meaningful savoring experiences. Mindfulness approaches emphasize a greater awareness of present-moment experience, making it easier to slow down and notice when the mind is trying to leap ahead to the next thing. Bringing a full awareness to the present moment helps thwart hedonic adaptation by prolonging the positive aspects of the current experience. It works against the normal tendency to judge the current experience as being "not enough." Furthermore, many mindfulness exercises cultivate the skill of sensory awareness, learning to bring a sustained, engaged openness to all of the various aspects of routine sensory experiences. In fact, there is a veritable symphony of interesting sensory experiences available to us all the time but to which we are usually oblivious because we are in the habit of ignoring seemingly irrelevant stimuli. Again, this isn't always a bad thing, but the skill of quickly and frequently opening up your senses to more fully enjoy an experience whenever you choose to do so can bring more joy to your life.

As an example, I had a memorable experience related to savoring during a week-long mindfulness retreat for mental health professionals. In addition to periods of meditation, instruction, and quiet nature walks in a beautiful mountain ranch in New Mexico, participants were encouraged to practice mindful eating. This meant slowing down the usual pace of eating (even setting down the utensil to pause between each bite) and really attending to the textures, flavors, temperatures, aromas, and other sensory aspects of the eating experience. I was about 3 days into the retreat, and after an initial period of wondering whether I was going to make it the full week, I started to fully settle into the experience of mindful eating one morning during breakfast. I had a bowl of oatmeal and some fruit in front of me, and I picked up a strawberry with my fingers and examined it carefully. I marveled at the pattern on

its surface and its vibrant color. I lifted it to my nose and smelled its unique fragrance, noticing a subtle salivary response in my mouth. I put it to my lips and held it there for a moment. I opened my mouth and prepared to take a bite; my full attention was on this simple experience of tasting an ordinary strawberry. I slowly bit into the strawberry, my attention completely immersed in the textures, juices, and flavor of this piece of fruit. In this state of increased awareness, the sensations were so vivid that I was overcome with a feeling of joy and started to weep. I had the thought, "Wow, I'm crying over a strawberry; that's pretty weird!" I knew others were probably looking at me and wondering what was going on, but it didn't matter. This was a precious moment, and I was going to savor it. I let the warm tears continue down my cheeks as I slowly and joyfully appreciated the experience of this simple breakfast.

Savoring Practice Use the following SCONE acronym to savor a walk in nature (sounds tasty, doesn't it?).

S: Slow down. Walk much more slowly than you normally do, giving yourself time to notice things that you might not normally notice. Imagine you are a curious alien scientist visiting Earth for the first time, engaging with this fascinating new landscape and studying it carefully and eagerly.

C: Consider the context. Consider the context of this landscape, how it's been millions of years in the making and how it's been the home of countless creatures, and consider all the forces that contributed to the scene now before you (geological forces, solar energy, photosynthesis, symbiotic relationships, countless cycles of death, decay, rebirth, new growth, etc.). Also consider your own personal context for being here to enjoy this scene. For example, consider your personal health and other positive circumstances (financial, familial, etc.) that made it possible for you to be here now.

O: Open up your senses. Take time to cycle through each of your senses, spending several minutes noticing what comes up with each sense: what you can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. How many different sounds can you hear? What's the most distant sound you can perceive? Can you notice sounds within sounds? Notice the different visual patterns, shapes, and colors. Notice what moves and what doesn't. What does the tree bark smell like? How many different scents can you notice? What does the grass taste like? Take off your shoes, and feel the sensation of the bare earth or grass beneath you. Immerse yourself in the symphony of sensory experiences available to you.

N: Notice thoughts. Be aware of thoughts as they come and go, letting them arise and pass away without your attention being carried away by them. Whatever comes up is fine: "My feet are getting dirty," "Am I doing this right?," and "I forgot to call my sister…." Just let the thought pass by like a car passing in front of your house, and bring your attention back to the available sensory experiences. If you notice a lot of thinking, planning, or evaluating going on, just gently say, "Thanks, mind, there will be time for that later," and come right back to what you can notice with your senses.

E: Enjoy this moment! Take your time. Be grateful for the experience. Be appreciative that you're alive and aware. Often the mind is busy making judgments about what's not right and looking for something better. What's just right about this moment? Consider that in the most important ways, nothing is missing. Look for the joy available in this moment. Appreciate it, savor it, prolong it, and enjoy it.

To learn more about research-based strategies for practicing savoring, visit www.mybestself101.org/savoring.

Optimism

For myself I am an optimist--it does not seem to be much use being anything else.
—Winston Churchill

Optimism has been a topic of study for decades in the positive psychology literature (Lyubomirsky, 2007; Seligman, 1990). Optimists fare better than pessimists on a broad range of outcomes, including immune system functioning, longevity, and the ability to cope with difficult circumstances (Carver & Scheier, 1998; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Sharot, 2011). A simple definition of optimism is the expectation of positive outcomes: looking for the silver lining in a cloud, seeing the glass as half full, and feeling good about one's future and the future of the world. A potential concern with this simple view of optimism is that it can often feel naive—a kind of "Pollyanna" perspective that ignores the challenges and suffering that are part of real life. Does optimism require burying one's head in the sand with regard to difficult thoughts, emotions, and experiences?

Mindful optimism emphasizes the ability and willingness to observe the entire inner landscape of thoughts and feelings (whether perceived as positive or negative) and to choose the perspective and subsequent action that maximizes one's well-being. It's not ignoring or denying the negative; it's being aware of the negative while nurturing positive thought patterns, because that makes for a better life. Rather than resisting or avoiding reality, optimism simply means emphasizing the perspective that promotes growth and positive living.

Consider the analogy of your mind as a stage. All kinds of thoughts make their way across the stage of your awareness, like actors competing for attention. Try as you might, you often can't control what wanders out there, but as the director, you *can* control where you shine the spotlight of your attention. And interestingly, the thoughts that get more of the spotlight grow and start to crowd out the thoughts that you don't feed with your attention. We could say that optimism is skillfully directing the spotlight of your attention to grow those thoughts and feelings that maximize your well-being while not feeding the negative thoughts with your attention or resistance.

Mindfulness practices promote optimism in a number of ways. One way is that practicing acceptance of challenging emotions paradoxically allows them to decrease on their own. As noted previously, acceptance in this context means

awareness of one's current reality, without denying or resisting it. In the midst of a challenge, this means acknowledging, for example, "Wow, this is really hard. I'm feeling really discouraged right now." During a difficult experience, it's normal to think "I don't want to feel this way," and we often use considerable energy trying to ignore, suppress, or resist the emotional experience. In the mind as a stage analogy, it would be like trying to push the undesirable actors to the background or hiding them behind a curtain. However, psychologist Christopher Germer humorously observes that when we try to resist difficult emotions, they go to the basement and lift weights, coming back stronger than before. A mindful acceptance of difficult thoughts, emotions, and experiences relieves us from an emotional wrestling match we can't win and frees us up to see and cultivate the positive aspects of our circumstances.

Similarly, mindfulness promotes the noticing of unhelpful thoughts before they carry us down a pessimistic spiral. Shakespeare's Hamlet observed, "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." Clearly, our thoughts shape our perceptions of an experience. Being able to observe one's thoughts without being carried away by the accompanying emotional narrative allows one to view an experience with greater perspective. It also makes it easier to see that there are many ways to view and interpret an experience, and because of the brain's default negativity bias (being Velcro for bad experiences), usually that means we open ourselves up to seeing more of the positives. As a result, people who practice mindfulness are more likely to have an optimistic worldview and experience a greater sense of ease and well-being.

Neuroscience research is beginning to reveal what's going on in the brain that may account for increases in optimism and well-being among mindfulness practitioners (Taren et al., 2015; Taren, Creswell, & Gianaros, 2013). One consistent finding relates to the amygdala, the part of the brain that acts like a threat detection center. High amygdala activity is related to anxiety, fear, and hypervigilance; it's a very important center for our survival instincts. It's what helps produce thoughts like "Uh oh, this could be bad…." Thanks to our distant ancestors for whom high amygdala activity played a protective role, most of us have default threat detection settings that are much higher than necessary. Mindfulness practices help moderate amygdala activity to a healthier level, making it less likely that automatic negative attributions get in the way of seeing things as they really are. That's exactly what we observe in the neuroscience research with mindfulness practitioners: decreased amygdala activity, increased connectivity between the prefrontal cortex (PFC) and amygdala (the PFC telling the amygdala, "Hey, it's ok, this situation isn't as bad as you thought"), and increased left PFC activity relative to right PFC activity (a neurological marker associated with greater happiness). In real life, we see a mindfulness practitioner who is optimistic, at ease, happy, and peacefully alert all at the same time.

Optimism Practice Bring to mind a recent challenging experience or situation that's been hard for you. Examples could be a stressor at work, a strained relationship, or a perceived personal shortcoming. Bring to mind the specifics of the

situation, and for a few moments, just sit with all the emotions that come up. Allow thoughts and feelings to come without resisting them, as if you're making room for guests at your dinner table.

Identify the most difficult thoughts that are part of this experience, and write each one down on a separate note card or Post-it Note with a "thought bubble" around it (e.g., "I'm not good enough," "She doesn't care about me," "I'm going to fail at this"). Play around with these thoughts for a while: rearrange them in front of you, make them into shapes and unfold them again, crumple them up, and see if you can juggle with them. As you play around with them, consider that these are just thoughts, that thoughts are not facts, and that in and of themselves they have no power. Their only power comes from believing them.

Now see if you can identify the single most challenging thought that sums up what you're believing about the situation. Ask yourself, "When I believe this thought 100%, how does it impact my behavior? Who am I when I believe this thought, and who am I when I don't believe it? Does this thought take me to where I want to be?"

Now take out several more note cards or Post-it Notes, and generate some optimistic alternative thoughts, including the opposite of your most challenging thought. You don't need to evaluate their accuracy, and you don't even need to believe them yet; just come up with a number of alternative possibilities, including examples of what a loved one or close friend might say about you (e.g., "I'm doing my best with a tough situation," "I choose to be kind," "Others will really appreciate my efforts"). Examine each of these alternative thoughts, asking yourself again, "When I believe this thought 100%, how does it impact my behavior? Who am I when I believe this thought, and who am I when I don't believe it? Does this thought take me to where I want to be?" Now pick out the one that really resonates with where you want to be, put it in your pocket, and take it with you (another option is to make this thought a temporary wallpaper message on your mobile device). You can just leave the other thoughts for recycling.

To learn more about research-based strategies for cultivating optimism, visit www.mybestself101.org/optimism.

Positive Relationships

Shared joy is a double joy; shared sorrow is half a sorrow.
—Swedish Proverb

High-quality supportive relationships are one of the single most important contributors to both emotional and physical well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Chapters "Mindful Parenting," "Mindfulness in Marriage," and "Strengthening Emotional and Physical Intimacy: Creating a Mindful Marriage" in this volume specifically address mindfulness in relationships and family contexts, and the reader is encouraged to explore these excellent resources. As a preface to those chapters, it is worth emphasizing that improving the quality of one's relationships is highly

valued in both positive psychology and mindfulness traditions. More specifically, mindfulness supports developing fulfilling relationships by learning to be more present with others, by facilitating awareness of others' needs, and through fostering natural compassion and loving-kindness toward others. Mindfulness practices help one see through the illusion of separateness between self and others, emphasizing a sense of interconnectedness that prompts one to respond with compassion to suffering wherever it is observed. Mindfulness can also guard against potential intrusions and distractions that often work against good relationships (e.g., technology use that interferes with opportunities for authentic interpersonal connection). Finally, a personal observation through my own mindfulness practice is that I am much less likely than in the past to let social anxiety interfere with getting to know people. Although some of that anxiety is still there in the background, I feel a more genuine interest in and concern for others that overrides my earlier tendency to avoid social interactions.

In addition to the resources provided in later chapters, you can learn more about strategies for enhancing relationships at www.mybestself101.org/supportive-relationships/.

Personal Agency

> *Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.*
> —Viktor Frankl

The issue of personal agency—free will—has occupied the minds of philosophers for millennia. Our everyday experiences and judgments are based on the expectation that as humans, we can choose our responses to circumstances. However, we know that genetics, environmental factors, and past behaviors may influence the range of possible and likely responses for an individual. Each of us has had experiences in which we responded in reflexive, reactive, unhelpful ways to stressful situations. After that, it seems easy to see what we should have done, but in the moment, it was as if we reacted without thinking. Can mindfulness practices promote positive living by making it easier to choose the best response even in challenging circumstances?

Mindfulness appears to enhance personal agency by promoting perspective and equanimity, by expanding a person's behavioral repertoire, and by decreasing the tendency to reactively respond to challenging circumstances. Mindfulness practices make it easier to notice and accept emotions, thoughts, and challenging circumstances without impulsively reacting to them. This sense of perspective allows one to observe the "storm" of challenging circumstances as if from above without being buffeted by the storm and debris. When caught up in difficult thoughts and emotions, it's difficult to see all of the options available to us, and in that state, we're much more likely to fall back on habitual reactive responses. From a state of calm perspective, the speed of the situation seems to slow down just enough to notice the

potentially impulsive response and to be aware of better options. With regard to the quote attributed to Frankl, it's as if the space between stimulus and response is expanded, buying us the extra split-second needed to choose the response that leads to growth and increased freedom.

Early on in my own mindfulness practice, I had an experience that reinforced this sense of increased equanimity and enhanced agency. I was with my family at a church service one morning, and it was during a period of the service where the congregation was sitting reverently in quiet contemplation. Suddenly, I heard an unusual sound coming from the bench where my family was sitting, a few places down from me, near where my teenage daughter was sitting. It was loud enough that everyone around us could hear it as well, a distinct percussive-like sound that was unexpected and unusual for the setting but that also had a vague familiarity: "Tsss. Tsss. Tsss. Tsss…." As eyes turned toward us, the sound suddenly became recognizable as it launched into the electric guitar riff introduction to AC/DC's hard rock classic "Back In Black." My daughter had inadvertently set this track as an alarm on her phone, and now she was frantically and unsuccessfully trying to turn it off. Flustered, she tossed the phone to my wife, but of course my wife didn't really know how to work my daughter's phone, and it took at least 15–20 s before we could shut it off, seriously disturbing the reverent atmosphere in the chapel. My initial subjective reaction was mortification and deep embarrassment. What was my daughter thinking? Did she do that on purpose to make a scene? (she would never have done such a thing on purpose). My immediate impulse was to shoot her a death glare and quickly mutter some stern rebuke (which would have surely just exacerbated the situation); however, I didn't act on that impulse, even though it may have been my automatic reaction in the past. To my own surprise, I quickly perceived that anything I did or said to my daughter in that moment would be unhelpful, so I just took a deep breath and did my best to return to a posture of quiet contemplation. It really was as if my new mindfulness practice had bought me a fraction of a second to recognize the futility of my initial impulse and the equanimity to see and choose a better response. The experience is pretty funny in hindsight, and we did get a few snarky comments from friends after the meeting about our "hymn" preference.

Conclusion

Hundreds of studies support mindfulness practices for managing issues such as depression, anxiety, chronic pain, insomnia, and other serious concerns. This chapter emphasized important benefits in a few other areas related to positive living: gratitude, savoring, optimism, relationships, and personal agency. However, the list of potential benefits of mindfulness is much longer: improvements in attention, focus, equanimity, resilience, compassion, psychological flexibility, immune functioning, and memory and decreases in stress, rumination, and emotional reactivity, among other benefits.

Does mindfulness sound like a panacea? I would certainly not approach it or present it as such. Interestingly, approaching mindfulness as a kind of tool to fix everything goes against some of its main themes of acceptance, patience, letting go, non-judging, and not being attached to specific outcomes. In spite of this apparent paradox, consider the wisdom that comes from the Pali term *ehipassiko*: simply translated, it is an invitation to "come and see," to put these practices to the test and see whether they promote positive living in your own experience.

For additional resources on mindfulness, please visit www.mybestself101.org/mindfulness.

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Compassion for Everyday Living

Jenn Fox and Gary Burlingame

Compassion is typically used to mean responding to the pain and difficulty of another with kindness, care, and help. Compassion comes from the Latin roots *com* for "with" and *pati* for "suffer" or, literally, to "suffer with." With compassion, we are joining a person in his or her suffering and entering a state where the boundary between our own suffering and the suffering of others thins, and we see and respond to all suffering equally, with the same desire to eliminate pain and to restore happiness. The Dalai Lama (2001) defined compassion as a sensitivity to suffering in ourselves and others with a commitment to prevent and alleviate it.

Humans have a natural inclination to avoid emotional discomfort, whether it is our own or someone else's. How often have we turned on the television to escape feelings of sadness or looked away when passing a homeless person? Compassion requires that we lean into the discomfort, opening our awareness to the pain in ourselves and others without disconnecting from it and allowing feelings of kindness and a desire to ameliorate the suffering to emerge (Wispe, 1991). We have to understand that all human beings want to be happy and free from misery and that all will inevitably experience pain and sorrow. Compassion is the courage to descend into the reality of the human experience, with all of its pain and disappointment. Compassion is recognizing that even though we want peace and happiness, we have pain and suffering and, with that recognition, allow feelings of kindness and our motivation to help freely flow.

Compassion can be categorized into three "flows": compassion directed to another, compassion received from another, and compassion given to yourself. As you think about different times you have experienced each of these flows, you may notice that some are easier or more difficult for you. We have often been told to be kind to others in need, and so compassion for others often comes easiest, but compassion from others and for self is harder. Indeed, research suggests that the ability

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P. R. Steffen (ed.), *Mindfulness for Everyday Living*, Mindfulness in Behavioral Health, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51618-5_3

(or lack thereof) to receive compassion from others and to give compassion to self hand in hand (Gilbert, McEwan, Matos, & Rivis, 2011).

At this point, it may be helpful to note that compassion is not the same as empathy, sympathy, or altruism (although it certainly overlaps with them). Empathy is the ability to feel the emotional state of another—a sort of internal mirroring or resonance which can include both positive and negative emotions. Compassion is a reaction to suffering and goes further than empathy by including a motivation to act. Sympathy involves our own negative reaction to someone else's distress. But, it falls short of generating a motivation to relieve suffering—we all have experienced moments of feeling sorry for someone without wanting to stop and help. Finally, altruism is an action that helps another, but it does not consider the emotion or motivation behind the act. A charitable donation is altruistic, but it may be motivated by a desired tax benefit rather than empathy. Thus, compassion includes each of these qualities, but is not the same as them.

Compassion and Mindfulness Are Symbiotic

Mindfulness is the ability to bring nonjudgmental awareness to the experience of the present moment. Compassion requires that we first are mindful of the present experience rather than turning away. Thus, compassion and mindfulness interweave with one another: one cannot fully engage in compassion without mindfulness, and mindfulness can lead to compassion. Mindfulness focuses on the nature of our relationship to the present moment experience. Compassion focuses on our relationship with the individual who is suffering (Germer, 2009).

Mindfulness is a key component of compassion. In a moment of suffering, an individual uses mindfulness to let the experience be as it is—to gently bring attention to the thoughts, emotions, and sensations without resisting or judging them (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). When compassion is added to mindfulness, feelings of care and concern naturally arise along with a desire for the self to be free from suffering (Neff & Davidson, 2016). Compassion exists in a state of paradox, at once accepting the moment while simultaneously wishing it to be different. Indeed, researchers have found that an increase in compassion is accompanied by an increase in mindfulness (Kirby, Tellegen, & Steindl, 2017).

Compassion is also a key component of mindfulness. In attempting to isolate the mechanism by which mindfulness enhances well-being, various researchers have hypothesized that self-compassion may play a key role (e.g., Baer, Lykins, & Peters, 2012; Hölzel et al., 2011). For example, Shapiro, Astin, Bishop, and Cordova (2005) found that in teaching mindfulness, self-compassion unintentionally increased as stress levels decreased.

Benefits of Compassion

Over the past 30 years, science has begun to take an interest in mindfulness and compassion, leading to thousands of research studies. We will briefly highlight a few of the benefits of compassion, with special focus on compassion given to self, or self-compassion, as this has been a primary focus of much of the research.

Psychological

Compassion has been shown to improve a number of measures of well-being. A recent meta-analysis (Kirby, Tellegen, & Steindl, 2017) found that as individuals increase their capacity for compassion, their levels of well-being also increase. Self-compassion in particular is associated with greater levels of happiness, optimism, life satisfaction, body appreciation, perceived competence, motivation, curiosity, and creativity (Hollis-Walker & Colosimo, 2011; Neff, Hseih, & Dejitthirat, 2005; Neff, Pisitsungkagarn, & Hseih, 2008; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007; Zessin, Dickhauser, & Garbade, 2015). Higher self-compassion is positively related to emotional intelligence, wisdom, personal initiative, curiosity, intellectual flexibility, life satisfaction, and feelings of social connectedness (Heffernan, Griffin, McNulty, & Fitzpatrick, 2010; Martin, Staggers, & Anderson, 2011; Neff, 2003a; Neff et al., 2007).

Compassion is also linked to mental health and emotion regulation (e.g., MacBeth & Gumley, 2012). Increases in compassion show a corresponding decrease in depression, anxiety, and overall psychological distress (Kirby, Tellegen, & Steindl, 2017). Additionally, greater self-compassion is linked with less rumination, perfectionism, and fear of failure (Neff, 2003a; Neff et al., 2005).

Compassion also improves resilience and ability to cope. Self-compassion aids in adjustment to divorce (Sbarra, Smith, & Mehl, 2012) and helps undergraduates cope with their first semester at college (Terry, Leary, & Mehta, 2012), academic pressure, and social difficulties (Kyeong, 2013). Self-compassion predicts how much stress parents of autistic children experience (Neff & Faso, 2015) and is a protective factor against post-traumatic stress disorder for combat veterans (Hiraoka et al., 2015). It has been linked to better resilience and coping in patients with chronic pain (Costa & Pinto-Gouveia, 2011; Wren et al., 2012), spina bifida (Hayter & Dorstyn, 2014), breast cancer (Przezdziecki et al., 2013), and positive HIV status (Brion, Leary, & Drabkin, 2014).

Motivational

Despite the many proven benefits of compassion, it is common for people to worry that if they become more compassionate to themselves and others, it will undermine motivation and lead to a lazy and self-indulgent lifestyle (Gilbert et al., 2011). A common belief is that harsh self-criticism is an important motivation to hold oneself accountable to high behavioral standards. The very idea of abandoning self-criticism leads some people to have visions of themselves lounging about eating sweets by the handful and binge watching favorite reality TV shows. Indeed, most of us use criticism to motivate ourselves (or our spouses or children)—but criticism really only motivates us to avoid judgment and more criticism.

Compassion provides a balance between criticism and indulgence. Any easy way to understand this is with a parent and child analogy (adapted from Gilbert, 2010): imagine little Johnny comes home from school with a failed math test. His parent could respond with harsh criticism: "How could you have let this happen? You are so stupid. You're grounded until you've redone every problem from this unit—twice!" In the short term, will Johnny be motivated to study his math? Possibly. But in the long term, Johnny will most likely hate math and feel badly about himself—probably not the outcome most parents want. Alternatively, Johnny's parent could respond with indulgence: "Oh Johnny don't you worry, you never really use math anyway. Why don't you stay home tomorrow and enjoy a movie and popcorn? I'll call your teacher first thing in the morning about getting this grade fixed." In this scenario, Johnny is unlikely to feel motivated to improve his math, now or in the long term. His parent may be helping him feel better now, but it is obvious that in the long term, this strategy does not lead to success. Compassion creates the middle ground between criticism and indulgence. A compassionate response to Johnny might be, "Oh no! I know you really want to do well because you are trying to get into the honors classes next year. What can we do to help you? Do you want to start working on your math homework together after dinner?" This response is likely to both be motivating in the short term and help Johnny reach his goals and feel good about himself in the long term. We instinctively know that a compassionate response is better and more motivating for a child than a critical or indulgent response. Yet when it comes to ourselves, we often struggle to extend that same compassion.

Research has repeatedly shown that as self-compassion increases, individuals have more motivation to change for the better, try harder to learn, repair past harms, and avoid repeating past mistakes (Breines & Chen, 2013). They are less afraid of failing (Neff et al., 2005) and are more likely to try again when they do (Neely, Schallert, Mohammed, Roberts, & Chen, 2009). Because failure does not result in harsh self-criticism, self-compassion lessens the negative emotional impact of failure (Neff & Seppala, 2016). Higher self-compassion leads to lower levels of perfectionism as we accept that all goals will not be reached and kindness is a better response with one falls short (Neff, 2003a).

Interpersonal

Although many support being more compassionate to others, they often feel that being more self-compassionate will make them selfish. On average, people are much less kind and compassionate to themselves than they are to others (Neff, 2003b). However, without self-compassion, our natural tendency is to criticize ourselves and ruminate on our faults, flaws, and shortcomings (Lyubomirsky, Tucker, Caldwell, & Berg, 1999; Nolen-Hoeksema, 2000). Treating ourselves with kindness reduces our ruminative focus on ourselves and increases our sense of social connectedness (Fredrickson, 2001; Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross, 2008). When we extend compassion to ourselves, we better meet our own needs, which then allows us to focus more attention and emotional resources on meeting the needs of friends, family, and others.

Research has shown that self-compassionate people have more compassionate goals in relationships, such as creating trust and providing social support (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). Romantic partners of self-compassionate people report more relationship satisfaction and greater feelings of security and describe their compassionate partner as "being more emotionally connected and accepting than those with less self-compassion" (Neff & Beretvas, 2013). Self-compassionate people are also more likely to apologize and repair relationships (Breines & Chen, 2013; Howell, Dopko, Turowski, & Buro, 2011).

Physical Health

Higher self-compassion can reduce the physical effects of stress (Breines et al., 2014; Breines, Toole, Tu, & Chen, 2014; Friis, Johnson, Cutfield, & Consedine, 2015) by decreasing cortisol levels and increasing heart rate variability—two major indicators of physical stress (Rockliff, Gilbert, McEwan, Lightman, & Glover, 2008). People with higher self-compassion also have better immune systems (Arch et al., 2014). There is even evidence that higher self-compassion has physical benefits for individuals with diabetes (Friis et al., 2015).

Developing Compassion

At this point, you may be thinking, "Ok sure, being compassionate is a good thing and that's great for all the people that are naturally compassionate, but I'm just not that nice of a person." Or maybe you are thinking, "I'm pretty good at being compassionate to other people like we're always taught, but being nice to myself, that's a totally different ball game." If you're having discouraging thoughts like these, the good news is this: There are things you can do to develop compassion! Decades of

scientific research and several thousand years of meditating monks have proved that compassion training really works.

Compassion as a Skill

We often think of compassion as an inborn trait, as something some of us are born with more than others. In fact, compassion is a skill and can be increased like any other skill. Just like flexing a muscle, as you use it over time, it gets stronger. There is increasing evidence that practicing compassion not only changes the way we think about and experience events but also causes physical changes in our neurophysiological and immune systems (Davidson, 2003; Lutz, 2008). When we practice compassion, we are literally changing ourselves into more compassionate beings.

Ancient Practice

The earliest known practices of compassion are religious in nature. For example, Christian prayer often focuses on a desire to relieve the suffering of others combined with taking action to help those in need. The concept of "metta," which roughly translates to "loving-kindness" or "goodwill," is referenced in the earliest texts of Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism (Wiltshire, 1990). Buddhism uses metta meditation to cultivate compassion. Metta meditation has two subsets: loving-kindness, or wishing for all to feel peace and happiness, and compassion, or wishing for all to experience relief from suffering. A typical meditation might involve silent repetitions of phrases such as "may you be happy" or "may you be free from suffering," sending these wishes progressively from the self, to loved ones, to neutral individuals, to disliked individuals, finally to all beings. In recent years, significant scientific interest on these meditative practices has shown that they increase positive emotions (Zeng, Chiu, Wang, Oei, & Leung, 2015). This sound scientific support has led to the development of secular programs that teach modified versions of metta meditations.

Secular Practices

As a few examples of secular programs, Compassion Cultivation Training (Langri & Weiss, 2013) includes a variety of Buddhist meditations. Research has shown that it improves compassion flows (Jazaieri et al., 2013), increases mindfulness and happiness, and decreases worry and emotional suppression (Jazaieri et al., 2014). Cognitive-Based Compassion Training (Ozawa-de Silva & Negi, 2013) teaches secularized forms of Tibetan Buddhist. Research indicates that it improves empathic

abilities (Mascaro, Rilling, Negi, & Raison, 2013) and helping behaviors toward those in need (Condon, Desbordes, Miller, & DeSteno, 2013). Mindful self-compassion, developed by Dr. Kristin Neff and Dr. Christopher Germer, focuses specifically on the compassion we give to ourselves using a variety of Buddhist-informed meditations and exercises. It significantly increases self-compassion, mindfulness, compassion for others, and life satisfaction while decreasing depression, anxiety, stress, and emotional avoidance (Neff & Germer, 2013).

There are also compassion-based psychotherapy models, such as Compassion-Focused Therapy, developed by Dr. Paul Gilbert. Patients are taught how to develop feelings of warmth, safeness, and soothing via compassion. Research shows that Compassion-Focused Therapy is effective in increasing compassion and decreasing depression and shame (Kirby, Tellegen, & Steindl, 2017). It has been used to effectively treat depression, schizophrenia, binge eating, smoking cessation, and a variety of other mental health concerns.

Practicing Compassion

The compassion exercises on the following pages[1] are organized into the three flows. We will first explore compassion from others, then compassion for self, and finally compassion for others. As you work through these practices, notice what is easy or hard for you. For example, maybe it is easier for you to receive compassion from others than to give it to yourself, or maybe it is easy for you to identify suffering in others, but you have a hard time wanting to help them. It is often helpful in these tricky situations to "borrow" a skill from another compassion flow. So, if it is easier for you to be compassionate for others than for yourself, you can notice what that experience of compassion for others is like and practice finding those same feelings for yourself.

Compassion from Others

Our first experience with compassion comes from receiving it from others. The first time a baby cries and a parent gently holds and soothes the child, this in an act of compassion. In fact, it is believed that the act of compassion is a caregiving instinct. When a child cries, the parent instinctively notices the distress and seeks to soothe the child—acting compassionately. The child, in turn, feels reassured, safe, and calm. When we experience compassion from others, it taps into this same system of caregiving, and we feel reassured, safe, and calm.

[1] The exercises used here are adapted with permission from Dr. Paul Gilbert's trainings.

Unfortunately, for some individuals, compassion from others does not evoke feelings of warmth and safety—for some people, it can be uncomfortable or even frightening. This seems to be especially true for individuals who experience high levels of shame and self-criticism (Gilbert et al., 2011). Fortunately, by addressing fears of compassion through practice, everyone can increase their capacity to receive compassion.

Before beginning the exercises, spend some time considering the qualities of compassion. Think for a few minutes about people you know who are very compassionate or experiences you have had with compassion. What was it that made that person compassionate? Common responses to this are kind, good listener, nonjudgmental, warm, patient, understanding, helpful, and self-sacrificing—and this list is by no means exhaustive. For brevity's sake, we will use three qualities identified by Gilbert (2009) which seem to encapsulate many of these qualities: wisdom, strength, and commitment. Compassion requires wisdom to recognize and understand suffering, as well as to know what to do (or not do) in order to alleviate and prevent future suffering. Compassion requires strength to face suffering and difficult emotions in ourselves and others—an inherently uncomfortable task—and strength to do what is necessary to help. Finally, compassion requires commitment to helping the one who is suffering—you can be the wisest and strongest person in the world, but if you do not care to help, it does not matter.

In addition to these three qualities of wisdom, strength, and commitment, it is helpful to think about how they are expressed. What kind of facial expression and body language do compassionate people have? What does their voice sound like when they talk? What emotions do they convey to the sufferer? The *way* you say something is just as important as the *words* you say. Think of all the meanings that can be conveyed with something as simple as "good job"—enthusiastic, dismissive, sarcastic, questioning, and angry; the list goes on. It all depends on tone and body language. So, when we imagine someone compassionate in these exercises, we want to be sure their nonverbal cues are just as compassionate as their words.

Now you are ready to try your first exercise! We suggest that you take your time—wait until you have 10–15 min by yourself in a quiet place. Some of the exercises may be easier; others might feel a bit odd or uncomfortable. And this might vary day to day. Whatever your reaction is, just notice it without judging it. Wherever you are with your practice, accept it without judging it. It's ok for you to be exactly where you are today.

Exercise: Meeting a Compassionate Being in a Safe Place

Start by sitting comfortably in a chair. Sit upright so that your posture is alert but relaxed. Allow your eyes to close or allow your gaze to find a soft focus. Begin by taking several slow, deep breaths, allowing your mind and your body to slow as you breathe in and out.

Now start to bring to mind an image of a place where you feel completely safe. It can be a real place or one you simply imagine. Somewhere you feel calm and completely at peace. Take a few moments to notice the details of this place—what can you see? What sounds can you hear? How does it smell? What sensations do you feel on your skin? Is there something you can taste? Take as long as you need to really imagine yourself in this place and engage all of your senses. Notice how it feels to be in this place, to feel completely relaxed and totally safe.

Now imagine someone is coming to meet you in your safe place—a being who is perfectly compassionate and who cares deeply about you. This being can be real or imagined, human or nonhuman, and fully formed or just an impression. It might be a wise old woman, a favorite pet, a tree, and even a cloud of light. Just allow the image to come to you.

And as you imagine this being, remember the qualities of compassion that this being would have: Wisdom *that understands that we all suffer, that understands your life story and how you came to this moment, and that knows the best thing to say or do in this moment;* strength *to be with you as you experience difficulties and to do what is necessary, even when it is hard; and* commitment *to caring and helping in a warm and accepting way and to being compassionate. And because this being is not human, it is not subject to human frailties and imperfections—it is perfectly compassionate and embodies all of these qualities perfectly. Take as long as you need to create this perfectly compassionate being. If at any time it feels difficult to imagine this being, its qualities, or the feelings of warmth and care, know that this is ok—it often takes time to develop. If it's not coming easily, allow yourself to have an intention or a wish for each of those aspects to be there and continue forward.*

Imagine that this compassionate being sits down beside you in your safe place. Notice what this compassionate being looks like. What expression does it have? How would its voice sound if it said hello to you? How would it feel about you? Notice how you feel just being with this compassionate being that cares for you. Sit with this being for a while, just noticing what that is like. Imagine that this compassionate being has these desires for you, conveyed with warmth and kindness: May you be well. May you be happy. May you be free of suffering.

When you are ready, allow the compassionate being to say goodbye for now and to continue on its way. Take another few breaths in this safe place. Now begin to bring your attention back to the present moment, to your body in the room, and to your slow breaths in and out. And when you are ready, open your eyes.

Compassion for Self

Initially, people are often confused by the concept of self-compassion. We are used to talking about giving compassion to others or receiving it from them, but not all of us have really thought through what it would mean to be compassionate to ourselves. Quite simply, it is the same feeling of compassion for others directed inward

(Neff & Germer, 2017). With self-compassion, we recognize that just like everyone else, we have moments of suffering and pain, whether from events beyond our control or our own mistakes, failures, and inadequacies. Just like everyone else, we too wish to be happy and free from suffering. Self-compassion is simply taking the compassion we would extend to another in their suffering inward to the self.

The three elements of self-compassion are mindfulness, common humanity, and self-kindness (Neff, 2003b). First, we use *mindfulness* to recognize our suffering nonjudgmentally, without getting sucked into self-critical thoughts or pushing away our suffering through avoidance or suppression. Second, our *common humanity* is the acknowledgment that all humans are flawed, experience hardship, make mistakes, fall short, and feel inadequate. However, in moments of suffering, we mistakenly believe that others are having an easier time and that our situation is abnormal or unfair. As we remember our common humanity, we reconnect to the world and feel less isolated and more understood. Finally, *self-kindness* is relating to ourselves in a warm and supportive manner, even when we feel things are going wrong or we "don't deserve it." It is common to respond to our shortcomings with harsh self-criticism, but this makes us feel worse. Self-kindness offers us warmth and acceptance while encouraging us to move forward and keep trying.

The following self-compassion exercise considers a difficult situation and includes the three elements of self-compassion. Give yourself 15–20 min of uninterrupted time to work through the exercise. We highly encourage you to write your thoughts down on paper, which creates a very different experience than keeping them all in your own head.

Exercise: Compassionate Letter Writing

Bring to mind a recent experience that was difficult for you—perhaps a time when you did not get what you wanted, you fell short of your expectations, or you made a mistake. Write a brief paragraph—3–5 sentences—explaining the situation, the consequences, and some of your thoughts and feelings about the event.

Next, take a few moments to put yourself in a compassionate mindset. Take a few deep breaths, allowing your body and mind to slow down and feel more settled and grounded. Focus on your compassionate motivation—your desire to be sensitive to suffering and to alleviate that suffering. Remember the qualities of compassion: wisdom to understand that suffering is part of life for all humans and what to do about it, strength to be present with the difficult emotions that come with suffering and to do what is necessary to help, and commitment to helping the sufferer.

Once you have settled into a compassionate mindset, write a letter responding to this event in a compassionate way. Start by acknowledging the difficulty and the thoughts and emotions that come with it. For example, you might say something like, "I understand that this was important to you, and you feel frustrated and embarrassed." *Next, explore why it makes sense to feel this way, perhaps considering how others might feel in a similar situation. For example,* "It makes sense for you to feel that way. You really wanted to make a good impression at this job interview, and

now you're afraid that you've messed it up and that you won't be able to provide for your family in the way that you want. Of course you feel frustrated and embarrassed." *Finally, write about what your compassionate mind wants you to know. This might be reassurance, hope, or a simple expression of love. For example,* "I want you to know that you did your best, and that is enough. You have worked so hard for your family. You love them so much, and they love you too. Even if this doesn't work out, there will be other opportunities." *At this point, you may wish to include some words of advice about how to move forward. This is ok to do sometimes, but watch out for the tendency to immediately jump into advice giving or to focus too much on it. Be sure you have thoroughly explored each of the three steps first.*

Don't worry if this feels unnatural at first. As with every new skill, it takes practice. Read back through what you have written, and make sure it really does sound compassionate. Can you imagine someone you consider as very compassionate saying these things to you? Feel free to make some revisions if needed. If you're feeling very stuck, it is sometimes helpful to imagine that you are writing to someone else that you love. What if this situation had happened to your best friend instead? What would you want to say to them in your letter?

Once you have your letter written, read it back to yourself. Be sure to do this warmly, with compassion. Try to allow your words and intent to sink in and be felt. Read slowly enough to allow yourself to experiences any emotions that arise. You may even want to do this out loud or in front of a mirror. Some people like to find a picture of themselves as a child and imagine sending these compassionate wishes to their child self. You may also want to try reading it again in a day or so. Whatever reactions arise for you, allow them to be there without judging. There are a wide variety of reactions to this exercise, from relief and reassurance all the way to anxiety and sadness. What is important is that you have an intent or a wish to treat yourself with compassion, even if it is hard to let that compassion in at first.

Compassion for Others

Compassion for others is the flow of compassion that we are most familiar with, and most of us can easily list individuals we feel compassion for (children, spouses, friends, etc.). We are sensitive to their heartache and long to ease their suffering. However, practicing this flow is more complicated when we are relating to strangers or those we do not like. A natural reaction during interpersonal conflict is to become defensive—unfortunately at the expense of empathy, sympathy, and compassion. But why should I practice compassion for someone who I do not like or who is not being compassionate to me? Ultimately, this will come down to your own values, but here are a few of the reasons that you might consider.

Why should I be compassionate to someone who is not being compassionate to me? The simplest answer is that engaging with other people compassionately invites them to be at their compassionate best. Whether you are in conflict with someone

you love or interacting with someone you do not like, the conversation can shift by making the other feel seen and understood. Compassion—with all of its empathy and wisdom—does just that. Of course, we cannot control their response, and our compassion does not guarantee a change, but it opens a new path of respect and kindness.

Why should I be compassionate to someone who does not matter to me? This question digs into the unavoidable human pattern of reacting to others as "my people" or "outsiders." It's not that we are necessarily rude or unkind to "outsiders," we often simply fail to pay attention to or even acknowledge them. The concept of common humanity reminds us that every human you meet wants the same thing—to be happy and free from suffering. And all of us have experienced the disappointment and pain of that wish not being granted. When we recognize this, it becomes natural to feel compassion—to see their suffering and to wish for peace, happiness, and relief.

The following exercise gives you a chance to practice sending compassion to others—to those you love, those you do not love, and those you do not know. As before, we suggest finding a block of time where you can be undisturbed to try this exercise. Try not to focus on "doing it right"—the whole point is to practice the desire and intent to send compassion.

Exercise: Sending Compassion

Start by sitting comfortably in a chair. Sit upright so that your posture is alert but relaxed. Allow your eyes to close, or allow your gaze to find a soft focus. Begin by taking several slow, deep breaths, allowing your mind and your body to slow as you breathe in and out.

Next, take a few moments to put yourself in a compassionate mindset. Take a few deep breaths, allowing your body and mind to slow down and feel more settled and grounded. Focus on your compassionate motivation—your desire to be sensitive to suffering and to alleviate that suffering. Remember the qualities of compassion: wisdom to understand that suffering is part of life for all humans and what to do about it, strength to be present with the difficult emotions that come with suffering and to do what is necessary to help, and commitment to helping the sufferer.

Now bring to mind someone you hold dear. Imagine seeing them right in front of you. Notice how, just like you, they have dreams, hopes, and fears. Just like you, they want to be happy and free from suffering. Take a moment to notice their suffering, big or small. Notice any feelings of concern and tenderness that arise and any natural desire to help. Holding your compassionate mindset, direct the following heartfelt wishes to this person: "May you be happy. May you be free from suffering. May you be at peace." *Repeat these wishes several times, directing feelings of warmth and compassion to this person. If these feelings do not flow easily, remain committed to your intention to be kind, supportive, and committed. Notice any feelings that may arise in you as you do this—there is no right or wrong way to feel; simply notice and continue with your intention or wish to send compassion. Now think for a moment about how, regardless of your relationship to this person, to many others*

they are merely part of a faceless crowd. Some may despise this person. And to others, they are loved deeply. Your feelings about this person arise out of your relationship to them; they are not intrinsic to this person. Now let the image of this person fade.

Next, repeat the previous paragraph, but this time, bring to mind someone who you neither like nor dislike—someone you feel neutral toward.

Repeat the paragraph with someone you dislike, perhaps someone who hurt you or who is a competitor.

Finally, bring back all three individuals to your mind. Reflect on how, just like you, they all have hopes, dreams, and fears. You all want to be happy and free from suffering. You all have people who love you, dislike you, or do not know you. Gradually expand your circle of awareness to include others you know. People you live near or work with. People you like and do not like. Notice how they all share these same things in common with you. Continue expanding your awareness to those you do not know—to all people in the same building as you, the same city, the same country, and eventually the whole world. All people have hopes, dreams, and fears. All want to be happy and free from suffering. Send these same compassionate wishes to all the people in the world: "May you be happy. May you be free from suffering. May you be at peace." *Focus on your heartfelt wishes flowing outward and becoming more and more expansive. Allow a sense of gratitude to arise for all these countless people upon whom our lives depend in so many ways. We are all interconnected in a great web of humanity. When you are ready, allow the image to fade, and return to the present sensations of your body. After a few moments, open your eyes.*

Where to Go from Here

This chapter has presented a broad overview of compassion, its applications, and a few practice exercises. It goes without saying that this whirlwind tour has barely scratched the surface of the history, literature, and research on compassion and all the ways to use it. We hope that the information and references below will help you on your journey into compassion should you wish to continue.

What to Do If You Feel Stuck

For some people, the three flows of compassion come easily and effortlessly, but for others, one or more flows are a challenge. If you are in the latter camp, you have lots of company! It is important to remember that compassion is a skill that requires practice, so *keep trying*. We use the words "practice" and "exercise" throughout this chapter because compassion is a skill that requires practice, just like skills associated with music, sports, sales, networking, or calculus. So be patient with yourself and keep practicing.

A helpful concept is compassion layering. Perhaps you fail at something like an exam and then try to practice self-compassion—and it does not come. Do not worry, you are not a failure, and it is not your fault. Do not go down the rabbit hole of self-criticism; instead, *add another layer of compassion*. Can you have compassion for the fact that you are not being very compassionate? This new layer of compassion acknowledges your suffering and desire to alleviate it. The wish or intention to be self-compassionate may be all that is possible in this moment, and that is enough!

What to Do If You Are Afraid of Compassion

Some experience a fear of compassion (Gilbert et al., 2011), thinking that giving or receiving compassion is weak or that others will take advantage of you. Perhaps compassion raises unpleasant emotions (anger, fear, or sadness) in you that are linked to past difficulties, or maybe it is not clear where these fears arise. Such fears are common in individuals experiencing self-criticism, depression, anxiety, and stress (Gilbert et al., 2011, 2012), and you may benefit from seeking additional help from further readings, compassion-focused retreats, therapeutic support groups, and/or a qualified mental health worker.

Further Readings

Mindful Compassion by Dr. Paul Gilbert and Choden
The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion by Dr. Christopher Germer
Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself by Dr. Kristen Neff

Further Exercises

The Compassionate Mind Workbook: A step-by-step guide to developing your compassionate self by Dr. Chris Irons and Elaine Beaumont
Self Compassion: Practices a website by Dr. Kristen Neff http://self-compassion.org/resources-2/
More meditation-based exercises can be found by searching for "compassion meditation" on numerous video or audio sites or in many meditation apps available for smart phones.

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Mindfulness for Pediatric Health Conditions

Kara M. Duraccio and Chad D. Jensen

"Breath in, breath out… Breath in, breath out," Rebecca tells herself over and over again. Rebecca sits nervously on a hospital bed, eyes clamped shut and head turned as far away as possible from the nurse who is about to insert a needle into her right arm to collect a blood sample. Rebecca has lost count of the number of times that she has been poked, prodded, and probed over the last several months. Her frequent medical procedures have heightened her fears and increased her sense of hopelessness. Rebecca tries to use the "coping skills" that her doctors have recommended to "help with the pain," "help with the nausea," and "help with the anxiety." "Breath in, breath out. Go to your happy place. Distract yourself." But Rebecca's fears persist, and she has a nagging dread that she'll never be "normal" again.

Rebecca feels a sharp sting and a tugging sensation, and then, the blood draw is over. Rebecca relaxes back onto the bed, and she finally opens her eyes. "Now that was easy, wasn't it!" the nurse says, smiling down at her. Rebecca can't help but roll her eyes and place her hands on her chemotherapy-induced bald head. Rebecca is filled with a dissatisfaction that she can't put into words, an overwhelming desire to have things go back to normal. She would give anything to escape this place, escape her body, and escape her illness. She closes her eyes yet again, fighting back the tears that have begun to roll out of the corners of her eyes. "Breath in, breath out," she says to herself, for what feels like the thousandth time. "Breath in, breath out."

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P. R. Steffen (ed.), *Mindfulness for Everyday Living*, Mindfulness in Behavioral Health, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51618-5_4

Health Challenges and Psychological Adjustment

Unsurprisingly, children and adolescents like Rebecca who are faced with significant health challenges often have difficulty with psychological adjustment. Psychological consequences of medical illness commonly create problems with academic, social, and family functioning. These challenges can be particularly difficult when children encounter chronic illnesses, which have lengthy or indefinite duration. For example, consider Oliver's experience. Oliver is a 16-year-old male with recently diagnosed type 1 diabetes. Oliver often feels embarrassed to check his blood sugar in front of his friends, so he frequently skips checking his blood sugar while he is at school. Failing to check his blood sugar makes it difficult for Oliver to know how much insulin he needs, which results in his blood sugar running too high. High blood sugar makes it difficult for Oliver to concentrate in class, and he frequently visits the school nurse's office or calls his mother to ask her to pick him up early from school. Because of his frequent absences, Oliver is falling behind in school, and his grades are suffering. Additionally, because Oliver is not managing his illness well, he seems to always be arguing with his mother about his diabetes and feels like his mother is always "nagging" him to be more responsible in managing his illness. If you or your child has a chronic medical illness, Oliver's story likely sounds very familiar. Oliver's challenges in his social, academic, and familial functioning are common experiences across youth with chronic medical illness.

Fortunately, recent research suggests that mindfulness can be an effective strategy for helping youths with health conditions to accept, make room for, and manage their chronic medical illness. Mindfulness practice is an excellent strategy for coping with the psychological stress accompanying illness in children and adolescence. As detailed in previous chapters in this book, mindfulness practice includes focus on present experience, nonjudgment of thoughts and feelings, and pursuing valued activities despite suffering. These principles hold particular promise for children and adolescents who deal with daily health challenges, including chronic pain, headaches, stomach complaints, or other chronic conditions.

Why Mindfulness for Pediatric Health Problems?

Many children faced with significant health concerns approach illness from a traditional biomedical perspective. This perspective implies that illness arises from some specific physiological problem (e.g., something has gone wrong in your body) and that medical intervention (e.g., doing something to change processes in the body) is what is needed to reverse the condition. Biomedical perspectives also tend to separate the body from the brain, with little acknowledgment for the influence of psychological processes on disease functioning or attention to the effects of physical illness of psychological health. When children and their families approach disease from this perspective, they often pursue medical remedies for illness with persistent

belief that medicine can provide solutions to their problems. However, many chronic health conditions cannot be treated effectively using traditional biomedical interventions, and parents eventually become discouraged by the limited effectiveness of drug or surgical treatments. When medical "cures" become increasingly unlikely and the prospect of living with an illness (vs. curing an illness) becomes the most likely outcome, children and parents often search for methods to cope with disease rather than continue to seek less effective medical remedies.

How Is Mindfulness Different for Children?

Mindfulness for children differs from mindfulness with adults in that the mindfulness for youth is often focused on specific practices that can be used as coping strategies, rather than focusing on mindfulness as a "state of being." For example, a simple mindfulness coping strategy for children and adolescents is to teach them mindful awareness of their breath. This can be done in a variety of ways (e.g., blowing bubbles, blowing on a pinwheel, putting a stuffed animal on their stomach and "taking the animal for a ride"), but the basic premise is to have the child take all of their attention and focus it on the breath. This type of breathing differs from the breathing we saw demonstrated by Rebecca at the beginning of the chapter. Simply "taking deep breaths" does not embody the spirit of mindfulness; you and I are both capable of deep breathing while continuing to engage in anxious thinking. Mindful breathing—that is, focusing all of one's attention on the breath—is the key characteristic that separates mindful breathing from simple deep breathing.

One mindfulness exercise that has been helpful for young children to practice mindful breathing is to have them imagine that a spider is sitting in their mind, tangled up with all of their "scary thoughts." The child is gently encouraged to imagine that the spider is slowly lowering down on his web (the child is instructed to keep their attention on the spider) until the spider is just behind the child's nose. The child is asked to imagine how the spider gently sways back and forth behind the child's nose as he breaths in and out. The child is instructed to focus on the air going in and out of the nose. The child is encouraged to imagine the spider moving toward his mouth, where the child is told to imagine that the spider sways even harder as he breathes out of his mouth. The spider then lowers itself on its web until it reaches the chest and stomach, where the child is instructed to "take the spider on a ride" while the chest/stomach moves up and down. The child is told that if the spider ever tries to "climb back up his web" and get tangled in the scary thoughts again, he is to gently coax the spider to lower himself back down on his web.

Outside of mindful breathing, mindfulness strategies such as progressive muscle relaxation (having the child tense and relax all major muscle groups, focusing on the state of tension and relaxation in each muscle group), grounding (e.g., having the child press his/her feet firmly into the floor, focusing on how they feel connected to the present moment), mindful noticing (e.g., noticing things in the room they have never seen before, noticing any smells in the room, seeing how many sounds they

can identify), and mindful activities (e.g., brushing their teeth mindfully, taking slow steps, and noticing how the body feels during the processes of walking) can be useful. Similar to adults, the goal of engaging in these mindfulness practices is that, over time, they can generalize this mindful awareness outside of the active mindfulness practice and use that awareness to navigate through life.

Interestingly, teaching mindfulness to children is often easier than teaching mindfulness to adults. Adults often have set ideas of how a mindfulness mediation practice should go or have already established set of beliefs or ways of thinking that may not be compatible with mindful meditation. However, children are typically more open to new experiences and are still developing their patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Habits that are formed in childhood are often maintained into adulthood, so childhood is a perfect time to begin to teach mindfulness meditation. However, it is not unusual for children to be resistant to mindfulness meditation practice initially (as children are not always the biggest fans of sitting still and "doing nothing"), but we have been surprised by how quickly children have taken to the practice.

Examples of Mindfulness Practice for Specific Illnesses

As discussed previously, mindfulness practice in children and adolescents often starts by using mindfulness as a way to cope with distressing thoughts or physical sensations (e.g., pain). This is especially true in using mindfulness in children with specific illnesses. Children with chronic medical illnesses face dozens (if not hundreds) of challenging moments throughout the day in which they are required to respond to an illness-specific stressor. The goal of teaching mindfulness is to give the child a skill that they can rely on at any given moment to help meet these challenges as they naturally occur throughout the day. A large component of mindfulness interventions for children with specific illnesses is acceptance, or accepting the parts of the illness that cannot change, and focusing instead on what the child does have direct control over. Mindful acceptance involves noticing distressing thoughts or experience (e.g., "I notice that my headache is back again"), avoiding judgment about the experience (e.g., "This pain is so awful, I can't go to school"), and moving in the direction of valued action (e.g., going to school despite pain). In the following sections, we will highlight how mindfulness and acceptance strategies can be applied for a number of common pediatric illnesses.

Gastrointestinal Conditions

Gastrointestinal conditions (such as ulcerative colitis, Crohn's disease, irritable bowel syndrome, and celiac disease) can often interfere with daily functioning and can be socially stigmatizing. Consider Sandy, a 14-year-old girl with Crohn's

disease, as an example. Sandy recently received a colostomy surgery where her colon was diverted to a small opening in her abdominal wall. Sandy now has to wear a colostomy bag every day to catch her fecal matter. Sandy has no control over when or where she has a bowel movement, and there are occasions when the bag will have a small leak and will smell. Sandy is mortified when she realizes that her bag is beginning to leak during the middle of a class, and she will go from bathroom to bathroom until she can find an unoccupied bathroom to empty her bag and clean herself up. Sandy frequently comments that she "hates" her colostomy bag and wishes she could make all of her stomach issues disappear.

Similar to many chronic medical illnesses, focusing on acceptance is a large part of coping with gastrointestinal conditions. Because these conditions can be so interfering, children often spend a great deal of time and effort wishing things could be different. Mindfulness practice for these children frequently involves having them map out what about their life they can't control (e.g., their disease, when they have diarrhea, when they throw up) and what they can control (e.g., what they eat, what sports they participate in, how they respond to disease-related stressors). Encouraging children to explore what type of life they want to live and brainstorm with them how to achieve this, even with their disease present, is a helpful strategy for engendering purposeful living. Interestingly, because stress is often a trigger for gastrointestinal-related symptoms, we have found that when children and adolescents stop struggling with trying to change their disease, their symptoms actually decrease.

Mindfulness mediation is also very useful for children with gastrointestinal issues, as it can be used as a grounding exercise during moments of physical discomfort or embarrassment. For example, if the child is experiencing stomach cramping in the middle of a class, they can bring their attention to their breathing for a few minutes to help them cope with their pain. Mindfulness can also be used to help the child from getting caught up in unhelpful thinking patterns; if a child notices that they are obsessing whether another student heard them throwing up in the bathroom, they can use mindfulness to bring their attention back to the present moment.

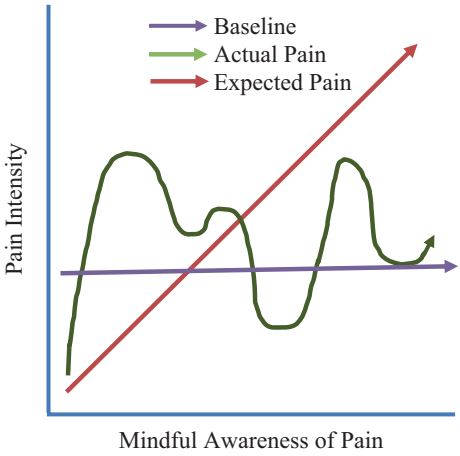
Pain

"Wait. You're telling me that you want me to actually focus on my pain? But I deal with my pain all day long! Why would I want to spend *more* time thinking about it?" This type of response to mindfulness and acceptance is very typical in children and adolescents. Chronic pain has become such a pervasive part of their life that it feels absurd to consider giving the pain even more of the limelight. However, mindfulness and acceptance around pain can teach the child a great deal about the nature of pain.

For example, one mindfulness activity that we conduct with children to teach them the nature of pain is to hold an ice cube for 5 min. As you are probably aware, holding an ice cube for that long is incredibly uncomfortable! While the child sits with the ice cube in hand, we encourage the child to notice the physical sensations in the hand, asking them to mentally label the sensations (e.g., sharp, stabbing, cold, burning, itching). We also ask them to notice how the discomfort alternates in intensity, with sometimes just being an annoyance and other times being nearly overwhelming. Finally, we ask the child to pay attention to what their brain is telling them, such as telling them that the activity is dangerous or that they need to drop the ice cube.

Following the mindfulness practice, we spend time processing with the child what it was like to have that acute physical discomfort. Children frequently note that they were surprised by how the ice cube did not hurt them the entire time but peaked at various points throughout the exercise. We often can relate this back to their chronic pain, noting how by paying attention to the pain the child can find moments where the pain is manageable and tolerable. We also spend time processing the many thoughts that arose during the ice cube mindfulness experience. Very frequently, the child reports that they worried that they would have permanent damage (such as frostbite) and that they would have to deal with the pain forever. They also talk frequently about having the thought that they need to drop the ice cube. We can then discuss how our brain's automatic response to pain is to try to escape the pain and pull in examples of how the child has tried to escape the chronic pain in their life (e.g., medications, skipping activities). More than anything, this exercise teaches the child that they can be fully present with intense physical discomfort for five whole minutes, and by being fully present, they were able to directly challenge thoughts and notice moments where the pain was not as intense. We then start to work with the child on becoming more aware of their daily pains.

This graph helps illustrate how mindfulness practices can teach about the nature of pain. Youth typically experience what they consider their baseline level of pain (purple line). When youth first think about focusing on their pain, they believe that the pain will only intensify if they give more attention to it (red line). However, by noticing the pain, they are generally able to see how the pain rises and falls over time (green line)—they may even be able to appreciate the moments when their pain is lower.



Mindful awareness of pain

Obesity

Mindfulness is also utilized frequently within children and adolescents with obesity. Because eating foods in large quantities often occurs automatically, or without thought, for youth with overweight or obeseity, we aim to bring awareness back to eating patterns and to body cues for hunger and fullness. For example, Sarah (an obese teenager) often eats potato chips while watching television, and she does not realize how much she has eaten until she notices that the bag is empty. We worked with Sarah on becoming more mindful of her motivations for eating and her eating behavior. Specifically, we helped Sarah to pay attention to every bite she consumed while eating her meals. This meant that we encouraged her to never eat while watching television, doing homework, playing on her phone, or even talking to others. We coached Sarah on how to really notice her eating experience; we prompted her to visually examine every bite of food, to smell each bite of food, and to let each bite of food sit on her tongue for a moment before slowly chewing and swallowing. Once Sarah placed the food in her mouth, we encouraged her to lower her spoon or fork until she had completely swallowed her food, to better enable her to be present with her eating experience. We also worked with Sarah to notice when she began to feel full and to respect her body's cues by stopping eating when she was no longer hungry.

In addition to mindless eating, adolescents who are overweight or obese often feel embarrassment or shameful about their body and frequently have negative thinking patterns regarding themselves and their weight. We work closely with adolescents on using mindfulness as a way to detangle themselves from these negative thoughts and instead focus on what they have control of in the present moment. For

example, when Tyler (an overweight 14-year-old male) thought about going to the gym, he would immediately begin thinking of how everyone at the gym would quietly make fun of him or secretly judge him for being overweight. These fears were often enough to deter Tyler from going to the gym. Using mindfulness exercises, Tyler was able to attend the gym, and he would frequently focus on his breathing or on his physical exercises as a way to keep his mind from thinking about what others were thinking.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have illustrated the usefulness of mindfulness for youths with medical/psychological concerns. It is important to emphasize that mindfulness implies that the brain and the body are intricately connected and that using the mind to reduce distress associated with health concerns is an important part of achieving wellness. Mindfulness has particular promise for helping children and adolescents with health concerns because it emphasizes pursuit of values, attention to present experience, avoiding negative judgment about experience, and using the brain to produce responses in the body that reduce distress. Mindfulness is not intended to "get rid" of illness. Rather, it provides tools to help children and adolescents change their relationship to illness and to help them move in the direction of health and thriving.

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Autism, Emotions, and Mindfulness

Mikle South

On his way home from school, 12-year-old Liam tells his mom about his day at school. "Life is like a game of dodgeball," he says, "and people are like heat-seeking dodgeballs." For his age, Liam is a skilled computer programmer and an insightful writer, although he usually forgets to turn in his homework. Like many autistic[1] children, Liam feels overwhelmed by loud sounds, bright lights, or being in a crowd. He can be sensitive to the feelings of others, but his understanding of emotions is often different than most of those around him, which can leave him feeling left out. Liam is so worried about making the wrong decision that sometimes he cannot make any decision at all. Liam especially dislikes any degree of ambiguity about schedules or expectations and incessantly asks his exasperated mom what's coming next. The most unpredictable aspect of Liam's environment is how other people will react—the heat-seeking dodgeballs that leave Liam feeling always on edge.

[1] Conventions about what to call a child or adult who has been diagnosed with autism are controversial. The "person-centered" viewpoint argues that one aspect of a person (e.g., autism) should not define that person. On the other hand, many autistic people such as blogger Lydia Brown counter that "autism is an inherent part of an individual's identity" and should be acknowledged as such, just as we may appropriately refer to people as "American" or "gifted." Of course, in most instances, it is best just to refer to a person by their name, not any one characteristic, but this is harder to do for a group. In this chapter, I will adopt the wishes of many autistic self-advocates and use identity-first language.

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P. R. Steffen (ed.), *Mindfulness for Everyday Living*, Mindfulness in Behavioral Health, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51618-5_5

Anxiety in Autism

Better understanding of the causes of mental health difficulties can inform more specific and effective treatments. My work with Dr. Jacqui Rodgers at Newcastle University in England has focused on three important factors that contribute to anxiety in autism. The first factor is unusual sensory processing that is common in autism. The second is difficulty identifying or labeling emotions. Difficulty in these two areas may lead to increased difficulty with ambiguity or uncertainty about the world that psychologists refer to as "intolerance of uncertainty." Figure 1 shows a diagram of how these factors might interact. The following sections provide an overview of how each may contribute to anxiety and how mindfulness-based interventions could be targeted to each of these in turn.

Sensory Processing and Anxiety Our five senses take in a lot of information all at once, and it takes a lot of effort and energy for the brain to sort out what everything means. Up to 80% of autistic children exhibit some atypical sensory-processing behavior, and sensory-processing concerns also persist for many autistic adults. Many autistic people have strong sensitivity to sensory stimuli: they may put their hands over their ears in response to loud or unexpected noises, prefer to wear only soft clothing such as jogging pants, or avoid foods with particular textures or smells. Some autistic people seek out intense sensory stimulation at unusually high levels: they may spend their time feeling the texture of toys rather than playing with them, staring at spinning objects, or being very particular about the way a room is arranged. Many autistic people have both oversensitivity *and* sensory-seeking behaviors.

There is growing evidence that autistic people have more difficulty sorting out different sensory stimuli, even at a subconscious level in the brain. This would mean that the environment is in a constant state of uncertainty: as one young adult man described his sensory experience: "I feel like I'm at war with the world." In such a world, a person with autism would feel more comfortable doing predictable activities in predictable places. This may be one factor leading to restricted or repetitive behaviors (i.e., a tendency to do the same things and/or talk about the same things more often than usual) which are one of the core features of autism. While these behaviors can be both interesting and useful (e.g., using a specialty in maps to guide city planning), these can also make it difficult to focus on other important things, like completing homework or paying attention in a meaningful conversation.

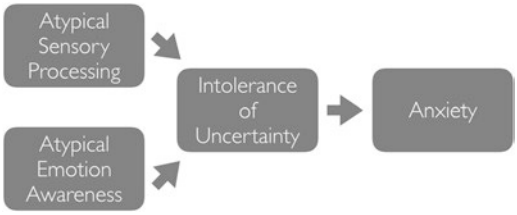


Fig. 1 Some proposed contributions to anxiety in autism, highlighting the role of intolerance of uncertainty (IoU). Adapted from South and Rodgers (2017)

Mindfulness Approaches for Sensory Processing in Autism This section covers two approaches. The first considers what can be done to make the environment a more sensory-friendly place for people where possible. The second considers how autistic people can use mindfulness skills to tolerate sensory distractions a little better.

Creating Safe Places Most people benefit from quiet time and spaces to help calm down and manage emotions, especially in times of stress. Because sensory processing in autism can be so intense, this need for space and quiet can be even more essential. A number of organizations are finding ways to create autism-friendly environments without much additional cost. For example, in 2016, the Melisa Nellesen Center for Autism at Utah Valley University—in collaboration with the Utah Autism Academy and the Woodbury Art Museum—held an art exhibition by autistic artists. The designers built a "relaxed gallery" in one corner of the large hall, a small separate room with reduced lighting, earphones, a soft chair, and a yoga mat where anyone feeling overwhelmed by the sensory or social experience could take a break. Many J. C. Penney department stores sponsor times before regular shopping hours when their store lights are dimmed and the overhead music is muted, where families affected by autism can shop in a welcoming place. Quite a few professional sports teams now offer autism-friendly experiences: for example, the Atlanta Braves baseball team has an "Exceptional Fan" program that includes quiet spaces in the stadium, maps of the ballpark that show where loud sounds such as fireworks or a big drum may happen, noise-cancelling headphones, lanyards with contact and safety information attached, and a "social story" to prepare them for the stadium experience. Autism-friendly meetings now ask the audience to wave or wiggle their hands to show appreciation for a speaker, rather than applause, in order to reduce the noise level.

Similar principles can be adopted at schools, workplaces, and homes. One school accommodation that we frequently recommend is the availability of a quieter place—perhaps in the lunchroom at some times of day, a counselor's office, or even a quieter corner of the classroom, where an overwhelmed child can go to relax. Of course, whatever assignments are due must still be completed when the child returns, but hopefully, the time away will help the child be more successful. I remember a family I worked with while I was in graduate school, a single mother and her 14-year-old autistic boy who came home each day from school and needed 30–40 min to pace while talking to himself. He usually did this pacing in a large rectangle around the borders of the lawn in his backyard, and at first, his mom was very frustrated that her son was damaging the lawn and sometimes yelled at him to quit pacing. After a short time, however, she had the idea to pave an asphalt path for him to walk on: this recognized and accepted his need for quiet time while also allowing her to mow, water, and otherwise take care of the yard without further trouble.

Expanding and Encouraging Sensory Success. Not all environments can be easily adapted, and finding ways for autistics to manage within the world is also

important. One common treatment is occupational therapy, which uses swings, balls, trampolines, and other equipment to engage a child's motor and tactile systems. The therapist challenges the children's sensory boundaries to gradually improve their comfort and to help them learn to organize their sensory world. Sensory-based therapies include activities and devices intended to help reduce arousal, such as weighted blankets or pressure vests, massage, or brushing to reduce sensitivity to touch. Unfortunately, the actual procedures used in treatments for sensory processing have not been well-standardized, and research on the effectiveness of such treatments is quite scattered. Thus, it is not certain what techniques or practices work best in autism, so some trial and error may be needed for each individual.

An intriguing model being developed at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia has the goal to decrease sensory sensitivity to food and to reduce picky eating in autism. The Building Up Food Flexibility and Exposure Treatment (BUFFET) is a 14-week program using cognitive behavioral therapy techniques that build on mindfulness skills such as deep breathing, distraction, and cognitive flexibility. A big focus for BUFFET is on "being in the moment" with one's food. The program includes steps to explicitly but gradually expose children to foods that make them anxious, to teach scripts geared toward flexibility with food, to provide education about sensory aspects of foods, and to train children to identify tastes more effectively. A review article by Emily Kuschner and her colleagues highlights flexibility training using a "Plan A/Plan B" script to prepare for the unexpected, such as not knowing what will be on the menu when visiting a new restaurant: "Plan A will be to order chicken fingers, but if they don't have chicken fingers, my Plan B is to order pasta." Working in groups, children develop a "Food Dictionary" for each snack time food, talking about how each food looks, smells, tastes, and feels; how to eat it; and so forth; they include a "review" of each food culminating in a rating ranging from "one fork" to "five forks." Parents are involved at all aspects of treatment and help to practice at home. A small pilot study has shown that children, parents, and clinicians tolerate the treatment well and believe it to be effective. This type of treatment may be effective for sensory-processing difficulties beyond just food sensitivity (Fig. 2).

Emotion Recognition and Anxiety It is a myth that autistic people do not feel emotion—in fact, many autistic people feel emotion very keenly. But knowing what those emotions mean, and what to do in response, can be difficult. The ability to identify and describe one's feelings is very important for emotion regulation. Difficulties labeling emotions—which scientists refer to using the Greek term "alexithymia" (meaning: "can't read emotions")—can lead to feeling overwhelmed by emotions. One example is seen in the popular Snickers© candy bar advertisements which depict "hangry" people who mix up feeling hungry with feeling angry and therefore act grouchy.

Alexithymia is common in many mental health conditions including depression and anxiety. But it seems especially prevalent in autism. This may include difficulties describing one's own emotions, which we see frequently in our interviews with autistic children, teens, and adults. Our standard interview questions ask people to describe situations when they feel happy, sad, angry, and worried and to describe

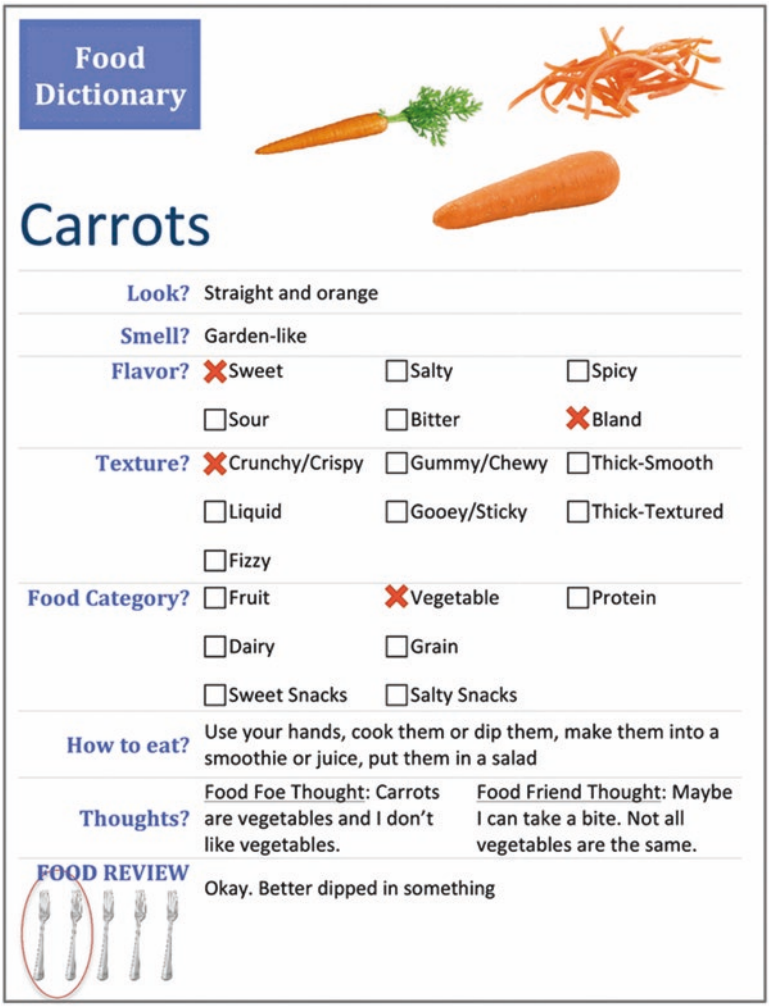


Fig. 2 Sample Food Dictionary entry from the BUFFET program (Kuschner et al., 2017)

their body reactions in such situations. These turn out to be some of the hardest questions, and many autistic teens and adults tell us that they don't really know the difference between the negative emotions; they also have a hard time making a facial expression to match each emotion. Alexithymia can also make it difficult to understand emotions in others, and research studies in autism have suggested a link between alexithymia and measures of empathy, which require labeling how others are feeling. Other research studies have now shown strong links between alexithymia and anxiety in autism.

One possible explanation for high levels of alexithymia in autism comes from brain imaging studies that show atypical organization for autism groups in the insula

region of the brain. The insula is a critical area for linking sensory and emotional experience. It is likewise important for integrating social and emotional cues from internal (within the person) and external (with relation to others) states. The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has argued that "feelings are mental experiences of body states," meaning that if we are being attacked by a bear, our heart will automatically beat faster and we'll start to sweat and then we will experience the feeling of fear or horror. It makes sense that atypical connections in the insula could lead to difficulty in sensory processing and in emotion awareness for both self and others.

Mindfulness Approaches for Emotion Awareness in Autism When we first started doing group therapy for social skills in children with autism, we worked a lot on building conversational skills, asking for help, and other important social behaviors. However, we soon realized that paying attention to social skills was going to be difficult until the children in our groups could learn to manage their anxiety, anger, and other emotions a lot more effectively. So, we started an emotion skills group as a precursor to social skills training. In line with theories that link body states and emotion states, our first group focused on body awareness: what do your breathing, muscles, heart, and skin tell you about how you are feeling? Figure 3 shows a shortened "Body Detective" chart that we assigned for homework.

We then practiced body awareness every week during our sessions. A favorite activity evolved from a classic child anxiety treatment called "robot to ragdoll," but we found that many children were having a hard time connecting with "robot" and nobody knew what a "ragdoll" was. So, one of our therapists modified the terminology on the spot to "Hulk to jellyfish": children get their bodies super tense all over, like the Incredible Hulk when he's angry; they then totally relax like a jellyfish and fall over the floor. This turns out to be very relaxing and really increases awareness of how our bodies and feelings are linked. We also worked on cognitive awareness with practice identifying "red light" thoughts that make us feel worried, scared, afraid, or angry versus "green light" thoughts that make us feel calm, relaxed, and happy. Children practiced with each other in pairs and in groups and had other fun

TOP SECRET

Write down 3 events that made you feel worried or upset this week. Then write down what body clues helped you know you were upset. Ask your parents for help if you need it, they're great assistant detectives!

As a reminder, here are some of the body clues we talked about in group: body shaking, heart pounding, red face, sweaty hands, empty stomach/butterflies in stomach, tense muscles.

1. Event:

Body clues:

Fig. 3 Sample body awareness chart

activities such as watching brief movie clips where they had to identify the characters' emotions and describe how they could tell.

Since we started these groups, a number of other great resources have been published to teach body and emotion awareness and coping skills. Although there are many books, workbooks, and websites that cover similar principles, we especially like the book *Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids (and their Parents)* by the Dutch therapist Eline Snel. The book includes many concrete exercises to help children improve awareness, beginning with breathing exercises to learn to attend to the body in the moment and then moving to fun ideas such as a "spaghetti test" to see whether our body is feeling anxious and stiff (like uncooked spaghetti) or relaxed and soft (like cooked spaghetti). The program then moves into practicing emotion identification, including a feeling thermometer to rate physical and emotional well-being, and a "personal weather report" about feelings that can be tracked over time: am I feeling the same way now as I was earlier in the day? Finally, the book covers strategies for reducing emotional upset, with a variety of activities such as "First Aid for Worries." The author now has a sequel for teens and parents called *Breathe Through This*.

Body and Mind: Principles for Older Teens and Adults Explicit instructions about body cues and emotions, with lots of practice, are also good principles for teens and adults. This is depicted in my favorite scene from the movie *Adam*, which tells the story of a young adult man diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder who has a special interest in space exploration and who becomes friends with a woman named Beth from the upstairs apartment. One day, Beth comes home from work to find Adam hanging upside down from the balcony above, dressed in a NASA spacesuit, cleaning her windows so that she can better see the stars. She is obviously taken aback and after she lets Adam into her apartment stands looking at him from a distance with her arms folded. Adam says, "I can see that you're upset, but I don't know what to do." Beth then gives a somewhat ambiguous instruction, "can you give me a hug" (to which he replies "yes"), before giving a very clear instruction: "Adam, I'd like you to give me a hug" (which he does). Autistic adults report being frustrated by psychological counseling approaches that expect them to make leaps of emotional insight on their own. Much better practice is to practice clearly defined steps to label emotions and to practice how to react in beneficial ways.

One particular focus of many mindfulness interventions is on increasing flexibility in thinking, especially in thinking about emotions. Because flexibility is often difficult for autistic people, this focus offers both a challenge and a unique window for successful treatment. For example, the concept of "cognitive fusion" refers to being "fused" to one's thoughts too closely. Perhaps I drop a drinking glass while loading the dishwasher, the glass breaks, I exclaim "I'm stupid," and then I generalize that thought to believe I am stupid about everything. Mindfulness treatments encourage one to be less attached to such thoughts. For instance, in a therapy session, the counselor may have a person say a silly word, such as "milk," over and over again for 30 s and pay attention to how silly that sounds. Then the person may take a summary of the negative thought, such as "stupid," and repeat that over and

over for 30 s while paying attention to how silly it sounds. Alternatively, the person could tell the story of the dropped glass using a cartoon voice such as Donald Duck, noticing that it really doesn't sound so bad as it did in the moment.

Researchers in the Netherlands have adapted standard mindfulness-based protocols to better address the unique styles in autism. This includes such modifications as making activities more concrete, less reliance on examination of thoughts (with more focus on sensory and other cues), and longer activities and duration of treatment. These and other studies of mindfulness—and acceptance-based interventions (MABIs) have shown real promise for reducing anxiety and depression in children, adolescents, and adults with autism. Studies of parent-involved treatments have also shown similar benefits for the parents, as well as improved social communication skills in the children with autism. Table 1 is a summary of the mindfulness intervention used by the Dutch therapist Dr. Annelies Spek and her collaborators. They ran a 9-week treatment with 20 adults diagnosed with autism, while a comparison group of 21 autistic adults did not receive treatment until after the study ended. Every session lasted about 2½ h, which included review of previous work and instructions on homework exercises, as well as time to discuss difficulties with the previous week's homework. Compared to the no-treatment group, the mindfulness treatment group showed reduced depression and anxiety as well as increased positive feelings. These benefits seemed to last for at least 2 months following treatment. As can be seen in Table 1, there is a big emphasis on *awareness* of body, breathing, and eating and on the negative content of thoughts. There is then an emphasis on managing reactions to such sensations through practice such as breathing, meditation, yoga, and cognitive defusion.

Intolerance of Uncertainty Underlies Anxiety in Autism A common theme in the previous sections is that of uncertainty: uncertainty about the sensory environment and uncertainty about the meaning of strong emotions. Like most species,

Table 1 Summary of mindfulness treatment for adults, reported by Spek, van Ham, and Nyklíček (2013)

Week 1. Mindful eating exercise and body scan (pay attention to various sensations in the body in an accepting way)
Week 2. Practice body scan, attention to situations of biggest stress, and several mindful breathing meditations
Week 3. Information on physical reactions to stress. Mindful walking exercise, movement exercise (yoga), and more breathing meditations
Week 4. Sitting meditation, focused on breathing and bodily sensations. A listening meditation "in which attention was paid to sounds as they naturally occurred"
Week 5. More sitting and breathing exercises and talk about how to use mindfulness techniques in stressful situations
Week 6. More sitting and breathing exercises and information about ruminative thoughts (e.g., rehearsing negative thoughts repeatedly). Meditation focused on observing thoughts "from a detached perspective"
Weeks 6–9. More practice of above exercises and discussion of how well things are going and possible solutions for overcoming obstacles

humans dislike uncertainty and will go to great lengths to find or create a more predictable situation—even at risk of losing money or other resources. But some people have an especially strong aversion to unpredictability, referred to by psychologists as an "intolerance of uncertainty." It's already known that intolerance of uncertainty is a strong driving force for many people with anxiety disorders and depression. Real-life experience suggests that intolerance of uncertainty is nearly constant for many autistic people and can be paralyzing. For example, a recent television advertisement created in England (view it at www.autism.org.uk/toomuchinformation) depicts a woman who is trying to leave home for an appointment, but she stands at the mirror by her front door imagining all the things that *might* happen should she go out. She is feeling completely overwhelmed. In the end, she stands frozen, crying, and unable to leave. Another example comes from a 10-year-old boy whose parents were phoned by the school to tell them he would be receiving an award the next day. He had a miserable night because, even though he knew that it would be a good thing, he didn't know exactly what the award was going to be. We are just now creating ways to study autism and intolerance of uncertainty in the lab, but several studies using questionnaires, given to parents of autistic children as well as to autistic adults, show strong evidence for our intolerance of uncertainty model.

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University conducted a study with children diagnosed with autism, ages 8–14, using cognitive behavioral treatment (CBT) for anxiety using the *Facing Your Fears* treatment which has been modified specifically for autism. The researchers measured levels of general anxiety as well as levels of intolerance of uncertainty both before and after the treatment. Overall, while the treatment was somewhat effective at reducing anxiety, it did not reduce intolerance of uncertainty. Importantly, levels of intolerance of uncertainty predicted how well the treatment worked for reducing anxiety, such that those who had high intolerance of uncertainty before treatment did not show much improvement in their anxiety after treatment.

One possible consequence of this incessant uncertainty could arise for learning when it's okay to feel safe. As with many species, the human brain responds quickly to any perceived threat, including a powerful fight/flight/freeze response when danger arises. Within the brain, the region called the amygdala is a small, almond-shaped group of nuclei that recognizes danger and initiates the body's defense response. In a brain imaging study using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), we explored differences in amygdala activity between adults with autism and neurotypical, non-autistic adults. During their brain scan, research participants watched a monitor that could show two colors of square in the middle of the screen. One color—the *threat* cue—was sometimes followed by a very surprising burst of air onto the lower part of the neck. The other color—the *safe* cue—was never followed by the burst of air. For the neurotypical adults, the amygdala was significantly more active during the threat cue than during the safe cue (see Fig. 4). We did not see this same difference between threat and safe cues for the autistic adults, however. We are still investigating why this might be, but we suggest that difficulties of knowing when to feel safe could contribute to the default response of feeling

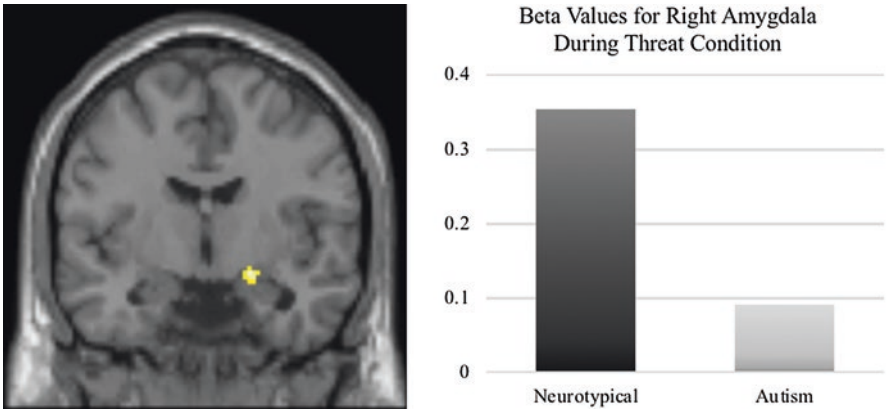


Fig. 4 During fMRI scanning, a sample of neurotypical adults shows greater activation of the amygdala for threat cues than safety cues, while a sample of autistic adults does not show the same differences

threatened, which may in turn contribute to frequent feelings of anxiety. We are collecting other evidence that adults with autism show elevated levels of threat reaction—for example, increased pupil size—even during nonthreatening activities.

Mindfulness Approaches for Managing Uncertainty in Autism I was speaking recently with an autistic adult about how I was writing this chapter about anxiety in autism. I told him that I was going to highlight the contributions of sensory processing, emotion awareness, and uncertainty. He replied that those are all important to talk about, but in his mind, "it all comes down to uncertainty." This reminds me of another story about Liam, the young boy whose metaphor about human dodgeballs began this chapter. His mom reported that during a family party, most people were watching a movie in the living room when someone said that Liam had made a mess in the bathroom. First his mom and then his stepdad became increasingly agitated while telling Liam to clean up his mess; he sat on the floor in the next room crying but not moving. Finally, Liam's grandmother went to him and asked, "What's wrong, Liam?" To which he replied: "I don't know what to do!" His grandmother took him to the bathroom, reviewed the situation with him, and gave him specific suggestions on what to do about it. Liam then cheerfully cleaned up the mess. This brings up the question of "will versus skill"; e.g., when struggling to do something they are asked to do (at home, at school, at work), is it because the autistic person is intentionally refusing to do it or because they don't know how? While it's often easy to assume the former, the latter is often truer.

Knowing this provides an opportunity for others to provide assistance, both by increasing the level of instruction or support that is needed to complete a project and also by helping those affected by intolerance of uncertainty to manage it better. At home and school, adults can provide more certainty in the autistic child's world wherever possible. We recommend using lists, schedules, or charts to organize

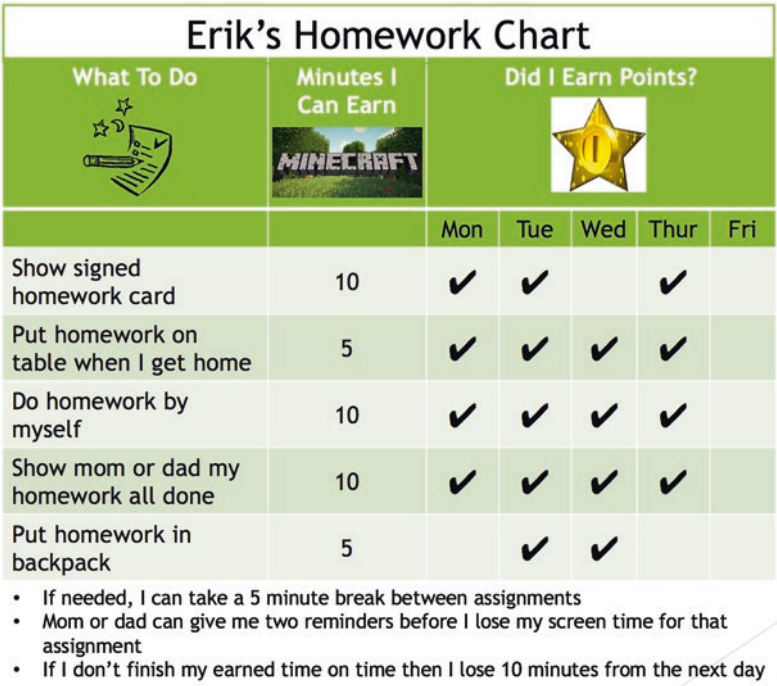


Fig. 5 Making tasks simple and easy to know when they are done can be very helpful. Avoid all-or-nothing reward systems

activities such as chores, homework, or other areas of conflict. Such lists can rely on pictures and/or words according to the needs of the individual. At home, parents may use a homework chart with simple rewards for concrete tasks, like the one pictured here. This can make power struggles less frequent because the instructions are on the chart, not with the parent. When the person knows what to do, they are much more likely to do it then if they are confused. At school, teachers may write up the order of daily activities on the board, including places the child needs to go during the day. Many teachers do this already, and we think it would help in every classroom but especially classrooms with autistic children. To-do lists are helpful for adults especially if they can be checked off when finished. Keep expectations simple and avoid all-or-nothing scenarios: have a few activities with good instructions that will encourage and reward success, and let the rest go (Fig. 5).

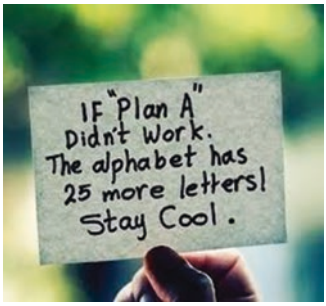
Similar ideas are true for the workplace. An adult with autism that I know was very successful at his internship working in IT, until he got a new supervisor who was loose with expectations and often changed instructions midway through an assignment. The intern began to struggle, and the company threatened to let him go. But his job coach talked to the company's HR department who agrees that their managers were doing a poor job. More training was provided for management especially around keeping expectations predictable and fair, and the intern was able to

resume work more successfully. I know a therapist who works with many autistic adults and who decorated his office with muted colors, lighting, and sounds. He also has a predictable routine for each session, which his clients really appreciate.

There is also a need to help people most affected by uncertainty to better manage it on their own. Dr. Rodgers and her team in England are now developing the *Coping with Uncertainty in Everyday Situations* (CUES©) program for children with autism and their parents. Rather than modifying CBT from non-autism programs, CUES has been developed from the ground up based on substantial input from autistic people and their caregivers. The program is aimed at the parents of children with autism who in turn help their children to better manage intolerance of uncertainty (IoU). CUES first aims to raise awareness of IoU and to "enable the child to become more able to tolerate uncertainty, rather than attempting to reduce uncertainty" (Rodgers et al., 2017, p. 3961). Parents work with therapists and with each other during group sessions to identify existing patterns of behavior that maintain IoU and then develop alternative strategies to cope more effectively. Finally, the program aims "to encourage reflection and evaluation" of how the family system manages uncertainty on an ongoing basis. Many families don't realize how much they work around a child's IoU, and we encourage some gentle pushback—become aware of when IoU is a concern and help the child to accept change and uncertainty a little bit at a time. Early results for CUES are promising, and a version meant for adults with autism is now being developed.

Intolerance of uncertainty can be so emotionally crushing that autistic people will not even begin a project unless they know exactly how to do it without making a mistake. While speaking some years ago at a workshop in Utah about anxiety in autism, I mentioned that I didn't have many good ideas about how to help people overcome this intense fear of failure. Fortunately, a woman from South Dakota, who was watching the talk via livestream, texted the conference hotline about her experience with her autistic husband on just this topic. She gave some really good tips which I repeat here:

(a) Celebrate risk-taking at every opportunity.
(b) Reinforce attempts more than completion.
(c) Reframe unsuccessful attempts as practice.
(d) Give extra support/instruction for learning new skills.
(e) Normalize failure.
(f) But acknowledge that failures in some areas may be frequent.



Modifying Treatment for Autism Many autistic teens and adults report being frustrated that their mental health therapists don't understand their point of view and that therapists insist on using standard protocols without any recognition of unique challenges for autism. This section reviews a few ideas for adapting standard treatment approaches to better address autism. Of course, the first rule is always to ask the client how things are going and whether there are specific ideas for improving the treatment approach. An autistic person may be timid about speaking up regarding their needs but likely would respond to specific questions. And if a client does speak up, definitely take their ideas seriously! This may be especially important for suicide prevention: instead of relying on an autistic person that you are concerned about to bring up the topic, direct and specific questions are in order: are you thinking about hurting or killing yourself? Have you made a plan to do it? And provide specific help and assistance, including crisis hotlines such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800-273-8255), the crisis text line (text "talk" to 741741), or The Trevor Project (866-488-7386).

There are some principles that may be useful for modifying traditional mental health treatments to make them more autism-friendly. Table 2 summarizes formal recommendations established by the United Kingdom's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE guidelines) regarding modification of cognitive behavioral treatment of anxiety in autism. The same principles are entirely applicable to mindfulness-based treatments.

One example of such modification is the *Facing Your Fears* treatment for anxiety, which adapted a standard cognitive behavioral treatment for children to be more autism-friendly. *Facing Your Fears* uses "visual schedules," a predictable flow for each session, gradual introduction of exposure to anxious situations, and substantial parent involvement in treatment. But treatment can and should be individualized as needed for each person. One challenge for mindfulness-based treatments is their frequent reliance on metaphors, such as "imagine your thoughts floating away on a leaf in a stream," which can be difficult for autistic people to follow. One of my doctoral students introduced a metaphor about how crowded our thoughts can become to a young adult woman with autism who told him that "I don't get it." So, he asked her if she could think of something that made sense, and she created her

Table 2 United Kingdom's National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines for cognitive behavioral therapy for anxiety in autism

1.	Emotion recognition training
2.	Greater use of written and visual information and structured worksheets
3.	A more cognitively concrete and structured approach
4.	Simplified cognitive activities, for example, multiple-choice worksheets
5.	Involving a parent or caregiver to support the implementation of the intervention, for example, involving them in therapy sessions
6.	Maintaining attention by offering regular breaks
7.	Incorporating the child or young person's special interests into therapy if possible

Adapted from Walters et al. (2016)

own metaphor: a whiteboard completely full of text, where she could then imagine herself erasing it a little at a time, which helped her feel less overwhelmed.

Final Thoughts: Letting Go of Expectations

However, it's important to remember that there are many thoughts and behaviors that autistic people don't need to change at all, and just because a behavior is "quirky" doesn't mean it ought to be "fixed." Variety is an essential element of any healthy system, and I often tell parents that as long as your child's behavior isn't hurting someone or otherwise interfering with necessary activities, there is no need to try altering the child personality or sense of self. Let it go!

This hands-off approach can be hard for non-autistic, neurotypical people to follow. I sometimes hear about one parent who can't stand hearing about their autistic child's topic of conversation or a teacher who is insistent that a child with both autism and atypical motor skills has to learn cursive handwriting, to which I respond: who is the one being rigid? I recently met with the mother of a 10-year-old boy who will only eat about eight foods but is growing well enough. She'd just come from a lecture from her pediatrician about making sure her children get enough fruits and vegetables. What I thought was, "I'd like to see that doctor take that kid for a week and try to feed him!" What I said was, "if your son is healthy and growing, don't worry too much right now about forcing the food issue," at which point the mother burst into tears, because she's been feeling so much pressure to do everything just right even though her son's sensory concerns and anxiety make things so difficult. She was very interested in the ideas from the BUFFET program reviewed above and now will be able to work on eating in a way that makes sense for autism and at a speed that makes sense for her child. This will reduce stress for everybody.

Summary

This chapter has highlighted how frequent anxiety and depression and other mental health struggles can occur in autism. I have reviewed mindfulness-based ideas which may be useful for helping to reduce the impact of these challenges. Because of the frequency of anxiety in autism, I have focused most of the examples there. But they are equally applicable for depression as well as for other mental health concerns. Some of the ideas are particularly applicable for mental health professionals, but many of the principles apply to home, school, and workplaces. As research into mindfulness-based treatment for autism grows, more specific information on what works well and what might not work so well will increase the effectiveness of treatment and help autistic children, teens, and adults to feel less distressed and more successful.

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Mindful Parenting

Corinne E. Ruth and Kat T. Green

Every baby can be seen as a little Buddha or Zen Master, your own private mindfulness teacher…

Jon Kabat-Zinn, Wherever You Go, There You Are (1994), p. 248

When asked about their most joyful experiences, most people highlight moments spent with their children. Parenting is often viewed as one of the most satisfying roles that anyone can fulfill in a lifetime, providing amazing opportunities to support and witness the growth of a child through seemingly endless unique stages. However, when asked about their most trying, stressful, or frustrating experiences, many people would *also* highlight moments spent with their children. While parenting brings numerous moments of gratification, the job description does not lend itself to smooth sailing and carefree days. Parenthood brings with it constant ups and downs inherent to raising children as well as a consistent pressure to be "perfect" in fulfilling the lofty demands of this role. As described by one mother, "I feel like I'm supposed to be in one thousand places and do one thousand things, all at the same time and with a big smile." Parents are responsible for managing a delicate balancing act of juggling the activities, hobbies, emotions, schedules, needs, preferences, and demands of multiple family members, all while trying to keep kids in semi-clean clothes, occasionally eating something other than frozen pizza. The constancy and enormity of this undertaking can make parents feel scattered and overwhelmed.

As demands on parents' time have increased, there has also been a flood of "helpful" resources on how parents can and should "de-stress." Suggestions from real or virtual friends or ideas in courses, books, self-help programs, or online coaching are often well-intentioned and may be a good fit for some, but much of the counsel seems to add *more* demands to parents' already busy schedules. Therefore,

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P. R. Steffen (ed.), *Mindfulness for Everyday Living*, Mindfulness in Behavioral Health, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51618-5_6

many parents get caught up in what may feel like an endless cycle of feeling overwhelmed with the stressors of daily life, then turning to resources promoting new programs and strategies to figure out how do it all the less stressful, "right" way, and consequently (and as a cruel irony) feeling *more* overwhelmed.

But there is good news: while you may not be able to change the demands associated with the job description (unfortunately, there are significant consequences to forgoing all rules or consequences for weeks at a time), there are ways to change your relationship to those demands, making it feel less harrying and perhaps even squeezing in some room to breathe. As mindfulness researcher Jon Kabat-Zinn explains, "you can't stop the waves, but you can learn to surf" (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). The application of mindfulness strategies to the tasks involved in parenting is an avenue for parents to teach themselves and their children to do just that—to ride the waves in everyday life in a purposeful way, rather than feeling dread or discouragement with each new challenge. And in even better news, the practice of "mindful parenting" has been shown to have substantial positive effects for parents themselves along with families as a whole.

What Is Mindful Parenting?

The following questions can help parents do a quick "check-in" to see if there are any areas of their parenting that may benefit from incorporating mindfulness:

- Do I ever find myself yelling at my child or speaking harshly almost as an automatic reaction, without feeling like I have a chance to stop and think?
- Do I often judge or criticize my own parenting behaviors?
- Do I miss things that my child is trying to tell, explain, or show me because I'm distracted?

If you, like most parents, answered "yes" to any of these questions, mindful parenting may be a good fit for you and your experiences. Mindful parenting involves applying the core tenant of mindfulness or paying attention to the present moment in a nonjudgmental and open manner, to the parent-child relationship. Mindfulness in parenting includes increasing your awareness of a child's needs, emotions, and unique nature, listening to a child with full attention, accepting yourself compassionately as the parent that you are, recognizing your natural impulses and reactions to situations, and learning to respond more adaptively and kindly to yourself, your partner, and your child (Bögels, Lehtonen, & Restifo, 2010). Mindful parenting does not look like one specific practice or set of exercises. Instead, it is a mindset of purposeful attention and acceptance of all aspects of the present moment with a child. Many parents are surprised when they learn that incorporating mindfulness in their lives does not require monumental changes in their routines. In fact, many find that the majority of activities that they already carry out during the day provide more than enough space for introducing the practice of mindfulness. For example, washing the dishes, reading a bedtime story, teaching a child how to tie his shoes, or

interrupting a squabble over a toy can all serve as opportunities to exercise mindfulness.

Why Is Mindful Parenting Helpful?

Examining how mindfulness helps parents requires a quick review of how different parts of the brain are involved in everyday life and decision-making. The amygdala, a small almond-shaped mass located right behind the eye sockets, serves as the brain's "fire alarm" system, activating in response to perceived danger. When the amygdala detects a threat to your well-being, it sends out signals to other areas of the brain and body that kick the body into "survival" mode, preparing you to respond to the danger (Siegel, Germer, & Olendzki, 2009). For example, if a car were coming full speed at you while you were crossing the street, your amygdala would send signals to your body to increase your heart rate, pump blood to the muscles in your extremities, slow down digestion, and quicken your breathing in order to get you ready to jump out of the way. This reaction is often termed the "fight, flight, or freeze" response, and when it is working properly, it does an excellent job at helping you survive in dangerous situations. For our ancestors whose main stressors were having to drive bears away from their family's food supply, being attacked by neighboring tribes, or hiding from predators in the forest, this system helped them survive in life-threatening situations. However, in the changed landscape our modern lives, this "fight or flight" reaction often triggers in response to situations that are not actually life-threatening. For example, you can probably think of times where you felt tense, panicked, out of breath, and ready to fight to the death or run for your life when you answer another call from your child's teacher, are looking for an important document on the computer that seems to have vanished into thin air, or are trying to calm a screaming toddler on a crowded airplane. While these situations do not pose real bodily danger, your brain may detect it as potentially threatening. When our brain detects a threat, it tries to help us solve the problem by giving us a flood of adrenaline to fight, run, or hide. Unfortunately, when those are not the actions that resolve the problem, the extra energy instead tends to heighten the stress and tension in the situation.

In fact, when the "fight or flight" response is activated, it generally overpowers other parts of the brain, like the prefrontal cortex, that are in charge of rational thinking, impulse control, and problem-solving (Siegel et al., 2009). Your brain is assuming that it's a life-threatening situation and figures if you are actively being chased by a bear, you should not need to stop and think about your options. Thus, it can be extremely difficult to make rational decisions once your body is operating in high stress or threat mode. Not surprisingly, research has shown that, when under stress, parents have more difficulty using effective skills to help manage their child's behavior and engage in more negative communication toward their child (Belsky, 1984; Crnic, Gaze, & Hoffman, 2005). One young parent recounted, "I know that I shouldn't yell at my child, but when she's singing the same song from her favorite

TV show over and over again while jumping on my stomach, I can't help myself." And when stressors that trigger "fight or flight" are repeated, our brain creates shortcuts and may trigger the response in when faced with smaller cues that suggest it *might* happen. For example, this parent may notice that, over time, that anxiety or fight response is triggered when their daughter sings the song, even without the body slam. And because our day-to-day is filled with so many stressors, sometimes, our brain's "fight or flight" triggers so often that we start to feel exhausted, disheveled, scattered, and worn down. In turn, this may lead to more persistent difficulty making decisions, staying organized, focusing, and planning.

Now, back to the question of the section: How can mindfulness help? Mindfulness has been shown to help parents become more aware of their own stress in the moment and their typical "autopilot" responses and provides an opportunity to choose different responses if warranted. Studies using brain scan technology have shown that, as people practice mindfulness, the connections between their prefrontal cortex and amygdala actually become stronger, meaning that their prefrontal cortex becomes better able to calm the amygdala's overactive responding during stress (Creswell, Way, Eisenberger, & Lieberman, 2007). Mindfulness provides a path to feeling less controlled by situations and often reduces the intensity of stress, as the brain gets a chance to learn ways of evaluating whether a "fight or flight" response is needed in a given situation.

It is important to remember that parents are not the only ones who experience stress, frustration, anger, and other negative emotions. Children are just as susceptible to amygdala overactivation as adults. Many parents have witnessed a child refuse to do something like talk to a new student at school, order their food at a restaurant, or try out for a new sports team because it is "too scary" or "too hard." The all-too-familiar scene of a child yelling, falling down on the ground, and crying at a grocery store because they were not allowed to get one of each candy bar serves as an excellent example of a child whose emotional response system is in overdrive, bypassing their developing rational-thinking channels. As parents adopt more mindful practices and strategies, they serve as models for their children of how to understand, accept, and respond to emotions in a healthy way. Any parent who has cringed (or laughed) at hearing a child repeat a choice parent phrase that runs contrary to the oft spoken rule of using kind words can attest to the power of teaching by doing, not saying. As parents strive to be more mindful of their own emotional reactions, they put themselves in a better position to teach their children how to handle everyday life difficulties.

How Do I Practice Mindful Parenting?

Now that we have set the stage for the importance of mindfulness in parenting, many readers are probably wondering, "That all sounds great, but how do I actually do it?" As we provide an overview of strategies to cultivate mindfulness as a parent, it is essential to remember that there is not one single right or wrong way to be

mindful. If you start to focus on doing mindfulness the one "correct" way, you run the risk of putting yourself in the achievement- and perfection-based mindset that leads to significant stress. Mindfulness is not intended to be another task on a to-do list that leads to feelings of shame and self-criticism when it does not get crossed off. Instead, mindfulness is intended as a way to bring parents out of "doing" mode and into the "being" mode. As Jon Kabat-Zinn has explained, mindfulness emphasizes that "the best way to achieve your goals is to back off from striving for results and instead to start focusing carefully on seeing and accepting things as they are, moment by moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2013).

Being Present

One fundamental component of mindful parenting involves being deliberately and fully present in the current moment with one's child. Researchers Bögels and Restifo (2013), who developed a mindfulness training program for parents, explain that parents often find themselves in "doing mode" as they plan transportation to sports practices, schedules for music lessons, family vacations, and doctors' appointments. While "doing mode" is helpful and necessary for getting things done, *constantly* being in doing mode can be exhausting and sets parents up for feeling incompetent when they are not able to get everything done. In addition, focusing on "doing" often results in parents missing out on many aspects of the present moment with their child (Bögels & Restifo, 2013). Consider this example, noticing how getting stuck in "doing mode" can affect the parent-child relationship:

> Suzanne wakes up at 5:54 am to the sound of her 5-year-old daughter, Kate, screaming that she is unable to find "Mr. Snuffles" in her bed. While Suzanne goes into her room to look, she yells out the door to her husband to start getting up in order to make it to his early-morning meeting on time. Suzanne pulls all of the blankets off of the wailing Kate's bed and thrusts Mr. Snuffles into her hands before rushing out of her room to comfort her 8-year-old son, Alex, who is yelling about how "annoying" his little sister is. After several attempts and reminders, both children get dressed and pack up for school. Suzanne helps Alex gather his homework assignments from around the house, finding the last underneath his dirty plate from dinner which is still sitting on the counter. She tries to start washing the dishes while coaching both of her children through the steps for getting their own breakfast out of the pantry. Looking at the pantry reminds her of what she needs to pick up at the grocery store for dinner that night and she starts writing a list in her phone. Midway through her list and while the kids eat, she glances out the window and remembers the oil change she needs to schedule and begins looking up the number for the autoshop. While doing that, she hears her daughter start to cry once more because Alex took the toy from the cereal box. She feels the tension in her shoulders and wonders how it can only be 8:15 am on a Monday.

When parents are in "doing" mode, they are often being battered by the many tasks requiring their attention, struggling to attend to any one at a time. They also tend to miss aspects of their everyday life that can serve as moments of connection. In this example, while Suzanne accomplished many tasks, she may have missed special moments with her children due to her focus on "doing" rather than being present.

Suzanne may have missed Kate's tender apology to her brother for waking him up, Alex pouring cereal for his sister, or the sweet way that Kate ate her strawberries one by one, pretending to be a dinosaur. She might have missed the chance to praise Alex for finishing all of his homework or may not have noticed the kind statement of gratitude from her husband for helping him get out the door for work. We highlight these moments not to create guilt for yet another thing parents need to do but because any one of moments like these may provide a much needed breath of fresh air, energy, and support to help the load of parenthood feel just a little bit lighter.

In "being" mode, parents still go about their day accomplishing necessary tasks but with the mindset of being present in the moment. Engaging in mindful parenting requires parents to shift their attention to noticing their child and the world around them while they shop, check off items on the to-do list, or consider various schedules. Certainly easier said than done! Just like any new skill is acquired, you can move toward more moments of "being" mode through gradual practice. You might approach it like you would building new muscles, starting with small steps and working up, until your body uses the muscle much more naturally and with less intentional effort. Gradual steps in mindfulness might be finding a single small moment each day to pause and shift your attention away from the tasks of daily living to simply noticing each detail of a scene. For that moment, as you take in the scene around you, worries about what comes next may need to take a number and wait—they are still there, but your attention is focused elsewhere. For example, if you find yourself in a chaotic morning similar to Suzanne, maybe you could choose a 2- or 3-min block of a routine focused on your child, where your phone is put away (no matter what!) and you focus on listening intently to your child, describing what they are doing and reflecting back what they are saying. Just like building a new muscle, at first, it feels awkward and uncomfortable to allow worries to be idle while you notice, describe, and engage with your child. Notice the discomfort, but continue in the experiment; most parents find that giving their full attention to each task they are working on, at least for brief periods, actually allows them to be more efficient and effective. Researchers have found that practicing attending to the present moment improves individuals' ability to remain focused in distracting environments, supporting the importance of practicing being present regularly (Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007).

When parents shift their attention to the present, their experience of being a parent is enriched, and they are able to notice more about how their child acts, feels, or problem-solves, his or her personality, and his or her habits, which in turn strengthens their relationship with their child and increases their empathy and understanding toward him or her. This process helps build positive feelings about parenting that a mother or father can use to provide strength when parenting becomes more stressful. For most of us, when children engage in frustrating behaviors, our minds naturally start to pick out the child's negative behaviors ("Why does she keep annoying her brother?" "Does he have to talk so loudly?") and even start to see those behaviors as more constant or permanent traits ("She's an annoying child," "He's always too loud"). Being mindful allows parents to recognize the child's strengths and weaknesses even in the moments where the behaviors truly are annoying or

disruptive (why do they have to continue saying "Mom!" 35 times after you acknowledge?) and take a more complete view of the child's behavior. For example, a parent may notice both that a child is jumping on a piece of furniture that she is not allowed to jump on but also be able to recognize the child's unique ability to express her feelings through physical movement.

Ways to Practice Being Present (Bögels & Restifo, 2013; Didonna, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 2009)

1. Practice noticing the sensations in your body. Do a "body scan" by focusing your attention on each body part one by one starting at your head or your toes. For each part of your body, notice any feelings and sensations that you encounter. Practice being curious about how your body feels ("What sensation do I feel in my right arm right now?").
2. Take a quick "breathing break" by focusing your attention on your breathing for a few minutes. Make sure to breathe deeply and slowly. Notice how the air moves in and out of your body. If you notice your mind wandering, accept that it has drifted rather than getting frustrated and bring your focus back to your breathing.
3. Practice listening mindfully to your child or spouse. First, bring your full attention and awareness to the speaker. Focus on the sound of their voice, the cadence of their speaking, their volume, and their body language. What are they saying to you? How are they saying it? Each time your mind inevitably wanders toward other tasks, bring your attention back to their face, words, and gestures. Try to refrain from passing judgment, evaluating, or labeling the speaker or what they are saying. Notice how you feel in response to their statements. How are you reacting? What do you feel or what thoughts do you have while you listen? Try reflecting back what they say before you respond. You don't need to be a parrot (kids have generally already taken that role); just let them know you heard them. For example, if your child says, "Dad/Mom, look at this bug I found, it's amazing!," your first response in your head may be, "Gross. What is it with kids and bugs?" Instead, let your child know you that heard them. For example, "Wow, you found a bug you think is amazing!" It is remarkable what such a brief, simple exercise does—your child will be thrilled, and while you may still have to set a limit about whether they can bring the said amazing bug inside as a new pet, your response may be softer and their response more positive than it would have been without that exchange.
4. Mindfully observe your child doing an activity on their own such as playing, doing a craft, interacting with a sibling or friend, or doing a school assignment. Pretend like this is the first time you have ever seen a child, as if you were an alien from Mars who has never met a human. Observe your child and their behavior with an open mind, noticing as many details as you can. Try and channel the amazement and wonder of seeing your child with new eyes. If you find it

difficult to keep your attention there, try occasionally narrating or describing what they are doing, without making any efforts to question, teach, or direct. For example, "Wow, you have really figured out how to stack those blocks super tall" or "You are really focused on that assignment!"

5. Keep a journal or list of positive moments that you have experienced or noticed with your child. Jot down a few details about each moment such as what your child was doing, how they did it, what struck you about their behavior, and how it made you feel. Every now and then, read through the list and notice your reaction.

Respond Rather Than React

Being present also allows parents to make deliberate decisions about how to respond to their children rather than simply reacting automatically. Most parents can remember a time when they completely "lost it" in response to their child's frustrating (and sometimes baffling behavior) and ended up overreacting rather than making a rational decision about how to respond. For some of us, it is easier to remember those times because it has been less than 24 h. It is natural for interactions between children and parents to be emotionally charged given the intimate and close relationship between them. Parents are actually wired to react quickly in order to protect their children from danger. For example, a parent who rushes in front of a car to push a child out of the way without taking the time to think of their well-being has a greater chance of saving their child than a parent who stands on the sidewalk trying to determine the speed of the car and the likelihood of injury. However, more often than not, immediate, emotional reactions are in response to less than deadly situations and result in escalating parent-child difficulties (Duncan, Coatsworth, & Greenberg, 2009). Being present in the moment helps parents be more aware of their emotions and their impulses to react, giving them the space and time to consider all of the information at play and make a rational decision about how to proceed.

Ways to Practice Responding Instead of Reacting

1. Become acquainted with your stress response. The next time you are stressed, take a moment to just notice (not judge) your response. How does your body change? Does your breathing change? Do your muscles feel different? What thoughts do you have when you are stressed? What sticks in your mind? What you do want to do when you are stressed? Understanding our stress response can help notice when stress is starting to overpower our rational thinking and can give us space to calm down. You may even try labeling it when you notice it: "I'm feeling pretty stressed right now." At first, it may feel silly or strange, but it's a small experiment—give it a try.

2. Think of a challenging situation that you have recently faced as a parent. Practice brainstorming as many different ways of responding to this situation as you can. For a few of the options, follow them "down the path." What would happen if you chose that response? How would it influence you and others? What would be the outcome? Recognize that there are a lot of very legitimate options that make sense given the context or circumstances. Rather than investing the energy in chastising yourself for "even thinking that" in response to emotional responses, just recognize it as an option and keep brainstorming others.
3. Identify an activity that you typically do on "autopilot" like driving or writing. The next time you do this activity, try paying attention to each of the small steps involved. What actions do you need to do to complete this activity? How do they build on each other? One of our favorites is mindful eating—try taking a full 2 min to eat an M&M or grape. This is a fun one to do with kids, as well. Use all of your senses—before you put it in your mouth, notice what it feels like, looks like, smells like, and sounds like, and then, in your mouth, notice the same things, as well as taste.

Acceptance and Compassion Toward Child and Self

Most parents can relate to the swelling feeling of warmth that they experienced when looking at their sleeping infant. However, when that same infant turns into a screaming toddler who will not stop biting his younger sibling, that feeling seems miles away. Instead, we are more likely to feel upset, angry, and frustrated at the child and then at ourselves, because we "shouldn't" feel or do those things. When parents approach an interaction expecting the worst from themselves or their child, ironically, they are more likely to respond in a harsh manner, which often provokes a negative response from their child, creating a cycle of negative behavior and responding. However, when parents are able to approach interactions with their child with a mindset of compassion and acceptance for both their child and themselves, they are more likely to engage in a positive interaction with their child.

Acceptance in the context of parenting involves taking a nonjudgmental stance toward a child and their behavior. As explained by Bögels and Restifo (2013), "Acceptance is letting go of wanting things to be different than they are, either by avoiding pain or grasping at pleasure. It is also letting go of judgmental and critical thinking, letting go of categorizing things as good or bad, black, or white." Acceptance absolutely does not mean that parents have to like, enjoy, or tolerate everything that a child does. Instead, acceptance involves being aware of and attentive to the child and situation, noticing, and accepting what is happening in the moment, to try to provide a more complete picture of the child's behavior before responding or redirecting (Duncan et al., 2009). Kabat-Zinn and Kabat-Zinn (1998) explain, "Acceptance is a door that, if we choose to open it, leads to seeing in new ways and finding new possibilities… Viewing our children's difficult behaviors in a more non-judging, compassionate and open manner allows us to remain their ally

and keep a heartfelt connection with them even when we don't like how they are acting" (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 1998).

As a parent, accepting a child as they are can sometimes be challenging given that parents often have hopes and expectations about how their child will develop. However, focusing only on these types of expectations can lead a parent to feel disappointed or hopeless if a child's behavior does not meet them as originally anticipated. It will be a long 18–80 years if we rigidly hold to expectations of children always following directions the first time, thinking before they speak, or wearing clothes right-side out. For example, think of this situation, parts of which will be familiar to many parents:

> You went through high school and college as the star of the baseball team. Experiences in baseball were a source of energy, excitement, life lessons, and positive relationships with your coaches and teammates. Your son played little league growing up but never seemed to really enjoy it or embrace it. He tried out for the baseball team going into high school but was cut in the first round. He then decided to join the marching band and loves practicing his tuba after school every day (inside, unfortunately). At his first marching band performance, you notice that he is smiling and marching vigorously, but you find yourself looking over longingly at the baseball team practicing on the other side of the fence and feeling disappointed that he didn't make it onto a "real" sports team. You start imagining what "could have been" – playing catch, talking strategy for the next game, or reviewing video footage of batting stance and swing and you find yourself feeling more and more unhappy. Before you know it, your son's actual performance is over and you have missed the section where the tubas are featured. Afterward, your son asks how you liked the show and you struggle to come up with any specifics you noticed.

This example demonstrates how focusing on parent-imposed hopes or expectations for a child can frustrate a parent and child, causing both to feel dissatisfied with their child's current situation. It can also bring a parent out of the moment with their child, causing them to miss important experiences and moments of closeness. To approach this situation with increased acceptance, maybe, the parent in this example notices the baseball field trying to pull his attention away and recognizes that a part of him wishes they were there but then brings his attention back to the band practice by searching out the face of his son. Maybe, the parent can maintain focus there by noticing his child's facial expressions, guessing at what he is thinking/feeling, and identifying all of the steps that it took for the child to get there. Acceptance allows the parent to shift their focus from trying to control and dictate their child's behavior, a futile goal given the strong will and self-determination of children, to allow and enjoy the child just as they are. This also provides much steadier, more positive ground to then thoughtfully address specific risky behavior or violation of parent expectations that may pose clear threats to the child's well-being (e.g., drug use and truancy), if needed.

Compassion refers to "… the feeling that arises when witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help" (Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010). When parents become more open to compassion in their relationships with their children, they become better able to understand the difficulties that their child is experiencing. This allows them to work *with* their child to address concerns, provide comfort when needed, or strengthen their relationship. In the example

above, a parent who was working on using the lens of compassion may recognize his son felt sad and frustrated that he or she had not lived up to their parent's expectations and would be able to extend kind reassurance. Given that stress often causes parents to behave more negatively toward their children, deliberately extending compassion toward a child allows a parent to counteract this natural drive to criticize and instead creates a warmer interaction.

An essential, and perhaps more difficult, part of increasing acceptance and compassion is being able to also direct these feelings toward oneself as a parent. Acceptance of ourselves as a parent means acknowledging ourselves as we are, with all of our imperfections and shortcomings. When practicing self-acceptance, it is important to try and look at ourselves without judgment of what is "good" and "bad" about ourselves as parents. Kristen Neff has described that self-compassion involves cultivating a compassionate stance toward negative aspects of oneself and one's experience that simultaneously facilitates a kind, forgiving, and empathetic attitude toward others (Neff, 2003). Self-compassion also includes recognizing the common nature of struggles, which can help parents be more forgiving of themselves for mistakes (Bögels, Hellemans, van Deursen, Römer, & van der Meulen, 2014). This often means recognizing and giving up the special "exception" status we sometimes give ourselves to justify harsher judgment toward ourselves ("Sure, it's normal, but for some reason or another, *I* should know and do better than everyone else and it's much worse when *I* do it than when *anyone* else does it"). We recommend testing out the rule that, if it's not something you would say about/to someone you care deeply about, it likely also does not apply to you. As with mindful awareness, traditional Buddhist thought teaches that compassion and acceptance are like muscles that can be strengthened with practice. If parents work to send messages of compassion and acceptance toward themselves, they become better able to manage their stress in parenting interactions (Moreira, Gouveia, Carona, Silva, & Canavarro, 2015). As you work to improve your own self-acceptance, you are also providing a model of the kind of self-compassion and acceptance you want your children to feel toward themselves and others. In addition, extending acceptance toward themselves allows parents to break through negative and entrenched patterns of self-criticism that are familiar to most. Research has shown that practicing self-compassion is associated both with improvements in individual functioning (e.g., increased happiness and optimism) and the quality of one's interpersonal relationships (Neff & Beretvas, 2013; Yarnell & Neff, 2013).

Self-directed compassion and acceptance can also provide comfort and peace during moments of disappointment or embarrassment. For example, a mother recounted a time when her 10-year-old daughter had told her that she did not want to spend the shopping together as they had planned. Instead, her daughter told her that she wanted to go with a neighbor and her parents to the local theme park because the neighbor's mother was "fun." This mother, who was trying to practice self-compassion and acceptance, recognized that she was feeling hurt and rejected, but instead of criticizing herself for feeling that way (e.g., "Grow up, you're the adult"), she gently told herself, "It's ok to feel let down. You like spending time with your daughter and it is hard to see her grow up and be drawn to her friends." She

described feeling "held" and "centered" as she talked in an understanding and compassionate tone to herself. This allowed her to feel excited for her daughter, who would be having an enjoyable afternoon fostering a new friendship, and communicate positively as she helped her daughter get ready. Taking an accepting and compassionate stance helped this mother understand herself more fully, experience her emotions rather than pushing them away, and relate more authentically with her daughter.

Ways to Practice Compassion and Acceptance

1. Bring up an image of your child into your mind. Name the things about them that you are grateful for. What do you appreciate about your child? What do they do that brings you joy? That makes you smile? Notice the compassion, love, and gratitude that you feel when you think about these traits. Next, notice the things that your child does that frustrate you. Try and extend the same compassion toward your child for these behaviors, recognizing their reactions and mistakes as normal parts of growth and learning.
2. Practice complimenting your family members when they do something positive. Get creative with your compliments, trying to notice behavior that might not usually come to your mind or may seem like a relatively small thing (e.g., efforts at independence, small gestures of kindness to siblings, staying calm in response to small stressors). Notice how they react to being complimented. Try choosing a block of time during the day where you try to reach three positive statements to your child for every one command or criticism you give them.
3. The next time you are experiencing a difficult emotion (e.g., frustration, sadness, guilt, embarrassment, shame, or anger), let yourself think about what a loved one would say to you to comfort you, something like "That must be really tough," "I see that you're upset," "It must be really hard to _____," and "Oh man, that must really hurt." Notice how you feel when you bring these statements to your mind. Try repeating them to yourself over and over. Notice how the original painful feeling changes.
4. Think of a difficult situation that you have experienced recently. How you would you respond to a friend who was experiencing that same issue? What would you say to them? How would you encourage them? Practice sending these same comforting and encouraging thoughts toward yourself.
5. To let yourself connect with other parents and reduce perfectionism, remind yourself that no parent is perfect. Think of "good" parents that you know who seem to "have their act together." Do you think they have ever struggled? Have they ever made mistakes? Have they ever felt like a failure? Remember that facing challenges connects you with other parents and is part of being human. What would life be like without mistakes? Are there valuable, meaningful lessons you might have never learned or moments of connection you would not have had if you never made mistakes?

6. Send yourself "well wishes" a few times a day. Extend positive thoughts and wishes to yourself. Repeat wishes that you would like for yourself such as, "may you be happy," "may be find peace," "may you feel love," or "may you be strong."

Taking Care of Oneself

As parents become more aware of themselves in the present moment and learn to accept and show compassion toward themselves, they often find it easier to determine their own needs. Being present can help parents attend to slight shifts in their thinking and feeling, providing them with clues about what they need to do to help themselves. Part of our efforts to accept ourselves and move toward more mindful parenting includes being reflective of what our needs are and taking actions to strengthen ourselves when needed. Mindfulness can help individuals cultivate self-awareness, which is defined as an unbiased and accepting awareness of one's inner experience, emotions, physical state, and behaviors (Norcross, 2000). Having access to information about our current state can help us make decisions about what we need from moment-to-moment. Self-care involves taking action to meet these needs in order to feel energized, content, healthy, and capable. Caring for oneself looks different for each individual. For some, self-care involves setting and sticking to a sleep schedule. For others, self-care consists of taking breaks to read a favorite book throughout the day, getting a meal with friends, or finding a few minutes each day to exercise.

Parents often struggle to give themselves the permission to take the time and effort to focus on their own needs. The analogy of trying to drive a car that does not have any gasoline in the tank can help parents understand that, if they are not receiving the support and energy that they themselves require, it will be difficult for them to do things for their children. Anyone who has heard the engine sputter and die as the gas gauge hits empty understands that fuel is needed in order to keep moving toward goals and responsibilities. Similarly, parents need to have their needs taken care of if they are going to exert effort to fulfill the needs of their children. Mindful self-care for parents involves attending to one's needs and taking action to fulfill them.

For parents, being mindful of one's own needs can cultivate the skills needed to attend to children's needs. For example, a father who had started practicing mindfulness started to become more aware of the constant tension that he carried in his back and shoulders. Gradually, he started practicing releasing his tension a few times a day by breathing deeply and imagining the tension flowing out. One day, after he had focused on relaxing his body for a few minutes in the car while driving his 7-year-old daughter to school, he noticed that she was scowling out the window. He was able to gently ask her what was wrong and have a positive conversation with her about a child in her class that she was not getting along with. Meeting his own need to relax helped this father be better able to attend to his daughter's needs in the moment. As put by Bögels and Restifo, "When we step back into our bodies and

fully experience their sensations, we tune into ourselves, which is the first step to tuning into our children. After all, if we are completely out of touch with ourselves, how can we possibly tune in to our children?" (Bögels & Restifo, 2013).

Ways to Practice Self-Care

1. Do a quick "self check-in." After taking a few deep breathes, notice how your body is feeling, what you are thinking, and how you are feeling. Ask yourself, "What do I need right now?" What do you need to feel nourished? What do you need to feel balanced?
2. Schedule a self-care activity. Put it on the calendar or in your planner for you do something to meet your needs such as going on a run, going to a movie, getting a haircut, making a treat, or reading a book. If possible, enlist the help of a friend, spouse, or family member to provide support in whatever way you need. When the time comes to do your self-care activity, make sure to do your best to follow through, even though it can be tempting to replace the activity with something that feels more pressing. Notice how doing the activity affects you.
3. Find a few minutes each day to be with yourself and attend to your own needs. If needed, make time for yourself by waking up a few minutes earlier or having your partner supervise your children alone for a few minutes at a certain time each day.

What Are the Effects of Mindful Parenting?

Researchers across the globe are examining effects of mindful parenting. Overall, parents who implement mindfulness in their everyday lives are more attentive listeners, less emotionally reactive in stressful situations, more aware of their own feelings, and more compassionate, accepting, and nonjudgmental toward themselves and their children. After practicing mindful parenting, parents note better ability to use positive parenting skills in the moment, engage more actively with their children, feel more comfortable and confident in their parenting role, and experience an improved parent-child relationship (Bögels et al., 2014; Coatsworth, Duncan, Greenberg, & Nix, 2010). But the benefits do not stop there! Research shows that children also benefit when their parents practice mindful parenting, often showing fewer emotional and behavioral concerns. In addition, parents implementing mindfulness experience improvement outside just the parent-child relationships, reporting less stress overall and better communication with their spouse/partner, too (Bögels et al., 2014). In addition, most parents who participate in mindfulness training report positive experiences learning mindfulness (rather than increased stress by having to do one more thing) and note that they continue to use mindfulness

practices on a regular basis, showing that building mindfulness can persist as a habit over time (Bögels & Restifo, 2013).

Overall, the research on mindful parenting and anecdotal evidence from parents who have used mindfulness strategies attest to its helpfulness as well as the feasibility and sustainability of implementing it into everyday life. Parents who incorporate mindfulness into their interactions with their children become closer to their children and better able to handle difficult situations as a result. While mindfulness is clearly a helpful tool in parenting, it should not be thought of as a skill that a parent needs to "master." As parents take on the task of learning to be more mindful, some anticipate that they will eventually reach a time when they will become "a mindful parent," viewing it as a terminal destination. Instead, mindfulness is best viewed as a journey. The process of learning to be more mindful is more important than "figuring it all out" or "reaching the goal." As the Buddha taught, "the path is lovely in the beginning, lovely in the middle, and lovely in the end" (Bögels & Restifo, 2013).

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Mindfulness in Marriage

Sam Ryland and Lee Johnson

Remember how interested you were in your partner when you were falling in love? Minor details were fascinating, and you enjoyed getting to know them on every level. But as the relationship progresses through the accumulating distractions of everyday life, can you relate to the following?

Husband: My wife is missing. She went shopping yesterday and has not come home!
Sheriff: Height?
Husband: I'm not sure. A little over five-feet tall.
Sheriff: Weight?
Husband: Don't know. Not slim, not really fat.
Sheriff: Color of eyes?
Husband: Sort of brown I think. Never really noticed.
Sheriff: Color of hair?
Husband: Changes a couple times a year. Maybe dark brown now. I can't remember.
Sheriff: What was she wearing?
Husband: Could have been pants, or maybe a skirt or shorts. I don't know exactly.
Sheriff: What kind of car did she go in?
Husband: She went in my truck.
Sheriff: What kind of truck was it?
Husband: A 2016 pearl white Ram Limited 4X4 with 6.4l Hemi V8 engine ordered with the Ram Box bar and fridge option, LED lighting, back up and front camera, Moose hide leather heated and cooled seats, climate-controlled air conditioning. It has a custom matching white cover for the bed, Weather Tech floor mats. Trailering package with gold hitch, sunroof, DVD with full GPS navigation, satellite radio, Cobra 75 WX ST 40-channel CB radio, six cup holders, 3 USB port, and 4 power outlets. I added special alloy wheels and off-road Toyo tires. It has custom retracting running boards and underglow wheel well lighting.
At this point the husband started choking up.
Sheriff: Take it easy sir, we'll find your truck!

As therapists, we often hear the story of a couple who started to drift apart without really noticing. Life can get busy, and the rose-colored glasses you wore as

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P. R. Steffen (ed.), *Mindfulness for Everyday Living*, Mindfulness in Behavioral Health, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51618-5_7

newlyweds eventually lose their tint. Maybe you wake up one day and realize your partner feels like a roommate, or even a stranger. Feeling this kind of "drift" in a relationship is common (Amato & James, 2018). Sometimes it's hard to see what is happening right in front of you because it's all you see, every day, and you are just used to it.

It's easy to stop *appreciating* your partner for what they are. Remember when your relationship was starting out and every little thing seemed so exciting and new? Back then, your partner was messy, and you loved their carefree attitude to life. Now, they are still messy, and it drives you crazy having to pick up after them. Maybe they spent hours on different projects, and you loved watching them work, but now, you just want them to come help you clean the kitchen and put the kids to bed.

When your focus is on the daily grind of family life, it's easy to see your partner's quirks as inconveniences and flaws. But if you can pause for a second and really *notice* your partner, you might rediscover things about them that spark your love and interest. You might even find some new things you hadn't noticed before!

If you want a relationship that feels good, where you feel close to your partner, you need to wake up and *pay attention*. Gift giving is a great example of this: buying expensive flowers won't mean as much as coming home with a jar of their favorite jam, or organizing to see a movie they've been looking forward to after they've had a difficult week. You don't need a lot of money for these gifts, but you do need to know what is happening in your partner's life!

Appreciation, noticing, and paying attention, these are the core concepts of *mindfulness*. While mindfulness can help us enormously as individuals, it can also help us appreciate our partner and pay attention to the most important parts of our relationship that lead to happiness and security (Kozlowski, 2013). So, we hope you are sold on the importance of mindfulness in marriage. With that in mind (pun intended), we can suggest four things you can do right now to pay more attention and become more present in your relationship.

Appreciation: Stop and Smell the Flowers

The classic film "It's A Wonderful Life" introduces us to George Bailey who, after experiencing a series of setbacks, tries to jump from a bridge. An angel named Clarence intervenes to help George see the positive impact he's had in other people's lives and help him appreciate the things he had taken for granted. It's easy to focus on the undesirable things we'd like to change, but this negative focus can make us miserable. When this pessimism takes over, it's important to remember the good things that are happening around us, especially in our relationship (Gottman & Silver, 2015).

There are almost certainly things you can find to appreciate about your partner. Maybe these are things that they do or maybe just the way they are. It may be tempting to say we appreciate what they *don't* do—but we want to aim higher than that.

For example, appreciating that your partner doesn't spit in your food doesn't really say anything good. Appreciating that your partner always gives you the larger portion does.

Let's try putting this into action in an experiment that will take only a few minutes. First, think of something about your partner that you appreciate but that you've never put into words before. If you need to close the book for a minute and think about this—that's great! That's a very mindful thing to do. Got something? Great! Now, tell them about it. Send them a text message or email, or write it on a note, and put it in your pocket to give to them later, or hide it somewhere that they will find it.

Now, the most important part—how did that feel? Spend a minute just noticing how it felt to appreciate your partner. Notice how this changes the way you feel in general. This is the power of mindful appreciation. By bringing a positive thought into your relationship, we can start to feel better about that relationship, and we can start to feel better in general. It only takes a second, but it usually won't happen unless we make the mindful decision to do it.

You can carry this exercise further. Try setting an alarm each day for the next week to remind you to have a positive thought about your partner or your relationship. Send the positive thought along if you want. Or you could make it a long-term thing with a weekly reminder. It's up to you, but we hope that even this one attempt will create a positive change in your relationship.

Intimacy: To Know You Is to Love You

How well do you know your partner? Often, not as well as you think you do (Kouros & Papp, 2018). It can be easy to assume that because you have spent so much time together that you must know each other really well. But during that time, were we really paying attention? We might build an image of our partner in our head over time; how often do we make choices and assumptions based on that image in our head, instead of paying attention to the living, breathing person right in front of us?

Intimacy is about knowing someone as they really are and removing the barriers that interfere with connection. Some barriers are the assumptions we carry around with us. Other barriers can be our busy lives or little resentments or a million other distractions. Both you and your partner have changed over time, but have these barriers kept you from noticing these changes or made you forget what you had noticed before? Do you really know what your partner is thinking or how they are feeling, on a day-to-day basis? Maybe that kind of knowledge sounds impossible, but it's not as hard as you think. You don't have to be a mind reader, but you do have to spend more time thinking about and showing interest in your partner (Gottman & Silver, 2015).

Once again, let's try a quick exercise. Where is your partner right now? What do you think they might be feeling right now or thinking about? Don't worry too much about knowing this exactly; just take a guess. Now, talk to your partner. Maybe they are there with you right now, or maybe you will have to call them or text them. Just

ask them (in your own words) something like, “What’s going on for you right now?” “How are you feeling?” “What are you thinking about?” If they can’t answer right away, keep reading, and come back to this thought later when you do make contact.

If you did make contact, how accurate were your guesses? Chances are good you didn’t have a complete picture. If you did, great job! But ultimately, it doesn’t really matter. Thinking about your partner and checking in with them helped you get closer. You just created more space in your mind for your partner: not just an image of your assumptions about them, but the real them! If you keep doing this, you will start to respond to your partner in ways that bring you closer and show them that you are really interested in them. Again, this kind of relationship shift can only come by mindfully paying attention.

Here’s another activity to try: *pay attention* to your partner for the next 24 h. Notice the things that they do, things that you might not have noticed before. At the end of the 24 h, tell them about some of the new things you noticed, and see if you can find out more about these things. Notice how your partner responds to your interest, but more importantly, notice how you might think about your partner differently after doing this.

Resolving Problems: How to Sweat the Small Stuff

Inevitably, when you spend every day with someone and weave your lives together, little things they do or say might bug you. Small issues can grow and fester over time until the relationship feels poisoned, and you have built so many walls it is hard to reconnect. A small fracture, given enough time, can bring down a mighty tree.

People often say, “don’t sweat the small stuff,” but sometimes we just need to sweat the small stuff out of our system. If we push it below the surface, it can grow into deep resentment. But we might also be afraid that if we bring it up, misunderstanding and hurt could make the problem worse. Mindfulness can help us figure out what is really bothering us and then decide how to respond (Childre & Rozman, 2005). Let’s try it:

- First, think of something about your partner or about your relationship that has been bothering you. It could feel small or big; it could be a new issue or an old one.
- Now, imagine reaching inside yourself, taking hold of this thing that has been bothering you and then placing it in the air in front of you. Make some space for it. Take a second to notice what it looks like or what it sounds like or what it is trying to say. If you want to, you could even give it a name. Remember, this thing is a part of your experience, but it is not *you*.
- Now, holding this thing in front of you, listen to your *true* self—that is, move inward, beyond your feelings and thoughts, and get to the core part of you. Now ask, what should I do? Give your true self a couple of moments to respond.

You might have felt an impression to talk about your problem or to leave it alone or to do something completely different. It is likely, however, that you will feel better about whatever solution presented itself. If nothing clear did present itself, that's ok; maybe try again another time. Either way, hopefully you will feel less "caught up" in the problem. This is how mindfulness can help us sweat the small stuff—by separating ourselves from the heat of the moment and letting our true self respond.

Rituals: A Stitch in Time Saves Nine

In the honeymoon stage of the relationship, it's usually easy to find time to spend together. Eventually, life gets busier; it can be easy to drift apart. The things we discussed—appreciation, intimacy, and resolving problems—won't happen unless we are regularly checking in. If you want to practice mindfulness individually, you will need to set aside regular times to do it. It is the same in your relationship: if you want to practice these ideas, you will need to make time for them.

We all participate in rituals: things we do on a regular basis that follow the same patterns. Some we are aware of, like singing "happy birthday"; some develop automatically, like the pattern we follow when we get ready in the morning or come home from work.

Rituals are critical to relationships (Doherty, 1999)—as we learn to live with each other, we start to move in familiar patterns, and this familiarity can provide a sense of security and reliability. If your partner always kisses you goodbye before leaving, think of how it feels when they don't. We can build rituals into relationships that help us connect and respond to each other. Leaving and coming home rituals are an example—what can we do for each other in the morning and the evening to make sure we're ok, to check in with what is happening in each other's lives?

For some couples, it works to set aside a brief window of time each day. For example, Bill Doherty helped develop the concept of relationship rituals: every night he and his wife had 30 min of connection time set aside with each other, where they would just sit and talk over a cup of coffee. Their children knew not to interrupt them during this time!

Rituals can happen in a lot of different ways, date nights, leaving and arriving, nightly chats, and pillow talk, but to be successful, they need the following elements:

- **Reliable**: You must both know that it will happen or at least have a backup plan should there be any interruptions.
- **Regular**: The more frequently you connect, the less pressure there is coming into your time together.
- **Brief**: It doesn't need to be very long—agree on a short length and stick to it. Rituals that take too long can increase pressure and are hard to work into your schedule.
- **Pleasant**: Relaxing, distraction-free environments are ideal. If appropriate, plan something to do afterward that you both enjoy.

- **Non-blaming**: As you start out, there may be a temptation to tell your partner all the ways they are bothering you. Try to have faith in the process: you will have plenty of opportunities to process all of this later (if you need to). Try to emphasize appreciation and connection.

This week, try building a ritual with your partner. Your ritual will be as unique as your relationship, but if you use the principles above and try to make it a pleasant experience, you might be surprised how nice it can feel to have these reliable points of connection. Complacency is the enemy of good relationships: once we start taking our partner and our relationship for granted and lose focus, pressures under the surface can start to erode the foundation. Mindfulness will help you be aware of potential threats to your relationship, but more importantly, it can help you see and appreciate all the good things you already have together.

You are reading this book because you are interested in how mindfulness can improve your life. We wholeheartedly agree that mindfulness is incredibly beneficial in developing peace and self-control. This enhanced frame of mind can be enormously beneficial to your marriage. We encourage you to incorporate your partner relationship into your mindfulness practice: consider what they mean to you, develop greater awareness of them, identify new responses to difficult situations, and, most importantly, keep practicing! This will put you on the road to a relationship that feels happier, safer, and more fulfilling in every way.

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Strengthening Emotional and Physical Intimacy: Creating a Mindful Marriage

Jason B. Whiting, Chelom E. Leavitt, and Jeremy S. Boden

Chris and Ginny were struggling and had come to me (Jason) for therapeutic help. Her first explanation for their problems was that Chris was always busy. "He works hard for us," she admitted, "But we never see him. Even when he is home he is often texting or surfing social media."

"I am a one-man show," he said. "She said she would be supportive of me starting my own lending company, but now that I am trying to keep track of clients and deals, she resents it. Also, I have busy church responsibilities, and that cuts into our evenings." They have three young children, and Ginny worked part time as an aide in her son's special needs kindergarten class. As we set goals together, Ginny said she wanted to have more time with Chris where they could talk about important things. "He hates to talk and gets really defensive if I am upset. He is always worn out from work and says that we should talk another time, but we never do. I need his help with the kids, and I want to have someone to talk with."

"She is the one that is always too tired," Chris responded. "We rarely have sex, and if we do, she acts like it is just something to endure. I don't want to be intimate if she is grudgingly going along with it." It became clear that despite their commitment to each other, there were some significant barriers getting in their way of deep connection. Ginny had a sexual abuse history and was often uncomfortable with touch and intimacy, and Chris had come from a highly critical family and habitually shuts down at any perceived emotional attack. It came to a head one day as Ginny had felt backed into a corner about their sex life. "You don't have to have sex! You don't need it to survive, and it is usually selfish!" Chris responded with frustration, "Well, you don't have to have all these deep talks! We can live without those and be

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P. R. Steffen (ed.), *Mindfulness for Everyday Living*, Mindfulness in Behavioral Health, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51618-5_8

just fine." After stopping this exchange, I suggested that while it was true that while neither technically needed these things to survive, just staying physically alive together was a pretty low standard for marriage. These two needed to slow down, connect, and learn what intimacy was—in all aspects of their relationship. One of the ways we began working on this was through mindfulness.

Mindfulness can be defined as "the direction of attention toward one's ongoing experience, in a manner that is characterized by openness and acceptance" (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 231). It is an attitude of being in the present moment without getting caught up in reactions to situations (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness originated from Eastern traditions of meditation and has been adapted to therapeutic treatments for addiction (Brewer, Elwafi, & Davis, 2014), trauma (Follette, Palm, & Pearson, 2006), eating disorders, depression, and anxiety (Baer, 2014). Mindfulness has also been found to be helpful in romantic relationships by boosting relationship functioning and stress-coping skills (Barnes, Brown, Krusemark, Campbell, & Rogge, 2007). In one study, researchers taught couples mindfulness skills and techniques and followed up with them 3 months after the training. Couples who implemented these skills experienced more relationship satisfaction, emotional closeness, acceptance of one another, and less emotional distress. They also experienced optimism, relaxation, and less psychological stress (Carson, Carson, Gil, & Baucom, 2004). With Ginny and Chris, we worked together to become more present and nonjudgmental, strengthen their compassion, deepen their emotional connection, and become more sexually mindful.

Presence and Connection in Couples

Chris and Ginny were often in the same room but worlds apart. They were distracted by business interruptions, children, church and community responsibilities, and constant alerts on their devices. Our brains are skilled at monitoring the surroundings and making connections, but this works against us in a world of bombarding stimuli and useless distractions. Although we are naturally social, our ability to connect to others often gets pushed to the back burner because the brain can't pay attention to multiple things. It can jump quickly around but can't focus on two processes at the same time (Goleman, 2013). A common emphasis of mindfulness is to be in the present moment. This occurs when outer distractions are shut off and thoughts (including past regrets or future worries) are set aside as attention is gently brought back to what, or who, is right here, right now.

One of the most common barriers in relationships occurs from the devices that are now attached to seemingly every living person. When someone is checking an alert, surfing a post, or picking up their phone in the presence of a loved one, it instantly puts a barrier between them. Researchers have labeled this phenomenon "phubbing" or phone snubbing, and it happens a lot. Have you ever seen a spouse surfing the web while the other is talking to them or checking their Instagram at dinner or surfing Facebook in the bedroom? When this happens, the relationship

vanishes because the surfer is not with the person nearby. Researchers have found that phubs damage relationships and increase dissatisfaction and depression. About 25% of couples have fought over phubs (Goldberg, 2018). Other researchers have labeled this problem "technoference," because technology interference clogs up conversations, dates, and intimate lives (McDaniel & Coyne, 2016).

When spouses are distracted, it causes not only distance but also resentment. It feels devaluing to be pushed aside in favor of cat videos or texts. Ginny felt hurt and deflated when Chris stopped listening to her to respond to another buzz on his phone. "That is fair," Chris agreed, "But sometimes I call her during the day. and it is obvious that she is half-listening, and she won't remember what we talked about later. I give up because she acts like the kids are more interesting than me."

Being present takes effort in a world of distractions. One study estimated that partners are distracted about 70% of the time, meaning that they are potentially aware of each other about 30% of the time, leaving the chance that they both are available at the *same* time about 9% (Gottman, 2011). For Chris and Ginny, learning to connect required some basic agreements to stop, put away devices, and become good listeners, like they were when first dating. They realized that in their early relationship, they would look into each other's eyes, follow body language, and ask personal questions. They didn't roll their eyes and interrupt, but instead were engaged and eager, and the phones were typically put away. To get back to this quality of presence, they chose to do what had come naturally when they were first in love. But in doing so, they became more appreciative of each other and were reminded that "In a world of inner and outer distractions, it is a gift to give the present to your partner" (Whiting, 2016, p. 118).

A Nonjudgmental Relationship

Another principle of mindfulness is to take a nonjudgmental stance. In marriage, it is easy to become opinionated, moralizing, or impatient with differences. Sanctimonious spouses are annoying but common because it feels good to be superior. As author and scientist David Brin has said, "Self-righteousness can also be heady, seductive, and even…addictive. Any truly honest person will admit that the state *feels good*. The pleasure of knowing, with subjective certainty, that you are *right* and your opponents are deeply, despicably *wrong*" (Brin, 2005). However, since all couples have different opinions, preferences, and values, there will be clashes if each person insists that their way is the right way. Healthy relationships are open to differences and include accommodation and acceptance. When couples deal with these differences in a kind way, they will be more successful than those who are threatened or make snide comments. Rather, healthy couples have a balance of compromise as they work out differences and alternate making suggestions and accommodations (Smith, Whiting, Crane, Felderhoff, & Stapp, 2015).

Relationships with high judgment tend to have either a lot of conflict or a lot of conflict avoidance, and both of these styles lead to resentment. In marriage, both

should be able to share opinions without criticism regardless of whether they agree. Chris realized that he had become judgmental about Gina's use of time, and she realized she had become critical of the way he was around the house, like how he put the dishes away or played with their children. They both had become sarcastic, and this led to further distance (Whiting, Harris, Oka, & Cravens, 2016). Both worked on becoming more accepting and less judgmental, and this made their conversations more free and friendly. This was an important step in strengthening the compassion and love they once had enjoyed.

Developing Mindful Compassion

Some couples become discouraged when their strong feelings of love seem to fade, but mindful principles can help here as well. Psychologist Barbara Fredrickson has found that love can be rekindled through mindful practices. She studies the vagus nerve, which is a connector between the brain and heart that triggers tiny facial muscles associated with eye contact and facial expressions. Fredrickson asked volunteers to practice feelings of love and kindness in a meditation. They reflected upon thoughtful phrases and wished others peace, well-being, and happiness. This reinforced vagal tone, which improved participants' capacity to track moods and feel love (Fredrickson, 2013). Stronger vagal tone helped partners self-soothe, control their moods, and have empathy, and these results were so impressive that the Dali Lama took an interest in the project.

It is important for couples to deliberately choose to be loving, because compassion is the adhesive that keeps a relationship safe and strong after the initial headiness if infatuation fades. Ongoing intimacy takes investment in the well-being of the spouse and a willingness to be open to their joys, as well as their pain. The term "compassion" is derived from Latin words that mean "to suffer together." In this sense, compassion is more than sympathy. It is taking on a spouse's burdens and feeling what they feel. It keeps couples connected and also acts as a healing influence. In one study, patients with irritable bowel syndrome signed up for an "acupuncture treatment." One group was welcomed by a caring, friendly researcher who asked each participant about his or her life, pain, and symptoms. After this introduction, they received the treatment. However, the acupuncture needles were a sham and didn't pierce the skin. Then, came the comparison group. Patients got the same trick needles but were treated abruptly by the assistant—no kind inquiry and no sympathy—just a quick in and out. Neither got any actual medical help for their painful bowels. However, the symptoms of those who received kindness and compassion got significantly better than those who were treated brusquely (Kaptchuk et al., 2008). It wasn't the treatment that helped, but the presence of a caring person. This is one reason spouses in a healthy marriage live longer than those alone or in unhealthy relationships. This isn't just because wives insist husbands get to the doctor. It is also because compassionate love lowers stress, soothes pain, and creates an intimate connection that promotes wellness in both.

This was found in another study examining the brain responses of those in new and still passionate relationships as they looked at pictures of either (1) their partner, (2) an attractive person of the same age and gender as the partner, or (3) a neutral word association designed to distract from pain. Viewers watched these pictures while being shocked on their hand, but as they were looking at their lover, their brains had a unique response. Not only was there less pain (the word distraction also had that effect), but there was a "pharmacologic activation of reward systems." In other words, the partner acted as medicine, with their face triggering the reward centers of the brain that light up from other pleasures like cocaine or winning money (Younger, Aron, Parke, Chatterjee, & Mackey, 2010). A similar study found that love stimulates the brain's cannabinoid neurotransmitters. The buzz you get from touching and connecting with your lover really is like medical marijuana (Wei et al., 2015). Care for the relationship is good for soul and the body.

Gina and Chris began to practice loving-kindness meditations that emphasize gratitude for life and for others, and they focused on things that they appreciated about each other. They chose to share blessings each day through text or conversations, and this further softened their resentment and helped them laugh and enjoy time together.

Emotional Intimacy and Connection

Humans are hardwired to connect in intimate ways. Infants do this with caregivers, and adults do it with significant others (Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1998). When people are unable to connect to one another, the brain senses danger and goes into what has been termed a "primal panic" (Panksepp, 1998). It is deeply uncomfortable and painful to be isolated, and consistently, being alone emotionally and physically is tortuous and can even be deadly (Hawkley, Masi, Berry, & Cacioppo, 2006).

Unfortunately, many couples feel alone, even when they are in the same house. This happens when they fail to connect intimately. Although many couples complain of poor communication, this doesn't mean that they are not sending any messages to each other. Rather, it means that the messages are shallow, harsh, or dismissing. Most couples are able to communicate these negative messages just fine, but many lose their ability to share meaningful things that generate love and closeness. This is not usually a matter of skill, but a willingness to be open and take risks. When couples are able to be honest and share from a place of vulnerability, they can find intimacy and emotional closeness (Greenman & Johnson, 2013). The ability to share real emotions is also the best way to reconnect after disconnection, especially if there has been a rupture in the relationship.

In one session, Ginny was frustrated that Chris had gone out with his friends and got home later than she thought was reasonable. After some back-and-forth blaming and criticizing, we stopped and posed the question to Ginny: "When Chris was out so long with his friends, what was underneath your hurt feelings?" Ginny looked down at her hands and said, "I just wanted to be included. I'm never included in his

life. He has all his important clients, church people, and even his buddies. I get the leftovers." Like most people, Ginny wanted to know that she mattered. Admitting this took courage for her, but after her confession, Chris softened, moved closer, and said, "I wish you would say it like that instead of telling me I'm selfish." To which she responded, "I guess I was scared you would make fun of me or criticize me even more for needing you." Behind her anger, blame, and criticism was a wife who wanted to know that she was a priority in his life. Underneath his frustration and withdrawal was someone who felt like he was a failing husband and was scared she wouldn't love him back.

The Depth of Emotions

Anyone can be taught skills, but without safety and emotional intimacy, skills are mechanical and can even be manipulative. A used-car salesman may be a skilled communicator but can also be selfish and pushy in using those skills. In marriage, the underlying virtues are more important than the skills. If the heart is good, then attempts to connect through listening and talking will be beneficial, but if the attitude is negative, then skills will not work. In a virtuous marriage, both partners try to do the right thing by being kind and understanding the other person, as well as themselves (Goodsell & Whiting, 2016). One of the best ways for individuals to start understanding their relationships and themselves is to get in touch with their own and their partners' emotions.

Our feelings are powerful and drive couples to connect, as well as stir up conflict. The word emotion comes from the Latin root *movere* which means *to move*. Emotions propel partners to take action, and it is helpful to be aware of how this happens. For Ginny and Chris, it was important to help them settle into their own feelings and identify the difference between *secondary* emotions and *primary* emotions. Primary emotions are experienced as automatic and include deep feelings of sadness or fear. Secondary or reactionary emotions are usually a "reaction" to these primary emotions. For example, when Ginny laughed at something one of Chris's colleagues did, Chris felt anger, but this was fed by his insecurity about his difficult professional tasks. It took some work for him to realize this, so his first reaction was to become frustrated and pull away from Gina. After he realized that his reaction was based on fear, he stepped back from his blame of Ginny and was able to talk about it.

The more couples work on emotional awareness and expression, the better they get at it. Relationships get into ruts, but spouses can, with effort, get out of them and on a better track. Brains can be rewired and new habits can be created. Better choices are healing and reinforcing, and new safety leads to more meaningful words and less tension, which then increases intimacy and more safety.

Mindful practices are designed to increase awareness of self, and while this can be uncomfortable, it is part of growth. One evening Chris and Ginny were listening to a spiritual mindfulness podcast, and Chris became overcome with emotion. Gina

was able to hear him as he expressed his feelings without trying to interpret or block them. She at first was threatened to see him with such strong sensations, but she chose to hold his hand and just focus on his experience. It was a turning point for them in their ability to share strong feelings together. As they became more attuned to themselves and each other, they became more accepting and more empathetic as well (Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002), and this helped them feel more connected as friends and lovers.

Creating Mindful Sexuality

Gina and Chris's sexual connection had not only fizzled; it had become a place of tension and frustration. Their sex life symbolized their whole relationship, and incorporating mindful principles of awareness, presence, and nonjudgment in the bedroom was very helpful in their relationship as a whole. Although applying sexual mindfulness was met with some tentativeness, with education and practice, it became natural.

Sexual mindfulness is the ability to remain aware and nonjudgmental within a sexual experience. For many, this is challenging because sex can include distractions of anxiety and judgment. Men are often socialized to be the initiator of sex and be an ever-ready partner (Siann, 2013). Women can be socialized to feel cheap or slutty when enjoying sexuality or pressure to be hyper-attentive to a partner's pleasure and not her own (Sanchez, Kiefer, & Ybarra, 2006). The effect of these messages is sexual distraction and a loop of self-evaluation of sexual identity and experience. In the case of Gina, she had been mistreated and forced when she was young, which left her fearful about being taken advantage of and uncomfortable with many aspects of sexual responses. Chris felt her anxiety, which fed his own sense of frustration about not being desired and increased his worry about meeting her needs in a safe way. Sexual mindfulness helped them focus on present experiences rather than these distracting thoughts.

For many, it is easiest to be mindful when alone, such as during yoga or in a meditation. Interacting with others in relational mindfulness can test one's ability to remain aware and nonjudgmental, and these challenges can increase in the charged and emotional sexual relationship. For many, there are expectations on sex: to feel a particular way, to be sexual or look a certain way, to end with orgasm, or follow a certain pattern. Women, particularly, may have harsh opinions of their naked body or feel insecure about how they look, act, or feel during sex, and this may be especially true if pornography has been a source of conflict in the marriage. Men may feel discomfort with emotions that sex evokes, or they may rush the experience of sex to reach the goal of orgasm.

Overcoming Sexual Anxiety Through Presence and Nonjudgment

Anxiety is one of the most troubling and consistent sexual functioning issues for men and women, and mindfulness addresses this directly (Lucas, 2012; McCarthy & Metz, 2008). Men and women who practice sexual mindfulness try to refocus when negative thoughts intrude and pay attention to the physical feelings and emotions unfolding in the present moment. Chris and Ginny began this process by doing mindfulness practices to become more aware of their own physical and mental states which brought greater awareness of how they were feeling physically, even before they became intimate. For instance, Gina said that she noticed that she often carried tension in her back or neck, and Chris became more aware that he clenched his jaw and that his irritability was often related to physical or sexual tension. As they brought this growing awareness to their sex life, they set aside expectations and focused on the sensations of touch, physical pleasures, and feelings. They also focused on the rhythm of their breathing and did body scans, gently bringing awareness to each body area to explore the stress or state of that section. They became more aware of how heightened arousal was affecting them emotionally and physically and what meanings they associated with sex. As Chris and Ginny slowed down and changed their expectations, they also found that their ability to talk about intimacy became safer and more meaningful.

Sex is more than just a physical act for couples. Becoming more sexually mindful includes understanding the meaning of sex as well as the emotions that are associated with it. Chris and Ginny discussed their emotions, responses, excitement, experience, and the journey they were taking together. They came to appreciate the vulnerability of sex as something that represented a total sharing of themselves with each other.

Overcoming Sexual Barriers with Mindfulness

Because of Ginny's troubled history with touch, she struggled with some of the strong feelings sexuality triggered. It was helpful for her to explore the relationship between pleasure, pain, and discomfort in the process of accepting her bodily sensations. Pleasure and pain use the same neural receptors, and a natural reaction to pain is tension (Kim, Zhang, Muralidhar, LeBlanc, & Tonegawa, 2017), which helps blunt the experience. The same can be true of pleasure. Some people feel uncomfortable with new sensations or emotions and resist the feeling and blunt it or rush through it to lessen its intensity, which diminishes the overall experience.

However, mindfulness helped Ginny acknowledge unfamiliar sensations, sit with them, be curious about them, and examine how they made her feel. This did not happen at once but took months of patience and courage. She had to communicate with Chris about how she was doing, and he needed to be sensitive about how things

were going for both, and some of their learning experiences happened during their failures when they would rush through sex or get distracted or frustrated. As they embraced success and failure and pleasure and pain, they learned from each other.

Befriending Your Body Through Acceptance and Nonjudgment

Unfortunately, most people are dissatisfied with their bodies, and this can set up challenges in the bedroom. Becoming a friend rather than a critic includes examining ones' internalized messages about the body and being open to the unique, awkward, and unusual parts of sex. In mindful eating, a person focuses on the feel, texture, and sensations of food, and the same principles apply in sexual mindfulness. Our body has drives, and honoring and exploring these are more helpful than ignoring them. For example, if someone ignores their hunger, it will eventually push forward and may result in scarfing a candy bar instead of a well-balanced meal. If intimate couples don't engage in regular, nourishing sexual experiences, they may get frustrated, impulsive, or distant. One of the goals of sexual mindfulness is to create a space where couples can regularly honor their bodily drives for sex and practice developing the skills of mindfulness in an atmosphere of intentional sexuality.

As Ginny and Chris became more intentional, they paradoxically became more relaxed. They set aside time, including certain days of the week, to be together. This helped Ginny feel like she could prepare for intimacy and helped Chris feel less anxious about not getting together. Their expectations changed from only orgasmic sex to also include sensual touching, holding each other, or just talking about sexual feelings. They shared sexual ideas and activities and gained confidence in their ability to be comfortable with low levels as well as more intense levels of sexual arousal. Although couples are different in terms of how often to connect, most couples benefit from sexual experiences multiple times a week.

Gender Differences in Sexual Mindfulness

Research has found that sexual satisfaction increases as people practice sexual mindfulness (Khaddouma, Gordon, & Bolden, 2015; Leavitt, Lefkowitz, & Waterman, 2019), but it is also typical that men and women have different experiences with the process. In general, sexual mindfulness helps women gain needed grounding within their own body and learn to honor her pleasure as much as her partners', and women tend to benefit more from nonjudgment and acceptance about body image and performance (Brotto, 2013; Brotto & Barker, 2015). Men are generally already more aware of their bodies and sexual sensations and less judgmental

of themselves, so one of their roles is patience and encouragement. A husband can prompt his wife to pay attention to her own body and remind her of the sensations they create together. He can focus less on his own sexual goals and more on the couple's physical and emotional connection with each other.

Moving Forward Together Mindfully

The mindful journey to intimacy is a lifelong trip. It is not a destination, and intimacy is not a location to arrive at. This is the reason that mindfulness is called a "practice." It is a process that is simple to try but will never be mastered. A relationship is made up of two people that have unique preferences and personalities that don't always mesh, and using mindfulness to grow closer takes time and energy. However, for those who are committed, there are endless ways of being mindful together. Couples who want to deepen intimacy can try personal mindful practices through apps or videos, couples therapy, reading books together, spending meaningful time on dates, and trying the ideas contained in this chapter. It will take patience and intentionality, but the results can change relationships.

For Ginny and Chris, mindful efforts paid off. They reduced not only their individual crankiness but also their relational conflict. They became comfortable talking about their feelings, including formerly delicate subjects like their sex life and old hurts. They set aside their devices and focused on each other, protecting their alone time from children and other interruptions. They chose to be kind and compassionate, share their feelings, and think positively about each other and their marriage. They slowed down and prioritized their sex life. It wasn't easy, and there were relapses, but they were committed. By choosing a mindful marriage, they became more emotionally and physically intimate.

Appendix: Mindful Marriage Practices

Mindful Body Scan With this exercise, find a time where you can be away from any distractions such as phones or interruptions from family. Begin by sitting or lying down and becoming aware of your body and its sensations such as tension or tightness. Try to become aware of your emotions of feeling restless or calm. Start to focus on your breath where you feel it most prominently such as your nose, mouth, or chest. Notice your breath as it comes in and as it comes out, breath by breath. Next, notice your body from the head to your toes and the sensations that are felt. Then, simply be aware of and be curious of your sensations and your emotions in a nonjudgmental way.

Mindful Appreciation and Awareness As a couple, sit down when you are calm and relaxed, and talk about your relationship. Perhaps set a time limit of 10–15 min. Start by discussing the positives that you appreciate about your partner (e.g., *You are a very good father to our children, and I really appreciate that because I know some fathers don't put their children as a priority.*) and the positive areas of your relationship (e.g., *I really appreciate that we are good with our money, and we generally agree in that area of our relationship.*).

Next, begin discussing some of the ways that you have disconnections, and see if you can identify the pattern that comes and attacks your relationship. Try not to focus on the topic that you argue about but rather the *way* that you argue and the way you move away from each other and/or move toward each other. As the days and weeks go on, try to recognize this pattern the next time you argue or find yourself in a conflict. Point it out together. Also, be mindful of your emotions when your negative pattern comes up, and share this with your partner when you are feeling calm and there is less tension in the relationship. For example, you might say, "I've noticed that when I am stressed, I tend to pull away which then affects you. You pick up on my withdraw and show what I perceive as frustration. Then, I tend to get defensive and pull away more which, I'm going to guess, is really tough for you. Is that close?" After you have agreed on a general pattern, promise each other that you will work together to fight against this pattern when it comes up. A phrase that Jeremy (third author) uses and teaches to couples and students is to come toward your partner with "compassionate curiosity" rather than frustration, defensiveness, or blame. Instead, try to see their underlying primary emotions, and then, reflect your understanding, accept that it's their experience, and explore more if necessary using compassionate curiosity.

When you are in the pattern, decide together to stop (e.g., "I think we are getting into that negative pattern we talked about."), take a break, and write down some of your underlying (i.e., primary emotions) feelings. Start each one by writing, "I feel…" or "I'm experiencing _____ right now." You may be tempted to say, "I feel angry." That is fine, but try to see what might be under the anger. What are your primary emotions? When you are both calm and relaxed, share these with your partner. By doing this, you avoid blame, criticism, and your negative pattern, and you create safety and softer feelings toward one another.

Mindful Embrace Stand with your weight supported, and loosely embrace your partner for about 10 min. Allow full-body contact if comfortable. Do not talk while embracing. Keep your mind's eye focused on your breathing, and remain aware of your body and your partner's body. What part of your body does your mind take you to? How do you feel within your partner's embrace? What does the space between you feel like?

When the 10 min are up, face each other, and talk about your thoughts and impression from your embrace. You may or may not want to continue touching by holding hands or hugging. When the second author (Chelom) has used this with

couples, they often report back that although it feels unusual at first, it then tends to become relaxing and even sparks feelings of love and gratitude.

Mindful Gazing Lie down on your side and face your partner in a comfortable position. Look at each other's face and if possible keep eye contact. You may talk about how you presently feel or what feelings you experience. Creating shared attention is important in all social contacts but particularly for intimate relationships. What emotions or thoughts come to mind as you maintain eye contact?

Loving-Kindness Meditation Sit facing each other, and hold hands for approximately 10 min. Each partner takes a turn being the giver and the receiver. The giver thinks of sending loving thoughts to the receiver. Keep breath in a regular pace and deep. Think of loving thoughts to send to the receiver. After the giver has focused on the receiver for about 5 min, stop. The receiver can then tell the giver how they felt. What thoughts or feeling came to them during this exercise? Then, switch roles and the giver is now the receiver. This can be done causally while driving in the car or sitting next to each other.

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Mindfulness and Mental Health

Meredith S. Pescatello and Tyler R. Pedersen

Mindfulness is a helpful tool for working with many different kinds of clients. Mindfulness is an integral element of many mental health treatments and can be used to target some of the specific needs of various mental health disorders. Many evidence-based psychotherapies use mindfulness as a key component of treatment (e.g., dialectical behavior therapy (DBT), acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT), compassion-focused therapy (CFT), mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR)). Further, 82% of therapists use mindfulness in addition to treatment as usual (Michalak, Steinhaus, & Heidenreich, 2018). Mindfulness is a powerful tool in the treatment of anxiety and depression (Russell & Siegmund, 2016; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). Mindful attitudes can be developed in psychotherapy to work with cognitive distortions, understand emotions, set goals, and identify values.

In order to help your clients more fully understand mindfulness and develop their skills, we have included this chapter. Unlike the rest of the chapters in this book, the remainder of this chapter is written for your clients. So, feel free to photocopy or print it. Though it is not designed to be a treatment manual or protocol, it contains many useful skills. Our hope is that this chapter will be a useful resource for clients and clinicians alike. It may be helpful to assign parts of this chapter or the whole chapter as a homework assignment for your client or in a group therapy session. You may consider implementing many of the mindfulness activities listed below in group or individual therapy. This chapter contains many useful practice tips that are practical ways your clients can start implementing mindfulness today. Mindfulness is a journey not a destination, so be patient as you and your clients practice and apply these skills.

Imagine you are embarking on an hour drive to meet an old friend for lunch. As you turn onto the freeway, your mind drifts to thoughts about your friend, what you

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P. R. Steffen (ed.), *Mindfulness for Everyday Living*, Mindfulness in Behavioral Health, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51618-5_9

are going to eat for lunch, the fact that you are missing work, and how you really need to do laundry tonight. An hour later, you arrive at your destination and don't really remember driving there. This is an example of mindlessness. Now, imagine that you are driving down the freeway and you are thinking about what you are going to have for lunch and how nice it will be to see your friend. Then all of the sudden, a car cuts in front of you and you slam on your breaks. You notice that your heart is beating a little faster, and now, you are only focused on driving. The car cutting in front of you has forced you to be mindful and aware of the present moment. Most of us experience mindlessness on a day-to-day basis, and it is often external events (i.e., a car pulling in front of you, a teacher or boss telling you to pay attention, etc.) that pull us into the present and thrust us into mindfulness.

As human beings, we have thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations that are often background noise to what we do. We go through life on autopilot and don't give much credence to what is actually going on physiologically or psychologically. We have habit-driven patterns of thinking, feeling, and doing that can cause us to lose our sense of joy, peace, and purpose. Mindfulness is about slowing down and experiencing life. It is a way of gaining knowledge about yourself and the world around you. Mindfulness is a way of being and interacting with the world. It is something that you likely already do some of the time. Mindfulness when practiced more consistently will improve your mental and physical health. This chapter will give you skills and tools that, if practiced, will help to live a more mindful life. As you read this chapter, you will come to understand how mindfulness can be applied to improve common mental health issues including anxiety, depression, and other maladaptive emotions. The first half of the chapter will discuss what mindfulness is and how it can help improve your mental health. The second half of the chapter will focus on mindfulness skills and how you can integrate mindfulness into your life to improve your mental health. Although we will provide some specific exercises and ideas that one could implement, the chapter is not designed to be a treatment manual or protocol. Rather, we will broadly discuss how mindfulness can be utilized to improve overall mental and emotional health.

What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a 2600-year-old technique that involves rooting one's attention in the present moment. It was originally developed as a method to enhance self-knowledge and wisdom (Anālayo, 2018). Mindfulness is a conscious and active process of focusing our attention and mind in the present moment without judgment or attachment to the moment (Linehan, 2015, p. 151). Mindfulness has two main components: full awareness of the present moment and attentional control (Rathus, Miller, & Linehan, 2015, p. 97).

Awareness of the Present Moment

The key to mindfulness is being aware of the present moment. This may be awareness of physical sensations (i.e., aches, pains, urges to move, sweaty palms, etc.), emotions (anger, sadness, joy, love, etc.), or thoughts. An important part of being aware of the present moment is withholding from making judgments about the present and withholding from trying to change the present moment (Rathus et al., 2015, p. 99). When we are trying to be in the moment, it is very easy to get distracted by future anxieties or stress about the past. While it is helpful to plan for the future and learn from the past, the goal of mindfulness is to help increase the amount of time you spend in the present moment. This will help you richen your experience in the present and lead you to make more informed and wise decisions in the future. When you practice mindfulness, your mind will often wander and shift. You may start to notice just how easy it is to be mindless. Mindfulness occurs in the moments that you notice these shifts in your attention. It is about being present in yourself, observing what your mind is doing, and learning to live with our eyes wide open.

Attentional Control

As you practice rooting your full awareness in the present moment, you will likely notice the other primary goal of mindfulness, learning to focus on one thing at a time. This is also called attentional control. There is a huge tendency among millennials to multitask, especially while using social media (Carrier, Cheever, Rosen, Benitez, & Chang, 2009). Many people perceive that multitasking is more effective and that they are being more productive. This is not the case. In fact, the relationship of multitasking and performance is an inverted U. Multitasking is helpful to a point, but then, it quickly becomes unhelpful and unproductive (Adler & Benbunan-Fich, 2012). Multitasking is associated with more errors, worse performance, and increased time to finish projects. In mindfulness, you will practice keeping your mind focused on one thing at a time. This will help you be more productive, get more out of the things you do, and have a richer experience doing the things you love most.

Practice Idea: Start Right Now You can start practicing this right now. As you read this chapter, put away your phone and focus just on reading this book. Stay in the present moment. When your mind wanders to the future or past, bring it back to the text on this page. Spend just 10 min reading this book without switching from thing to thing. After you are done, compare this experience to your typical experience of reading a book. Were you more or less productive? How did it feel? Peaceful? Stressful? Consider doing this with work and homework, while spending time with loved ones, and in any other situation that you hope to experience the fullness of the moment.

How Mindfulness Can Help Your Mental Health

As scientists and practitioners have further examined mindfulness, they have noted that it can enhance many aspects of mind, body, and spirit. It can lead to positive brain changes including increased learning and memory capacity (Hölzel et al., 2011) and increased control over our mind. Mindfulness can create positive autonomic nervous system changes through enhancing our body's natural relaxation response (Khazan, 2013). Researchers suggest that mindfulness can help change the relationship we have with our thoughts and feelings, clarify what we value, increase self-awareness, cope with addictions, increase cognitive flexibility, decrease emotional reactivity, increase our ability to focus, decrease psychological distress, and enhance our spirituality (Coffey & Hartman, 2008; Shonin & Gordon, 2016). The rest of this section will address distinct ways that mindfulness can improve your mental health.

Mindfulness, Impulsivity, and Decision-Making

When we are especially emotional, it can be easy to respond in impulsive ways, without thinking. By learning to live in the present moment, we practice noticing what is going on in our body and mind. This gives us time to think before we act and act instead of reacting (Rathus et al., 2015, p. 100). This helps us to act with intention and purpose. It can help us to make better and wiser decisions. When I was freshman in college, I was often anxious about what professors thought about me or if I said something wrong in class. I would often worry about the emails that I sent and whether I offended one of them. I had the urge to send follow-up emails, clarifying what I had said. There were times when I impulsively sent emails to professors well after midnight. They often contained grammatical errors or autocorrect issues. The impulsively sent follow-up email often resulted in worse consequences than the originally sent email. This is an example, where I was caught up in future anxieties and was not being very mindful. If I had been acting mindfully, I would have noticed what was going on in the present and what I was thinking and feeling. I may have paused and been able to more rationally evaluate the situation. When we are experiencing a negative emotion, it can be very hard to be mindful. The urge is to react to the situation first, so that our distress will decrease. As we learn to be more mindful, we are able to slow down and have more control over our actions leading us to make wiser decisions.

Mindfulness and Physical Symptoms

Many people enter therapy as a result of chronic illnesses and stress-related illnesses (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2017). Additionally, many people express emotions through physical symptoms. For example, those who are chronically stressed have increased activation of the hippocampal-pituitary axis and increased cortisol levels. This has been associated with morphological differences in your prefrontal cortex, decreased functioning of your immune system, depression, cardiological problems, and shorter life span (Mariotti, 2015). There is an increasing body of literature that shows that mindfulness can improve many aspects of physical health resulting in reduced physical pain and decreased muscle tension (Wippert & Wiebking, 2018). Many physicians have been using mindfulness to supplement or replace treatments for numerous physical conditions and chronic pain (Burdick, 2013). In fact, there is a large body of literature on the mind-body connection. This means that your mind and body are related and can influence each other. Mindfulness is an important tool that helps us to use the mind-body connection to improve physical health.

Mindfulness Reduces Emotional Suffering

Negative emotions commonly arise from worries about the future or rumination about the past. As we learn to become more mindful and live in the moment, we are able to experience the present more fully and worry less about our future and past. When we learn to accept the moment as it is and participate fully in it, we are able to enjoy the small details of life. Mindfulness has been linked to reduced stress and anxiety (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Another reason negative emotion may arise is because of harsh criticisms or judgments we make about ourselves or others. When we learn to be mindful, we learn to observe the present moment and describe it in observable facts (Rathus et al., 2015, p. 101). This leads us to use language of self-acceptance instead of self-criticism. Rathus et al. (2015) give the example of instead of calling yourself a "stupid idiot" you could "stick to the facts" and say something more observable (p. 101). For example, instead of calling yourself a "stupid idiot," you might say "when I was tired, I misread that email. This resulted in me showing up to the meeting 15 minutes late. I will try to be more careful about getting enough sleep and reading my emails more thoroughly in the future." The feeling is really different between these two examples. In the first example, there is harsh criticism that is likely to make you feel downtrodden and depressed. It is unlikely to motivate you to do anything that is effective. The second example describes what really happened and gives you the opportunity to do something differently the next time. It helps you to think and problem solve. When we are mindful, we learn to slow down and observe what is really going on. We are invested in seeing the present as it is, through nonjudgmental eyes. This helps us to see ourselves and others through a

lens of love and not hate resulting in more balanced and effective responses and emotions. In the remainder of this chapter, we will discuss how you actually do mindfulness. We will then discuss how you can use mindfulness to target problematic thoughts, cope with difficult emotions, and improve our relationships.

Mindfulness 101: How to Do Mindfulness

In mindfulness, there are core skills and core beliefs. How you do mindfulness matters just as much as the specific mindfulness activity you are doing. In the next several sections, we will first learn core beliefs or attitudes that we can apply to any mindfulness activity. Following this, we will discuss three broad categories of mindfulness activities or skills.

Core Beliefs

Mindful attitudes can be used to enhance our understanding of our thoughts and feelings. Jon Kabat-Zinn (2017) describes several attitudes of mindfulness. These include nonjudging, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, and letting go. Linehan (2015, pp. 154–155) summarizes these into a set of skills called "How Skills" or "How to do Mindfulness." How Skills are composed of three skills, nonjudgmentalness, one-mindfulness, and effectiveness. We will discuss these three skills along with acceptance. As we practice mindful activities, we suggest attempting to adopt these attitudes of being nonjudgmental, one-mindful, effective, and accepting.

Nonjudgmentalness As human beings, we use judgmental language all the time. In mindfulness, we try to cultivate an attitude of being nonjudgmental. Though judgments are quick and important ways of conveying information, they are also not very specific. For example, a mom might tell her child "good girl" after the child eats her broccoli. While "good girl" is a positive judgment and efficiently communicates a positive assertion, it does not give the child feedback about what they did that was good. Additionally, it says that the child is good, not that the behavior is good. Positive and negative judgments dominate human communication. They can harm relationships and intensify emotions. The function of being consciously nonjudgmental is not to eliminate judgments, but to help us notice our judgments, be more descriptive, and determine what we are actually trying to communicate.

Linehan (2015, pp. 200–201) describes two categories of judgments, those that discriminate and those that evaluate. Discriminations are a necessary part of life that describe how things are similar or different, whether something fits certain criteria, and whether or not something makes sense in a certain context. In contrast, evaluative judgments evaluate the worth of something. Evaluative judgments add opinions

and personal beliefs that exceed the facts of the situation. Notably, evaluative judgments are not a factual part of reality. Evaluative judgments assess what good and bad are as defined by the observer not qualities of what is actually observed. An example of a discrimination is noticing that your friend, Phoebe, weighs more than your other friend, Sam. An evaluative judgment is evaluating that because Phoebe weighs more, she is gross, should lose weight, and is not as good as Sam. In mindfulness, we practice letting go of judgments that evaluate and retaining those that discriminate. This will improve our relationships and make our communication more specific.

Practice Tip: "Don't Should on Yourself" "Should" statements are usually an indicator that a statement is evaluative and not discriminative. We like the phrase "don't should on yourself," because it reminds us to be more self-compassionate and less judgmental. It can be an eye-opening experience to count the number of "should statements" you make in a day or attempt to spend an entire day or couple of days without using the word "should." Another way to practice this skill might be counting how many judgments we make per day. Often we use judgmental language about ourselves, others, and the world and never stop to realize we are using this kind of language. The point of this exercise is to help you to be mindful of the judgments you are making not to eliminate judgments. This can help you to decide whether or not your judgments are effective—whether or not they are helping you accomplish your goals and move toward what you value.

One-Mindfully Much of human life is spent accomplishing things and moving toward a purpose; we are a driven species. Much of our time is spent multitasking and completing checklists. This attribute is extremely important as it helps us achieve our goals and has led to tremendous scientific, literary, and mathematical accomplishments throughout human history. However, this drivenness can lead to burnout over time. Being on overdrive can cause us to lose track of what is going on in our bodies and minds. After a long time, we can become grossly ineffective in what we are trying to do. We become tired, sick, and unhappy. In mindfulness, we practice being "one-mindful." This means that we focus only on the present moment, doing one thing at a time and remembering to take breaks. This helps us to be completely immersed in and enjoy the present moment. One-mindfulness allows us to create space for doing self-care activities, which can increase self-compassion and effectiveness in reaching our goals.

Effectively The effectively skill reminds us that we must pay attention and notice if we are moving closer to or away from our goals and values. We must do what actually works to achieve our goals instead of what is "right" or "wrong." Effectively means changing the things we can and accepting the things we cannot. Life is filled with goals and things or people urging us to change. As important as change is, acceptance is equally important. Often the need for acceptance and change exists in the same moment. The ability to accept the current moment or situation in its fullness helps us notice what we really want to change. This is perhaps the most painful

moment. This is when we become fully aware of a problem and the reality of the moment. While painful, this moment of clarity can be a powerful tool to see what needs to be changed and how to change it. It is only after this moment of acceptance that lasting change can happen. Effectively allows us to understand the different qualities and value of both acceptance and change. This helps us to clarify our values and move toward the life we want to live.

Acceptance Acceptance often occurs when we realize that certain situations cannot be changed. During these times, the only option we have is to accept the situation and move forward. This type of acceptance is hard but necessary to move forward and into the present moment. Lack of willingness to accept the present moment can explain a significant amount of the variance in depressive symptoms (Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 2016). Acceptance helps us to learn to be psychologically flexible which has been linked to decreased stress and increased well-being (Wersebe, Lieb, Meyer, Hofer, & Gloster, 2018).

Acceptance and Dialectics A useful tool for working on acceptance is practicing dialectical thinking. A dialectic is the idea that two opposing things can be true simultaneously. An example of this is the death of a loved one. It is really sad and can be quite tragic. However, there is another side. The reason that the funeral is sad is because of our love for the person who died and the impact they had in our lives. In this way, funerals are dialectical and multifaceted. Another example is failing a driving test. Let's say that you went to the DMV to take a driving exam and renew your license and you failed because your eyesight was poor. Though this was probably frustrating, it probably also helped you realize that you needed to get your eyes checked. Dialectical thinking helps us to see the many dimensions of life, leading to increased acceptance of the present moment and increased happiness.

Practice Tip: Dialectics Thinking dialectically can be easily practiced by replacing "but" statements with "and" statements. For example, let's say a teacher tells you that "You are really great writer, but you forgot several commas." The "but" in this sentence places more emphasis on the latter half of the sentence than the first half the sentence. Using an "and" statement values each side of the statement as equally true, "you are a great writer and you forgot several commas." Though "but" statements are natural, "and" statements help us to not discount the positive or negative qualities of a situation. They help us to willingly and effectively acknowledge the fullness and complexity of a situation or person. Acceptance is a key part of the healing process; it is a willing acknowledgment of the present moment.

Core Skills

There is a myriad of mindfulness activities. Linehan (2015, p. 154–155) defines three broad categories of mindfulness activities, the "What Skills." These skills include observing, describing, and participating. Observing is the ability to notice what is happening right now. Describing is adding words to your experience or describing what is going one. Participating is the practice of fully participating in the here and now. Most mindfulness activities require that we apply our mindful attitudes to some combination of observe, describe, and participate.

Observe Observing is about being able to take a step back from the situation and observe the present moment. This includes the environment around you, your body, and your mind. It is easy to let past experiences color or shape our present experience. While the past is an important tool to learn from, it can prevent us from seeing the present situation accurately. Often we are so accustomed to situations being a certain way that we miss the ways that the current moment is different. During observation, we practice using a beginner's mind (Kabat-Zinn, 2017). This is the idea of experiencing a moment as if for the first time. This helps us to see the present moment as a new, unique learning opportunity.

As we begin to observe the present moment, it is a common experience to want to hold on tightly to the positive experiences and avoid what is unpleasant. Many people believe that negative experiences are bad and should be avoided. The attitude of letting go reminds us that positive and negative experiences come and go, thoughts come and go, and emotions come and go. In mindfulness, we practice letting go. This is the attitude of letting experiences with both positive and negative valences come and go. Linehan (2015) calls this Teflon or "non-stick" mind. Observing in this way allows our minds to be open to all experience and learn from all experience.

Practice Idea: Use Oranges One application of the observe skill is called mindful oranges. This can be done alone or with other people. In this activity, obtain a bowl of oranges. Choose one orange out of the bowl. Spend about a minute getting to know your orange. Observe the orange. You might consider asking yourself, how is this orange different than every other orange? After a minute, put the orange back in the bowl and mix it in with the other oranges. Try to find your orange. This activity can be used in cases of social anxiety. If you are anxious about interacting with people, you may try asking yourself, "How is this person different today than all other days?" Observing helps us to be impartial about the present moment and fully experience reality.

Practice Idea: Breathing A classic example of observing is a breathing exercise. During such an exercise, you might pay attention to your breathing and attempt to slow it down. You may choose to focus on lengthening your exhales. Many people find it helpful to do "clock breathing." In this exercise, you use a clock and breathe in for 5 s and out for 5 s. The goal is to focus only on your breathing. Throughout

this exercise, as you observe your breath, your mind may wander. When you notice it wandering, bring your mind back to your breath. This process of refocusing your mind is mindfulness. Observing allows us to attend to the present moment with awareness and see things in new ways.

Describe Describing is about using words to label our observations about behavioral and environmental events without judging. This helps us to work with what is instead of what we think it is or what we think it should be. When we describe, we put into words a description of just what we observed, without interpretation. This is an opportunity to provide words for what is happening around us and give a name to the thoughts, feelings, and sensations we experience. This can help us learn to be nonjudgmental and see things clearly. Observing and describing can be especially helpful in new or difficult situations, because it gives you some space from participating to actively observe and understand what you are doing and how you are interacting with the new context.

Practice Idea: Mindfulness of an Emotion In this activity, the goal is to describe the physical sensations of the emotion and the thoughts you are having and eventually put a name to the emotion. An important part of describing is that if it cannot be described through your senses, it cannot be described (Linehan, 2015, p. 154). This activity will help us to understand our emotions better and communicate them more clearly to our loved ones.

Participate Participate is about being wholly in the moment you just observed and described. During participation, you are aware and immersed in the moment, but you are not analyzing the details of the situation. Participating is the process of being fully emerged in the moment. It is about allowing yourself to be a part of what is happening without obsessing over the details. It is about being a part of the changing nature of life. Participation will help you to get more enjoyment out of the present moment and be more efficient and effective in the moment.

Practice Idea: Games An easy way to participate is playing a sport or game. When playing a sport or game, it is hard to think of anything else. You must be alert and aware of the game around you so that you can respond quickly and smoothly. The next time you play a sport or game, notice how it feels to be fully present. Try to take this with you into other daily activities. Try to be fully in the moment, at home, school, and work. As you participate in the moment, those around you will notice and it will improve your relationships. Other ideas for practicing participate might be during various meditations and relaxation activities such as loving-kindness meditations or body scans.

Mindfulness 102: Using Mindfulness to Improve Your Mental Health

Using mindfulness, we can increase our awareness of our thoughts and feelings, thus improving our psychological and emotional functioning. As human beings, we have a tendency to avoid our thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations. This is called *experiential avoidance* (Hayes et al., 2016). High levels of experiential avoidance are a hallmark of generalized anxiety disorder (Mennin, Heimberg, Turk, & Fresco, 2002). Additionally, the severity of anxiety, depression, and worry symptoms is highly correlated with the amount of experiential avoidance (Hayes & Smith, 2005, p. 47; Roemer, Salters, Raffa, & Orsillo, 2005). This avoidance can be habitual and results in either muted emotional experience or more distressing emotions. Mindfulness helps us be open to and aware of our emotional, mental, and physical experiences. This signals to our body and mind that these thoughts and feelings are manageable. It also helps us to understand our thoughts and feelings. Mindfulness helps us to respond to thoughts and feelings effectively instead of reacting impulsively.

As you practice mindfulness and begin to notice your thoughts and emotions more and more, you may realize that emotions and thoughts come and go. They are like waves in the ocean. To really experience a feeling or thought is to know that they are transient. It can be common to try to attain only positive feelings or thoughts and hang on to them out of fear they won't come back. When we stop trying to attain them, we will notice that they come up all by themselves and learn to trust ourselves to generate positive emotions and thoughts. Similarly, it is common to avoid negative emotions and thoughts and try to prevent them from entering our consciousness out of fear that they will come to stay. If we stop viewing negative emotions and thoughts as the enemy and simply let them be there, we will notice that they too pass. In 1987, social psychologist Daniel Wegner did a famous experiment. He had two groups of participants. Each group was asked to verbalize their stream of consciousness for several minutes. One group was asked to try to not think about a white bear, and the other group was allowed to think about whatever they wanted. Then, he asked both groups of participants to do the same thing, but this time, they were told to think of only white bears. The group that originally was not allowed to think of white bears thought of white bears much more often. When we suppress our thoughts, they come up at a much higher intensity. This is true for emotions too. Allowing ourselves to feel emotions helps us to move through them. In this section, we will discuss how you can use mindfulness to notice your thoughts and emotions and allow them to come and go. This will help you to cope with distressing thoughts, regulate intense emotions, improve your relationships, and deepen your experience of everyday living.

Mindfulness of Thoughts

Being mindful of thoughts helps us understand negative and positive thought patterns and work with our thoughts instead of against them. As human beings, we have thousands of thoughts per day. We think constantly, but rarely do we consciously notice that we are thinking. In *The How of Happiness*, Lyubomirsky discusses the idea that 50% of happiness is determined by genes and is totally out of your control, 10% is determined by your environment, and the final 40% is determined by our thoughts, actions, and attitudes. Thoughts can be powerful tools or destructive roadblocks in our happiness. Mindfulness helps us to notice our thoughts as just thoughts. This mindful stance helps us to use our thoughts as tools in order to create a space between our thoughts and our reaction, combat cognitive distortions, and gain control over negative thoughts and beliefs.

Increasing Our Reaction Time Mindfulness helps us notice the gap between stimulus and response. Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) uses the ABC model of emotion. In this model, there are three parts: A is the activating event, B is the belief about that event, and C is the consequence of the event. According to CBT assumptions, most of the emotional pain due to mental health disorders and resulting behavior come from faulty beliefs or cognitions (B) about ourselves, others, and the world. For example, imagine you just failed a test and your friend is bragging about how well they did on the test. This is the activating event, A. This causes you to feel jealous and yell at your friend. This is the consequence of the activating event, C. In between A and C, there is B, the belief. An example of a belief about this activating event is that you believe that because your friend did better than you, you must be very stupid. However, there are some problems with that belief. An example of one problem with that belief is that one test does not determine your intelligence. Most of us go through life on autopilot and go from stimulus (A) to response (C) with little thought or processing. The more we notice the gap between stimulus and response, the more freedom we have to choose how we respond to difficult stimuli. Mindful attitudes help us to slow down and notice the intervening beliefs, B. This can help us to get some separation from our thoughts.

Creating from Space Your "Sticky" Thoughts As human beings, we often hold irrational and unhelpful beliefs. These are often called cognitive distortions. These distortions are exaggerated, irrational, or unhelpful patterns of thought that are often related to mental health disorders (Burns, 2000). These distortions prevent us from seeing reality clearly. They often come from making assumptions about ourselves or others. Common cognitive distortions include black and white thinking, personalization, overgeneralization, should statements, magnification, minification, mind reading, and fortune telling. Cognitive distortions cause us to magnify negative experiences; minimize achievements; blame ourselves; jump to conclusions about ourselves, others, and situations; and judge ourselves and others. Cognitive distortions do not lead to problem-solving or personal growth; rather, they prevent us from seeing reality clearly and provide roadblocks in moving toward our goals and

values. Cognitive distortions can cause our thoughts to seem unmanageable or fixed. Some refer to these as "sticky thoughts" or "fused."

Stephen Hayes (2016) has described multiple ways to gain space from our thoughts; he calls it cognitive defusion. The simplest way to "defuse" from a thought is called thought watching. In this activity, start with being mindful of your breath. As thoughts come up, practice saying, "Oh, there's a thought." When another thought comes up, practice saying, "There's a thought too." Another activity is called leaves on a stream (Linehan, 2015). In this activity, we imagine a tree next to a stream. Begin by observing what is around you. As you make observations about either the imagined tree and stream or your own experience, label these as thoughts, feelings, urges, or sensations. Then, imagine your thoughts, feelings, urges, or sensations landing on a leaf and floating down the stream. The key to this activity is to let your leaf drift off and not float with it downstream. Another way to practice cognitive defusion is noticing when you are having an intrusive, obsessive, or distressing thought and saying it aloud or writing it down. Some people find it helpful to sing the thought aloud or say it in an accent. Others find it effective to use the phrase "I am having the thought that" and then state their thought. These activities help us to detach from these sticky thoughts. Remember that the benefits of mindfulness accrue over time and with practice; while many of these might help a little initially, the biggest benefits occur as you practice these skills over and over.

Gaining Control over Negative Thinking Many of our thoughts are unimportant, odd, or irrational. It can be easy to get stuck on any one of these thoughts. Some people have intrusive or obsessive thoughts. This happens when someone has an unpleasant thought and pays more attention than usual to these thoughts. This increases both the frequency and distress of the thoughts. Berry and Laskey (2012) demonstrated that individuals with and without obsessive compulsive disorder(OCD) have similar types of intrusive and unwanted thoughts. They show that the difference between people with and without OCD lies in how much the thoughts bother them not the content of the thoughts. When thoughts bother us a lot, we tend to pay a lot of attention to them. We might say things such as "what does this mean about me?" Additionally, thoughts that distress us are thoughts that we have that seem to go against what we value. Often this causes us to attempt to avoid the thoughts, which makes them more severe. Mindfulness asks us to use acceptance and nonjudgmentalness to lean into our internal experience—to allow our thoughts to come and go like waves. This helps us to allow our thoughts to come and go and ultimately leads to less distress about our thoughts and an increased sense of control.

Mindfulness of Emotions

As human beings, we experience a plethora of emotions throughout the day. Emotions are powerful tools that communicate information to us. Each emotion serves a different function. Emotions are as painful as they are pleasant. Emotions

have action urges associated them. These action urges range from very effective to wildly ineffective. It is easy to act on an emotion without noticing or feeling it. When we take a moment to notice and feel the emotion, we can decide what function the emotion serves and whether it is effective to act on the emotion. Below we will discuss several ways we can use mindfulness to regulate our emotions.

Just Notice Mindfulness of emotions can be experienced through leaning into emotions and then moving through them. Noticing emotions is the first step to mindfulness of emotions. This involves slowing down and recognizing how we feel in our body and our mind. Each emotion feels different physiologically and psychologically. When we learn to notice the small changes in our mind and body, we have an opportunity to intervene. The lower the intensity of the emotion, the easier it is to intervene. Using mindfulness, we can notice the minute changes in our body.

Practice Idea: Get Out of Your Head You might spend some time noting the different ways emotions make you feel both in body and in mind. It may also be done through paying closer attention to the chain of events both internal and external that cause emotional experience. It can be helpful to examine the pleasant and unpleasant qualities of all experiences. Part of mindfulness is realizing that all experiences (e.g., emotions, bodily sensation, external cues) are multifaceted and they have positive and negative qualities. This will help you get out of your head and make your emotions more objective and manageable.

Practice Idea: Daily Check-Ins You may consider checking in with emotions, body, and mind throughout the day. A check-in might look like setting reminders in your phone several times a day. During the check-in, begin by taking a few slow breaths. Then, pause and notice how your body is feeling. What are these physiological cues telling you? These physiological cues can tell you a lot about the thoughts and feelings you experience. If you are uncomfortable or tense, take a minute to readjust. If you have closed posture (i.e., pursed lips, folded arms, raised shoulders, knitted eyebrows), consider moving to an open posture (i.e., relaxed face, open hands). Changing the way your body is in space can change the way you feel. If you experience muscle tension, these check-ins can be especially important to take a moment and help yourself to feel more comfortable. Finally, take another moment, and notice what is going on in your mind. What kind of thoughts are you having? How you are feeling emotionally? We have a tendency to never slow down and notice what is going on. When we become aware, we have an opportunity to adjust. We can evaluate what is going on in our mind, body, and spirit. This allows us to decide if there are changes we need to make and gives us the space to address our own needs. This activity will help you notice what is going on and give you a chance to regulate your emotions before they get too intense.

Challenging Emotions When emotions are intense, they are hard to cope with and move through. We can use mindfulness to refocus our attention onto something other than our emotion for a time so that when we return to the emotion, it may be

at a more manageable intensity. During this kind of mindfulness, it is particularly helpful to do something very active or something that requires a lot of focus. This could be anything from a sport to a challenging puzzle. The key to this mindfulness skill is to be completely in the moment focusing on something other than your emotion and then after a sufficient amount of time returning to the emotional experience. It is usually helpful to stay in the mindful activity until you feel as though your distress has decreased by 50%. When you finish the mindfulness activity and your distress has decreased, you may consider returning to the emotion-evoking situation. As you examine our emotional experience, you may notice that your emotions, though they feel as if they come out of nowhere, have a cause. This cause can be an external event (i.e., an interpersonal interaction) or an internal event (i.e., a thought). The cause is usually not the event itself, but our interpretation of the event. Noticing the cause of our emotion can be an indicator of what our emotion is trying to communicate. Identifying what your emotion is trying to communicate can be a helpful tool in problem-solving.

Practice Idea: Be a Detective Next time you have intense emotion, spend some time observing and describing the emotion. What were you thinking while you experienced the emotion? What was your posture like? What were your facial expression like? Why was this emotion important? What was it communicating to you? What was it communicating to others? What would you have liked it to communicate with others? Maybe your emotion is telling you that you are feeling a little worn out; could you find some time for a self-care activity? Do you have too much on your plate?

Urge Surfing Most emotions are accompanied with an action urge or a desire to take action. For example, sometimes, people experience the urge to hit someone when they are angry. These action urges can feel automatic. This is due to the activation of the sympathetic division of our autonomic nervous system. This invokes the fight-or-flight response which is an automatic response to fearful situations. This can be adaptive in that it can prepare us to act in a potentially dangerous situation. An example of this could be running away from a bear who is chasing you. Sometimes, however, the fight-or-flight system is activated unnecessarily and is maladaptive. Sometimes, our action urges can be very ineffective (i.e., hitting someone when you are mad). We may practice mindfulness through urge surfing (Linehan, 2015). Urge surfing is the process of experiencing the urge to do something and waiting for it to come and go. As the urge comes up, you might be mindful of all the physiological sensations that arise. Take some time to label or describe them. Urges typically peak in about 20 min (Linehan, 2015). These urges can be emotional urges or urges related to addiction. Mindfulness increases our ability to act deliberately. With mindfulness, we can decide whether or not to act on an action urge. We wait for the initial urge to subside and then decide on how to proceed. Taking time to notice what emotions we are experiencing and what they communicate to us can help us decide how to best communicate this to other people and the world. As we are mindful, we realize that our emotions are interconnected with us.

Mindfulness gives us space to organize what is important to us, convey it to other people, and cultivate a life rich with what is important to us.

Practice Idea: Don't Scratch the Itch Next time you have an itch, use it as an opportunity to be mindful. Instead of giving in to the urge to scratch the itch, just let it be. Allow the itch to be there. Observe the itch and describe its qualities; how does it feel? Watch the urge build and the dissipate. Consider writing down what your learned from this experience.

Mindfulness in Relationships.

Whether it is by our never-ending to-do list or our anxieties, it is easy to be distracted in relationships. Mindfulness can be used when talking to people to enhance relationships. It can also be used to increase thoughtfulness and preserve relationships by helping us to be less impulsive. Mindfulness is a power tool in dealing with complex relationships.

When we are not mindful, it is easy to say things without thinking. Sometimes, we are on autopilot and do not realize our own verbal tics. A common one is the use of the word "sorry." Some people are chronic "sorry-ers." They apologize for everything even when an apology is not warranted. Sometimes, this can be damaging to relationships. We can use mindfulness to understand the function of the "sorry." For example, let's say you are a chronic "sorry-er." You just made a comment in a meeting and then apologize for talking too long. Perhaps, what you really intended to say was "thank you for listening" or "thank you for taking into account my comment." A more mindful response may have been, "thank you." You can use mindfulness to be more specific in what you say or to notice your verbal tics. Noticing your verbal tics gives you the opportunity to decide whether or not you would like to replace them with more specific communication. This can help enhance self-knowledge and strengthen relationships.

It is a common response to act impulsively when interacting with people we care about. For example, let's say you get an email at work from your boss. He has given you some challenging feedback, and you are very upset. It can be easy to send an emotional email back immediately. However, we can use mindfulness to urge surf and ride the emotional wave. We can then send the email when we are in a more balanced frame of mind. Mindfulness can help us to become more informed about our own body and mind and therefore interact more positively in challenging interpersonal situations.

Mindfulness Activities to Enhance Daily Living Mindfulness skills can be used to broaden experience in everyday life. These may include using mindfulness while in nature or going for a walk, mindfulness while eating, mindfulness while driving, mindfulness of things you are grateful for, and using mindfulness in any everyday context. For example, imagine it is winter time and it is really cold outside. You have parked your car far away from the grocery store, because it was challenging to find

a parking spot. You can use mindfulness as you walk from your parked car to the grocery store. You might do this by noticing all the physical sensations of cold in your body or being mindful of your breath as you walk. In fact, being mindful while being out in the cold can help you to feel less cold and make your experience be more enjoyable.

Mindfulness can also be used to notice the things you are grateful for. Gratitude has been shown to improve physical and mental health including enhancing sleep, self-esteem, and resilience (Lavelock et al., 2016). Mindfulness can be used to practice gratitude through using the observe and describe skills. Examples of this would be gratitude journaling, spending time to notice and reflect on blessings, and gratitude-specific meditations.

Another common way mindfulness is used in everyday is called mindful eating. Most Americans do not really pay attention to what they are eating or when they are full. We are often distracted while eating. In mindful eating, we practice just eating without multitasking. It is the process of slowing down and using our five senses to observe the full experience of eating. This includes looking at your food, noticing its texture, experiencing the smell of your food, noticing how it feels in your mouth and in your stomach, and paying attention to your hunger and fullness cues. Mindfulness can be used in many different ways to brighten and broaden life experiences.

Final Thoughts

Mindfulness is a way of living life and seeing the world. It can help challenge negative beliefs and cope with difficult emotions. It can be practiced in structured or unstructured formats during psychotherapy and in everyday living. Mindfulness does not involve making huge changes in lifestyle, but rather, it allows us to see the world through more mindful lenses. Through our ability to notice details in ourselves, others, and the world, mindfulness helps us to create subtle and powerful changes that allow us to experience life in greater abundance.

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P. R. Steffen (ed.), *Mindfulness for Everyday Living*, Mindfulness in Behavioral Health, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-51618-5