

# **MINDFUL LOVING**



**REWIRE YOUR BRAIN  
FOR LOVE**

**Dr Susan Kriegler**

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## REWIRE YOUR BRAIN FOR LOVE

There's a myth that won't seem to die in popular understanding of anger. Back in the 1960's, psychology (doing the best it could as a very young science) put forth the notion that "venting" your anger, letting it all hang out, was the way to go if you wanted to be emotionally healthy.

Venting (a.k.a. cathartic expression of anger) feels great in the moment, and it would seem to make sense that letting it out, instead of keeping it bottled up, would make you less prone to lashing out at those you love, like letting some steam out of a cranked-up pressure-cooker.

Nope.

In the 1990s, Brad Bushman and his colleagues Roy Baumeister and Angela Stack definitively showed that **letting off steam actually leaves you more prone to do it again and again** (it does feel good, after all), and stated:

*These results contradict any suggestion that hitting the punching bag [the form of letting off steam in their studies] would have beneficial effects because one might feel better after doing so (which is what advocates of catharsis often say). People did indeed enjoy hitting the punching bag, but this was related to more rather than less subsequent aggression toward a person...hitting a punching bag does not produce a cathartic effect: It increases rather than decreases subsequent aggression.*

**Venting keeps your nervous system primed for more angry responses**, and you're more likely to keep venting - all over the people in your life - so you can keep doing it. Other people react "badly", and then you can vent at/on them. Quite the feedback loop, eh?

**Whatever you practice the most is what gets wired up to be the fastest and first route in your brain.** And the "hit" of dopamine that you probably get from venting makes it all the more addictive.



**Not the path to better relationships.**

**Making mindful choices in how we respond authentically**, in the moment - that's the path you want to get yourself on. It's something that, with early experiences of optimal, attuned communication and secure attachment, our brains have more experience and therefore more ready-for-action wiring in the **middle prefrontal areas** - the areas that allow for greater choice in how we respond emotionally. **Shunting the surge of an angry reaction upward into the prefrontal centers (the middle prefrontal - mPF - areas in particular)** is, quite literally, second nature for those who grew up with brains that had those experiences.

But what about those of us who didn't get that? Or who, in certain contexts, are able to keep it together and use our higher-brain processes (like, at work), but elsewhere (at home after a long day) ... not so much?

You may have tried various strategies and/or made lots of resolutions ("I'm not going to blow up at Bob when he forgets to \_\_\_\_\_," or "Whenever I feel myself getting defensive, I'm going to take three deep breaths before I respond.")

Those can be helpful, but how many of us forget those well-intentioned promises to ourselves in the heat of the moment? (My hand is raised, how about yours?) To remember and choose to engage those strategies, **you've got to be able to recruit, pretty much immediately, your higher brain. But your limbic brain is simply, naturally faster on the draw.**

So how **do** we get there from here?

### **Carnegie Hall**

*Guy gets into a cab in Manhattan and asks the cabbie, "Excuse me, how do I get to Carnegie Hall?"*

*The cabbie answers, "Practice, practice, practice."*

You guessed it - **practice in mindfulness.**

Mindfulness practice **grows the connections from down low to up high and in between all of those helpful buddies in your mPFC**, and making those connections (and the structures themselves, it seems) thicker and speedier. Instead of reactivity reverberating and ricocheting around on their own, **the more "insightful" parts of the brain get called in.** And the more connections between the limbic system and the neocortex, the more emotional responses are possible.

As your mPFC gets better integrated, the path from your limbic areas going "Ding!" and your emotional response gets longer and more complex, and **that** is the pause that refreshes.

***Freedom means being able to choose how we respond to things.*** When wisdom is not well developed, it can be easily obscured by the provocations of others. In such cases we may as well be animals or robots. If there is no space between an insulting stimulus and its immediate conditioned response - anger - then we are in fact under the control of others. - Andrew Olendzki, "Calm in the Face of Anger"

## **Mindfulness Begins With Breath Awareness**

Eckhart Tolle (*A New Earth*) recounts an incident where someone showed him the prospectus of a large spiritual organization containing a veritable smorgasbord of seminars and workshops. The person asked Eckhart to help him to choose one or two courses. "I don't know," Tolle replied. "They all look so interesting. But I do know this," he added. **"Be aware of your breathing as often as you are able, whenever you remember. Do that for one year, and it will be more powerfully transformative than attending all of these courses. And it's free."**

### **Listen to the free flow of your breath**

The breath energizes and sustains every cell of our body. It nourishes everything in its path. It is like the freshness of water. It is with us every second of our lives, but most people pay little attention to it.

Our breath is **mainly automatic and unconscious and regulated by the instinctive and primitive involuntary or autonomic nervous system.** Autonomic is derived from the word 'autonomy', it has the quality of being 'independent' of the conscious, voluntary mind.

By practicing conscious breathing we gradually **strengthen the connections between our unconscious, autonomic reactions and our voluntary, or consciously chosen responses.** This strong bridge between the primitive "lower" mind and the "higher" mind enables us to mend the split between the raw reactions that ruin our relationships, and the wise responses that we could choose to nurture our love.

### **Breathe a shining light into your mind**

## Conscious breathing builds the connections between the limbic system and the neocortex.

Breath awareness shines a light into the workings of our mind. By observing the mind (thoughts, emotions, desires, intentions, perceptions and expectations) we can free ourselves of the knots that bind. **Observing the breath allows us to take a deep look at the nature of mental formations** such as fear, anger and anxiety and helps to bring about an understanding of how our mind works. To improve your mind, you need to be aware of how it works.

The breathing process is connected directly to the brain and the central nervous system. The breath can **control the flickering nature of the mind**.

Breath awareness serves another function, because it **trains your mind to stay focused** on a natural - and essential - body process. By focusing your conscious intention on your breath, you begin to slow down mental "busy- ness." Your thoughts become fewer and more integrated, and your body begins to relax.

Many people's breath is unnaturally shallow. The more you are aware of your breath, the **more the natural depth will reestablish itself**.

## A Mindfulness of Breathing Practice

**Sit comfortably with your spine straight**, in a relaxed way, on a straight-backed chair or cushion on the floor. It is important that your spine is straight and your body relaxed, to promote mental alertness and clarity. Sitting this way may be a new experience, and you may need to experiment a bit.

**Establish a proper motivation** before beginning the practice. For example, you might affirm the intention to simply use your breath as an anchor for being mindfully aware of your experience in each moment, with a sincere desire to learn something new, with an **attitude of open-minded curiosity**.

**Close your eyes.** (If this doesn't feel comfortable, or feels like too much vulnerability to internal sensations, keep your eyes open and gaze at the floor about 5 feet in front of you with a soft focus, not attending to anything in particular.) As you inhale and exhale naturally, **bring your attention to the sensations of your flowing breath**, either at the tip of your nostrils or in your abdomen.

Take a moment to **notice the sensations of touch and pressure** where your body makes contact with the chair or cushion and the floor, and any sensations that might indicate tension in your body. Just notice these sensations with curiosity and acceptance. If you need to slightly adjust your posture, that's fine, but if some tension or pressure won't go away, that's OK too, so long as it's not painful (in which case you may need to try sitting on something else).

**Consciously and deliberately take a few deep breaths**, but do not strain. The idea is to emphasize the movement and sensations, to clarify what you are attending to.

Now **allow the breath to find its own natural rhythm**. Allow the body to breathe on its own, without attempting to change it in any way. Shallow or deep, fast or slow, it's OK. Allow the inhalations and exhalations to come and go, just noticing the sensations of your flowing breath at the tip of your nostrils or in your abdomen. You may notice the slight pauses between each in-breath and out-breath.

Gently and without wavering, allow your attention to rest or float on the changing rhythms of your in-breaths and out-breaths. **Whenever your attention wanders or loses its alertness – and it often**



**will – gently but firmly bring your awareness back to the breath**, and observe with fresh curiosity the sensations as they arise and pass away.

**It is totally natural for your mind to wander**, and nothing to be concerned about. Again, when you notice that your mind has wandered, gently and firmly bring it back to the breath with fresh curiosity and alertness.

If you find yourself judging yourself when you discover that your mind has wandered, instead briefly congratulate yourself for making the discovery – then go gently and firmly back to your breath...

Bringing the mind back to the breath trains the mind to be attentive and mindful. It takes effort, but slowly the mind will grow stronger.

Continue with this practice for **15-20 minutes**, or just 10 minutes or less if that feels like enough for the first time. During this time, sometimes when you find that your attention has wandered, you might remind yourself of your intention: simply to use your breath as an anchor for being mindfully aware of your experience in each moment.

If at any time you find yourself becoming not just perturbed but overwhelmed by feelings or memories, immediately stop and do something (healthy) that you would normally do to cope with these experiences.

## Rewire Your Brain for Love

Published on January 27, 2010, Marsha Lucas, Ph.D, in *Rewire Your Brain For Love*, says, "In my work as a psychologist, I see a lot of very bright, insightful people who still struggle with relationships, and when I suggest that they start practicing mindfulness meditation, they want to know **why and how sitting and meditating can help their love lives**. They may know that they "should" meditate because it's good for them, but how is it going to make things better between them and their [fill in the blank: Wife/Husband/Boyfriend/Girlfriend/ Partner...]?"

Here are three of the many reasons, with some examples we can all relate to:

**A Date With Love. When you're less stressed, your nervous system is less likely to overreact**, less likely to be hyper-vigilant to potential "threats." You're less defensive, and better able to hear and respond to what's actually going on. As Jon Kabat-Zinn says, mindfulness leads people to be better at approaching apparently stressful events as a **challenge**, rather than a **threat**.

Under threat, we're geared to quickly - and without much thinking - **fight, flee, or freeze**. With challenge, we see an increase in the brain's ability to pull ideas together and come up with informed, balanced solutions.

So what does this do for improving relationships? Imagine that your brain is stressed out over deadlines at work. You're already late for your date with your girlfriend. Your body, thanks to the brain's message that things are dangerous, is tight, prepared to fight, flee, or freeze, and in a magnificent feedback loop, your **brain gets the body's tightness as a message to keep on the lookout for trouble**.

You walk into the restaurant for your date, aware that you're late, and you see a look of annoyance on her face - which your brain detects as an additional stressor-threat. Your girlfriend sees the body language of your stress even before you get to the table, and her fight-flight-flee response gets further activated. Add in the restaurant noise she's been sitting with, the problems she had finding a parking spot to meet you close to your office, and the fact that you're both hungry. It doesn't take much imagination to see how this date very quickly turns into a nasty argument with tempers flaring like fireworks.

In the bad date scenario above, we've got an **overabundance of stress hormones** raging through both bodies, tight muscles ready to react - basically, two hungry people with hyper-vigilant "danger detectors" in their brains chomping at the bit to help them rapidly and decisively defend themselves. And neither

one of them is able to readily access perceiving any of this as a challenge, rather than a threat. How well do you think the date is going to go?

Now imagine that at least one of them practices mindfulness meditation regularly. At the very least, if all we're looking at is the benefit of **overall decreased stress and an ability to recognize, let go of, and recover from stress more easily**, we can see how much better the evening is going to be.

There's so much more to mindfulness meditation than stress reduction, though. Let's take a look at **two other ways that mindfulness meditation gives your relationship a boost**.

**Mind the Gap.** Research on the effects of mindfulness meditation on the brain is increasingly showing that there is a **beefing up (in activation and even in size) of the middle prefrontal cortex (mPFC)**. The mPFC is an area which neuroscientists believe plays an important role in integrating our higher, "intellectual" brain areas (for example, your frontal cortex) with those down below in our more raw, "emotional" areas (like your amygdala - the brain's "panic button").

Having a more formidable mPFC allows your brain to **bridge the gap, as it were, between your "thinking" and your "feeling" areas**. Your brain can better integrate what's going on in your "emotional" brain areas and your "intellectual" brain areas.

Here's an example of relationship argument, with emotions and intellect banging into one another instead of being integrated - as you read it, see how this plays out in each individual, as well as in the couple:

*A wife comes home, somewhat exasperated after being out with a good friend, but one who can be self-involved at times. "She did it again!" she exclaims to her husband. "Jane managed to make the whole evening about her!" Afraid of losing a friend, and also tired, she begins to cry, bemoaning how hard it is to make friends, how alone she feels, and wondering what's wrong with her that she can't figure it out.*

*Her husband sees her distress and wants to scramble to respond, to help her "fix" the problem. So, he tells her, "First, you need to stop beating up on yourself. Jane's the problem, not you. I don't know why you stay friends with her, anyway; you're always upset after seeing her. Just go out and make some new friends who treat you better. Weren't you going to join that book club to meet new friends?"*

*She proceeds to lash out at her husband for being insensitive and overly intellectual, and accuses him of not caring. He's hurt and angry that his attempt to help her solve the problem has gotten her angry at him - again - and he responds by yelling at her "Of course I care!" and that she's too emotional and can't think straight enough to remember that.*

Here, the wife came in the door with a **flailing amygdala**, almost pure, raw emotion. The husband responded with a **rational frontal cortex**, trying to help while also trying to avoid or staunch the emotions. The result is that they've completely **missed each other**.

Imagine if they could **integrate the two**: Being tuned in to the emotions, but not overwhelmed by them; searching for a calmer, rational response, without losing sight of the emotions. **That integration and connection is what mindfulness meditation helps cultivate and grow, quite literally, in the brain - as well as between couples.**

"Minding the gap" - shorthand for practicing mindfulness in order to **bridge that gap between thinking and feeling** - helps protect you from the dangers of having either your emotions or your intellect become a runaway horse, dragging your partner and your relationship in the dirt behind you.



**"Getting" Your Partner Better.** As you practice mindfulness meditation, you're practicing over and over again, the act of **noticing when your mind has wandered off**. (By the way, if you think your brain is too busy for you to meditate - think again (pun intended)).

Being more aware of when your mind isn't "in the moment" lets you become more aware of what **is** going on in the moment. You get more attuned to what's going on inside you, **instead of being on "autopilot" or in distracted-reactive mode**. You also become more aware that even if you're feeling something in this moment, it'll feel a little different if you just sit with it a bit. Your emotions aren't bags of wet concrete sitting on your head (or in your heart); they're more like weather patterns moving through.

Getting to be more aware of your internal state allows you to be **more attuned to yourself and your experiences** - allows you to have greater understanding and empathy for yourself. (If a baby is upset and crying, the caregiver needs to "tune in" and empathize in order to effectively understand what's going on, and how best to respond - in effect, you're doing this for yourself when you practice mindfulness.)

As you increase your ability to be more attuned and more empathic with yourself, **your capacity to be attuned and empathic with your partner increases as well**.

## What Is Mindfulness?

Modern psychology and psychiatry since the 1970s have developed a number of therapeutic applications based on the concept of mindfulness (Pali *sati* or Sanskrit *smṛti* / स्मृति) in Buddhist meditation.

### Definitions

According to various prominent psychological definitions, mindfulness refers to a psychological quality that involves bringing one's complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis,

or involves

paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally,

or involves

a kind of nonelaborative, nonjudgmental, present-centered awareness in which each thought, feeling, or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is.

Bishop, Lau, and colleagues offered a two component model of mindfulness:

The first component of mindfulness involves the **self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience**, thereby allowing for increased recognition of mental events in the present moment.

The second component involves adopting **a particular orientation toward one's experiences** in the present moment, an orientation that is characterized by **curiosity, openness, and acceptance**.

In this two-component model, self-regulated attention (the first component) involves conscious awareness of one's current thoughts, feelings, and surroundings, which can result in metacognitive skills for controlling concentration. Orientation to experience (the second component) involves accepting one's mind-stream, maintaining open and curious attitudes, and thinking in alternative categories. Training in mindfulness and mindfulness-based practices, oftentimes as part of a quiet meditation session, results in the development of a "Beginner's mind," or, looking at experiences as if for the first time.

## Historical development

In 1979 Dr. Jon Kabat-Zin founded the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction program at the University of Massachusetts to treat the chronically ill, which sparked a growing interest and application of mindfulness ideas and practices in the medical world for the treatment of a variety of conditions in people both healthy and unhealthy.

Much of this was inspired by teachings from the East, and particularly from the Buddhist traditions, where mindfulness is the 7th step of the Noble Eightfold Path taught by The Buddha, who founded Buddhism almost 2,500 years ago. Although originally articulated as a part of what we know in the West as Buddhism, there is nothing inherently religious about mindfulness, and it is often taught independent of religious or cultural connotation.

Clinical research shows Buddhist mindfulness techniques can help alleviate anxiety, stress, and depression.

Teachers such as Thich Nhat Hanh have brought mindfulness to the attention of Westerners. Mindfulness and other Buddhist meditation techniques receive support in the West from figures such as the teachers Jack Kornfield, and Joseph Goldstein, the psychologist Tara Brach, and the writers Alan Clements and Sharon Salzberg, who have been widely attributed with playing a significant role in integrating the healing aspects of Buddhist meditation practices with the concept of psychological awareness and healing.

## Buddhist Techniques in Clinical Settings

For over a millennium, throughout the world, Buddhist practices have been used for non-Buddhist ends. More recently, Western clinical psychologists, theorists and researchers have incorporated Buddhist practices in widespread formalized psychotherapies. Buddhist mindfulness practices have been explicitly incorporated into a variety of psychological treatments. More tangentially, psychotherapies dealing with cognitive restructuring share core principles with ancient Buddhist antidotes to personal suffering.

### Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT)

ACT did not explicitly emerge from Buddhism, but its concepts often parallel ideas from Buddhist and mystical traditions. Mindfulness in ACT is defined to be a combination of four aspects of the psychological flexibility model, which is ACT's applied theory:

- Acceptance (openness to and engagement with present experience);
- Cognitive defusion (attending to the ongoing process of thought instead of automatically interacting with events as structured by prediction, judgment, and interpretation);
- Contact with the present moment (attention to the present external and internal world in a manner that is flexible, fluid, and voluntary);
- A transcendent sense of self or "self as context" (an interconnected sense of consciousness that maintains contact with the "I/Here/Nowness" of awareness and its interconnection with "You/There/Then").

### Adaptation Practice

The British psychiatrist Clive Sherlock, who trained in the traditional Rinzai School of Zen, developed Adaptation Practice (AP) in 1978 based on the profound mindfulness/awareness training of Zen daily-life practice and meditation. Adaptation Practice is used for long-term relief of depression, anxiety, anger, stress and other emotional problems.

### Cognitive Behavioral Therapy



Dr. Albert Ellis, considered the grandfather of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), has written:

"Many of the principles incorporated in the theory of Rational Emotive Therapy are not new; some of them, in fact, were originally stated several thousands of years ago, especially by the Greek and Roman Stoic philosophers and by some of the ancient Taoist and Buddhist thinkers."

To give but one example, Buddhism identifies anger and ill-will as basic hindrances to spiritual development. A common Buddhist antidote for anger is the use of active contemplation of loving thoughts (for instance, metta). This is similar to using a CBT technique known as "emotional training".

### **Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT)**

Marsha M. Linehan writes: "Mindfulness skills are central to DBT... They are the first skills taught and are [reviewed] ... every week.... The skills are psychological and behavioral versions of meditation practices from Eastern spiritual training. I have drawn most heavily from the practice of Zen."

Controlled clinical studies have demonstrated DBT's effectiveness for people with borderline personality disorder.

### **Focusing**

Focusing, a deep, interactive technique for personal growth that draws upon the wisdom of the body, was developed by Eugene Gendlin at the University of Chicago in the 1960s. It has frequently been referred to as a spiritual practice and compared to Buddhism and Buddhist meditation. While focusing doesn't aspire to be a religious teaching, it uses mindfulness techniques to assist the sufferer to a deeper level of knowing, an exploration of life and life's meaning, and an understanding of their lives and the larger context within which their lives unfold. Focusing is guided by an implicit philosophy that closely parallels elements of Buddhism.

### **Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)**

Jon Kabat-Zinn developed the eight-week MBSR program over a ten year period with over four thousand patients at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Describing the MBSR program, Kabat-Zinn writes:

This 'work' involves above all the regular, disciplined practice of moment-to-moment awareness or mindfulness, the complete 'owning' of each moment of your experience, good, bad, or ugly. This is the essence of full catastrophe living. Although at this time mindfulness meditation is most commonly taught and practiced within the context of Buddhism, its essence is universal.... Yet it is no accident that mindfulness comes out of Buddhism, which has as its overriding concerns the relief of suffering and the dispelling of illusions.

In terms of clinical diagnoses, MBSR has proven beneficial for people with depression and anxiety disorders; however, the program is meant to serve anyone experiencing significant stress.

### **Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)**

Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) was developed by Zindel Segal, Mark Williams and John Teasdale, based on Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness-based Stress Reduction program. The team is based in the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, University of Oxford. The MBCT program was designed specifically to help people who suffer repeated bouts of depression.

The MBCT program takes the form of 8 weekly classes, plus an all-day session held at around week 6. A set of Guided Meditations accompany the program, so that participants can practice at home once a day throughout



the course.

The MBCT book, *The Mindful Way Through Depression* is written for anyone who suffers from depression or chronic unhappiness and would like to find a way to improve their own lives through Mindfulness. It is available from all good book shops including Amazon.

### **Somatic Experiencing®**

Peter Levine's books *Waking the Tiger* and *Healing Trauma* (including audio tapes) contain exercises teaching persons to "pendulate" or move back and forth between experiences of pain or fear and safety. Somatic Experiencing® (SE®) can heal PTSD symptoms such as depression, nightmares, panic attacks, aggressive outbursts, and hyper-arousal. The primary way of doing this is by increasing the ability of sufferers to track their body sensations, which helps reduce the symptoms of trauma and stops the body from reacting as if the trauma were still occurring. Says Harry Kessler, mindfulness is actually the key to the successful implementation of Somatic Experiencing.

## **How Can I Cultivate Greater Mindfulness?**

There are many different kinds of meditation, from many different traditions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

As with meditation, unless you have seriously studied Buddhism, you are likely to have some questions and misconceptions about it. I have read many books over the years, and used many practices from different Buddhist traditions. However, I am not an expert on Buddhism, so I will limit comments here to these two:

**Buddhist ideas** and practices related to mindfulness have been developed and refined within an extremely rigorous research tradition. This tradition is focused on transforming one's attention into a suitable tool for **directly investigating the nature of mind and experience, with the goal of reducing and eliminating ignorance, confusion, and suffering – and increasing freedom and happiness.**



The focus on **training and refining one's own mind** is very different from the research traditions of **Western science**, which have developed powerful methods for studying **other people's minds and brains**. But the two approaches are absolutely compatible. Even more important, they are complementary – as increasing numbers of psychology and neuroscience researchers are discovering.

Buddhist ideas and practices related to mindfulness are **completely compatible with faith in or practice of any other religion, or atheism or agnosticism**. They are tools for taming, understanding, and increasing the freedom of your own mind; therefore, they can increase your ability to live according to the principles of any religion, or any system of values and morals.

## **Lovingkindness - An Essential Companion of Mindfulness**

The non-judgmental quality of mindfulness is very important. However, the **absence of judgment** toward unwanted experiences is necessary but not sufficient. We also need to cultivate the **presence of kindness** – toward ourselves, toward others, and toward the inevitable unwanted, painful and otherwise distressing experiences in life.

There are two especially important forms of basic human kindness, which Buddhists refer to as "lovingkindness" and "compassion." These are ways of relating to ourselves and others that promote acceptance, calmness, happiness, and freedom. While lovingkindness and compassion

are (moral and ethical) ideals for relating to others, they are also mental qualities essential for achieving greater peace, freedom, and happiness.

"Lovingkindness" is an English translation of the word "**metta**" from Pali, a language used to record the early teachings of Buddhism. The word has two root meanings, "**gentle**" and "**friend**," and the foundation of lovingkindness is being a gentle friend to yourself, no matter what kind of experience you happen to be having in the moment.

Lovingkindness refers to an **unconditional and open love**. This is not the kind of "love" that has requirements and conditions attached to it ("I love you because...", "I'll love you if..."), or that only accepts pleasant experiences and thus distorts one's perceptions based on wishes and illusions. Lovingkindness is not bound up with personal agendas or desire.

Lovingkindness **does not want things – including unwanted experiences – to be anything other than they actually are, in the present moment**. Instead, the present moment and current experience are embraced. Paradoxically, this makes even unwanted and painful situations more "workable," by providing **other options for responding than automatic and habitual reactions** which cause more problems and suffering.

**Accepting** rather than rejecting what is happening in the current moment does **not mean** believing or "accepting" that one can do nothing to prevent the situation from continuing or getting worse in the next moment. Nor does it mean blindly accepting and simply allowing one's own automatic and habitual responses – no matter how compelling or "justified" such responses may initially feel.



Just the opposite: accepting the current moment enables you **not to allow** the external situation, or your internal reactions, to rob your capacity for freedom in the next moment.

**It's not about "letting down your guard," but rather guarding your mind** – guarding it from being carried away with automatic, habitual, and unhelpful responses based on reactions to past hurts; guarding it from being consumed by fear and self-defense rather than being supported by clear perception, effective reasoning and wise choices about how to **respond skillfully** and without worsening the situation.

With lovingkindness, **taking care of oneself and responding compassionately to others are not in conflict**, but go hand in hand. Most of us sometimes "defend" ourselves when it's not necessary, or respond with more extreme self-protective measures than are required or helpful in a particular situation. And most if not all of us think we were "just trying to defend myself" when attacking another person. Lovingkindness practices can reduce and eventually help to eliminate these habitual ways of thinking and behaving.

## Lovingkindness Practice

Sometimes it can be hard to feel kindness (especially if you've experienced a lot of hurt and betrayal in your life). Try starting with something simple:

The starting point is to **imagine a person or animal that spontaneously and irresistibly evokes feelings of kindness**. Picture them in a peaceful quiet setting, like a nice field of grass.

This could be a person – for example, a baby, a niece or nephew, another little child, or a much-loved grandparent who is still living or has passed away. If you choose a person, it's important that it not be someone for whom you have any mixed feelings, otherwise they could get in the way.

Or it could be a cute little puppy, kitten, or other baby animal, or a group of them.

**Notice the feeling you get when you imagine this person or animal.** Notice whether your body changes, any internal sensations of kindness.

If you can feel this kind and warmth feeling, give yourself a minute to continue imagining the person or animal and feeling that warmth, and the attitude of gentle friendliness that goes with it.

If you don't feel the kindness and warmth initially, give yourself some time, and experiment with images, until you find one that helps you have some feelings of safety and comfort. Then give yourself a minute to continue having those feelings, and imagine wishing them for a lovable person or animal.

**Notice the kindness behind your wish, and give yourself some time to experience that kindness and feelings of warmth that go with it.**

**Then bring to mind an image of yourself as a young child. Move the kindness from the other person or animal to yourself.** If the young image of yourself is too young for words, simply hold your hands over your heart.

If you wish to use words, gently add the phrase *"may I love myself just as I am"* while holding your heart. Other lovingkindness phrases are, *"may I be happy, may I be peaceful, may I be safe, may I be free of suffering,"* but feel free to make up your own, whatever works for you.

Jeff Cannon writes, "In practicing metta (lovingkindness) we do **not have to make** certain feelings happen. In fact, during practice we see that we feel differently at different times. Any momentary emotional tone is far less relevant than the considerable **power of intention** we harness as we say these phrases. As we repeat, *'May I be happy; may all beings be happy,'* we are **planting seeds** by forming this powerful intention in the mind. The seed will bear fruit in its own time..."

"Doing metta, we plant the seeds of love, knowing that nature will take its course and in time those seeds **will bear fruit**. Some seeds will come to fruition quickly, some slowly, but our work is simply to plant the seeds. Every time we form the intention in the mind for our own happiness or for the happiness of others, we are doing our work; we are channeling the powerful energies of our own minds. Beyond that, we can trust the laws of nature to continually support the flowering of our love."

## The Practice of Mindfulness

Psychologist and mindfulness meditation teacher Jon Kabat-Zinn has simply defined mindfulness in this way:

**"paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally."**

This sounds simple, but mindfulness is a skill that takes practice to cultivate and maintain. Why? Let's consider the different parts of the definition...

### "Paying attention"

How much of the time are you really paying attention to what's happening in your life – as opposed to thinking about something else, remembering things, imagining possible futures, and acting out habitual patterns or, more accurately, reacting to people and situations based on old habits of perceiving, thinking, feeling, and behaving?

Paying conscious attention can be especially hard when a current interaction reminds us of past hurts or betrayals – and before even realizing it, we can automatically and defensively responded as if those old experiences were happening again.

### "On purpose"

It takes a conscious decision, and effort by one's mind and brain, to pay attention to what's happening in the present. In fact, such choices and efforts are required over and over again, since we are continually pulled back into habitual ways of processing information and responding to things.

Too often we're on "auto pilot," not even trying to pay attention to what's actually happening in the unique situations and interactions that make up our lives.

### "In the present moment"

Most of us, most of the time, are absorbed in memories of the past or visions and plans for the future.

For most people, it is rare to be aware, without some amount of distraction or multi-tasking, of what is actually occurring in the present moment.

Particularly when strong emotions arise, people often respond not to situations as they are, but to reactive perceptions and thoughts based on painful experiences in the past. In the most extreme instances, one may not be "here" in the present, but "back there," reliving the past through reactions to present situations.

### "Non-judgmentally"

This is one of the hardest things to achieve. We so often react intensely to our experiences, particularly unwanted experiences, and to our initial reactions to them.

*"This is horrible!" "What an idiot!" "How could I do that?!" "I can't take this any more!" "Here I go again."* You know the ways you can instantaneously and automatically judge situations, other people, and your own thoughts, feelings and behaviors – often in a chain reaction of increasing judgment and distress.

*"I need..." "I want..." "I deserve..."* Positive judgments and the cravings they evoke can also be a problem, particularly when they are automatic and intense. We can lose our focus, forget what's important, get caught in cycles of addiction, and selfishly take advantage of others.

In contrast, the non-judgmental quality of mindfulness brings great freedom – to see things more clearly, to evaluate situations with some distance from our habitual emotional reactions and impulses, to observe emotions and impulses as they arise without either trying to escape them or letting them carry us away.



## The Five Keys To Mindful Loving

David Richo (*How To Be An Adult In Relationships - The Five Keys To Mindful Loving*) writes that love is the possibility of possibilities. Its farthest reach is beyond us, no matter how long we love or how much.

Love will always remain a mute mystery to whose ache we can only surrender with a yes. There is something cheerful and plucky in us that lets us risk a journey into the labyrinth of love, no matter how hazardous. However, **all the love in the world will not bring us happiness or make a relationship work.**

That **requires skill, and this skill is attainable.** Practice can make us nimble enough to dance together with grace, however clumsy we may be at the beginning.

We feel loved when we receive **Attention, Acceptance, Appreciation, and Affection**, and when we are **Allowed** the freedom to live in accord with our own deepest needs and desires. In childhood, we need these "five A's" to develop self-esteem and a healthy ego. They are the building blocks of identity, of a coherent personality. What we need as children is also precisely what we need for happiness as an adult in our relationships. The five A's are simultaneously the fulfillment of our earliest needs, the requirements of adult intimacy and of universal compassion.

Is there a way to increase our capacity to give and receive these essential elements of love? Yes, we can do it through mindfulness, an **alert witnessing of reality without judgment, attachment, fear, expectation, defensiveness, bias, or control**. Through compassionate mindfulness we become adept at granting the essential components of love to everyone - even to ourselves.

## Slowing Down Thoughts in Mindfulness

The more one practices just **noticing thoughts and bringing attention back to the breath** (or other current sensations in the body), the more "gaps" occur between chains of thoughts and the individual thoughts within them. Your thoughts become less compelling and demanding of your attention and energy.



The continual **inner "chatter" and images of the past and future don't go away**, since that's the nature of the human mind. But they do "settle down." And this slowing and settling down of mental processes, particularly when you don't need them to be moving quickly, brings relaxation, and brings the freedom to choose what to think about rather than being dragged along. This effect is often experienced after only 10 or 15 minutes of mindful attention to one's breathing.

One way to convey this is **imagining your mind as an excited puppy** - running after every bone it sees, even sticks and rocks, anything that gets its attention, scurrying from one to the next as fast as it can. Like the immature puppy, your mind needs training to slow down and serve your needs rather than being carried away by emotions and distractions.

If you can cultivate the ability to slow down your mind by practicing mindfulness, you can bring this ability to times of pain and suffering. Instead of jumping quickly from an experience in which you feel sad (or helpless or disrespected or whatever) to feelings of anger, shame and guilt - and before you know it finding yourself in a blizzard of negative thoughts, feelings and memories - the outcome can be different.

**You might notice the chaining of one brief negative mental state to another, and the links and gaps between them, and be able to choose another direction**, like calming yourself, reminding yourself to focus on what brought up the negative feelings in the first place, or bringing your attention back to the current situation and your goals for it.

**Being aware of your breath forces you into the present moment** - the key to all inner transformation. **Whenever you are conscious of your breath, you are absolutely present**. You may also notice that you cannot think *and* be aware of your breath. Conscious breathing stops your mind.

## Paying Attention And Letting Go

A relationship can force us to revisit every feeling and memory in the legend of ourselves. In our **psychological work** of addressing, processing, and resolving emotional blocks and problems, we **pay attention to thoughts and feelings**, explore their implications, and hold them until they change or reveal a path that leads deeper into ourselves.

In our **spiritual practice** of mindfulness, something very different occurs. we **let feelings and thoughts arise and let them go**. We do not process them, nor do we hold them. Each of these approaches has its proper time, and we need both of them.

Paying attention and letting go are the twin tools of mindful relationships. Therapy without mindfulness takes us only to the point of resolving our predicament. Mindfulness with therapy helps us to dissolve the ego that got us into it in the first place.

**From concepts and methods to reliable skills.** Like everything else that requires practice, the development of mindfulness first involves learning some concepts, and some methods to practice.

The methods are practiced over and over again, first only in very structured situations, eventually in all kinds of situations. In this way, what were initially only concepts become realities – real skills that one can reliably and flexibly apply in all kinds of situations. The concepts are pointers, guides, and "training wheels" that become less and less necessary as one's skills are strengthened.

## Patience in Mindfulness

Patience means accepting a slow pace of change; **bearing unwanted, difficult or painful experiences with calmness.**

As soon as we attempt to follow the sensations of breathing without distraction, we discover just how out of control our minds are. Even after years of mindfulness meditation practice, most people will not have unbroken control over where their attention is directed for more than a few moments at a time. But experiencing this fact over and over again, and repeatedly observing – with acceptance, non-reactivity, and curiosity – that one's mind has wandered or been carried away in a chain reaction of conditioned thoughts and feelings, is a wonderful way to cultivate patience.

And these experiences can translate to daily life, enabling us to **become more patient with ourselves and others as we all continue to fall into habitual responses that increase our suffering.**

Another meaning of "patience" refers to calmly bearing unwanted, difficult or painful experiences. In the Buddhist tradition, the term "**equanimity**" is often used. Mindfulness practice provides repeated opportunities to observe the arising of unwanted, difficult and painful experiences and one's habitual reactions to them.

Again, as the observation of such experiences increasingly includes acceptance, non-reactivity and curiosity, one's patience grows and can be spread to other experiences in one's daily life.

## Observing Thoughts and Feelings as Events, Not Facts

We often respond to our thoughts and feelings as if they were facts or truths that "demand" or "justify" particular responses. However, it is also possible to **understand and experience our thoughts and feelings as events that arise under certain conditions, and then pass away**. This is true of all sensations, perceptions, feelings, memories, fantasies about the future, and other mental experiences.

Understanding and experiencing our thoughts and feelings in this way opens up some "space" around them. **Instead of the thoughts and feelings having you, and carrying you away, you can experience yourself as having certain thoughts and feelings under certain conditions, and as having options about how you respond to them.** One of the most liberating options is to simply observe thoughts and feelings as arising under certain conditions, and as capable of passing away without you having to do anything else but observe them.

People who cultivate mindfulness are pleasantly surprised when they discover just how many thoughts and feelings that previously seemed so compelling, and seemed to absolutely require and justify habitual reactions, are much better understood and experienced as **sources of information about mental habits which have actually been increasing their suffering.**

For example, consider an emotionally charged thought that often arises in the mind of someone who was deeply hurt as a child: "There must be something about me, something wrong with me that made him

(or her) pick me to abuse." It is possible, with practice, for this person to recognize this thought as common and normal, and one that is likely to arise at times of self-doubt and depression.

Then, instead of getting caught up with the thought, one can **attend to the emotional needs** – perhaps for support, help, and encouragement – that created fertile soil for that thought to arise in the first place. Embracing such thoughts and beating up on oneself, or trying to push them away or argue with them in your mind, will tend to increase their grip on you.

Viewing such thoughts as an event, and as sources of information about your current state of mind and body, and what will be helpful to you in that state, opens up all kinds of healthy possibilities and options.

## Attending to Process Versus Attending to Content

Most of the time, most of us are **lost in the contents of what is running through our minds**. Though fears, cravings and various emotions drive our thought processes, we tend to **get lost in the specifics and details** of our thoughts and memories. Mindfulness meditation teaches us how to observe the processes of our minds and how they work.

For example, when we are experiencing a pain in our body, or a painful memory, we tend to focus on the content of the pain experience and relate to it as something solid and unchanging. When that happens, the pain or memory is experienced the same way we always experience it, with the same predictable results.

However, if we **truly attend to the process** by which sensations of pain or aspects of remembering arise and change from moment to moment, the experience tends to lose its grip over our awareness and become more tolerable and workable.

When we can **attend to a painful memory as a process that arises and plays out in our mind**, we notice how the images, thoughts, feelings and bodily experiences change from moment to moment, and that experience of remembering involves new learning and opportunities for healing.

## The Five A's: The Keys That Open Us

Need fulfillment and good parenting mean the five A's:

- **Attention**
- **Acceptance**
- **Appreciation**
- **Affection**
- **Allowing**

As children, we noticed how our parents did and did not fit the bill. We then look for someone who could fit the bill better or more consistently.

This process is like looking at a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* but noticing it is blurred and the color is not right. We know how it should look, and we keep our eye out for for a sharper print with a brighter color.

As adults we look for the partner who will be just right.

At first that means a replica of our parents with some of the better - or missing - features added. So we find the man who controls but is also loyal.

As we mature we no longer seek the negative traits, only the positive ones. So we no longer look for controlling men but for loyal men who let us be ourselves.

In full maturity we do not demand perfection at all, we only **notice reality. We access our resources within.**

A partner who cooperates in that is a gift but no longer a necessity. The five A's begin as needs to be fulfilled by our parents, then become needs to be fulfilled by our partners, and someday become gifts we give to others and to the world.



## The Middle Way Means Moderation

The Middle Way or Middle Path (Pali: majjhimā paṭipadā; Sanskrit: madhyamā-pratipad; ) is the descriptive term that Siddhartha Gautama used to describe the character of the path he discovered that led to liberation. It was coined in the very first teaching that he delivered after his enlightenment. In this the Buddha describes the middle way as a path of **moderation between the extremes** of sensual indulgence and self-mortification. This is the path of **wisdom**.

The middle path does not mean a mid point in a straight line joining two extremes represented by points. The Middle Way is a dynamic teaching as shown by the traditional story that the Buddha realized the meaning of the Middle Way when he sat by a river and heard a lute player in a passing boat and understood that the lute string must be tuned **neither too tight nor too loose** to produce a harmonious sound.

“Moderate” is a key word for giving and receiving the five A’s. A nonstop flow of them would be quite annoying, even to an infant. Our fantasy mindset makes us long for just what we would soon flee. Hence, what seems like an unsatisfactory compromise is actually an adult’s best deal.

The hospitable sanctuary and the generous waters of an oasis can be enjoyed for one day or many, but not forever. Sooner or later they will cloy, and our hearts will long for what comes next. The desert and what lies beyond it, whatever their mystery and hardship, beckon, and they cannot be evaded or renounced. Journeying is built into us no matter how beautiful our home.

## Relationship Key: Attention

“My father turned to me as if he had been waiting all his life to hear my question,” says a character in one of J.D. Salinger’s novels. *Were you listened to like that? Does your partner matter to you that way?* Attentiveness means noticing and hearing words, feelings, and experience.

We cannot attune if we assume certain feelings are right and others are wrong. **We need neutrality toward all feelings, moods, and inner states and the fearless openness of mindfulness.** Only with such pure attention can we see beyond his bravado to his terror, beyond his stolidity to his turmoil. This is how attention becomes **compassion**.

Attuned attention is the first A of mindfulness. Attention means bringing something or someone into focus so it is no longer blurred by the projections of your own ego; this requires **interest and curiosity** about the mysterious and surprising truth that is you. A parent or a partner who has gotten to know you in a superficial way may only be meeting up with her beliefs about you. Parents and partners who give us attention love to see the evolving mandala of you.



The desire for attention is not a desire for an audience but for a **listener**. Attention means **focusing** on you with **respect**, not with contempt or ridicule. Your feelings have such high value to those who love you that they are on the lookout for them. They even look for the feelings you are afraid to know and gently inquire whether you want to show them.

When others give you attention, they also confront you directly when they are displeased, harboring no secret anger or grudges. But they always do this with respect and a sincere desire to keep the lines of communication open. Attention, like the other four A's, is given in a **trusting atmosphere of holding**.

## Bare Attention in Mindfulness

In mindfulness bare attention means **attending to sensory experiences** that arise with an object of attention, without distraction or cognitive elaboration.

For example, when attending to your breathing with bare attention, you just notice the sensations of breathing and nothing else. When this is occurring, many subtleties and nuances of breathing, and patterns in these, reveal themselves to you. Also, you are just noticing these sensations as they arise and pass away in the present moment – not thinking about them, not labeling them with language, not associating them with other sensations or patterns you may have experienced before.

With practice, bare attention can be **applied to bodily and emotional responses**, including those triggered by very painful or traumatic experiences. For example, a person might attend to the sensations in her chest, throat, and face that arise when someone raises their voice in anger and reminds her of a hurtful parent.

**Focusing on emotions as bodily events while "dropping the story"** of verbal thoughts and remembered images and sounds, she can attend with bare attention to what is actually happening in her body now, in the present moment. This opens new opportunities for learning about her emotional and bodily responses, accepting these as conditioned reactions that arise and pass away, and responding to them in new ways.

## Mindfulness and Curiosity

Curiosity is an attitude of interest in learning about the nature of one's experience and mind.

Through mindfulness, this quality of mind can be brought to a much greater range of experience than we ordinarily do. When it comes to things we want, we tend to just go after them based on prior conditioning. When it comes to experiences that we don't want, including painful memories and emotions, we tend to just push them away and avoid them.

We tend to reserve curiosity for things and experiences that are new and at least somewhat positive.

But with mindfulness, we can **bring curiosity to the full range of our experience**, and discover much that is new and enlightening. We can discover that experiences which would ordinarily just evoke automatic conditioned reactions are opportunities to apply curiosity and learn a great deal about how our mind works, including how it can increase our suffering by imposing old conditioning on new situations.

For example, it is possible to bring curiosity to the way a reminder of past betrayal by someone we loved triggers memories, which in turn trigger automatic responses like sadness, shame, or anger, and/or craving for alcohol, sex, or some other "fix." When such reactions are experienced with mindful curiosity, they can become opportunities for learning, for being gentle and kind toward oneself in the midst of such responses, and for discovering new ways of responding.

## Relationship Key: Acceptance

In Buddhism there is a phrase, **"the glance of mercy,"** which refers to looking at other human beings with acceptance and understanding. Acceptance is **unconditional** since it



means validating someone's choices and lifestyle **even when we do not agree** with them. It is the opposite of moralizing.

Acceptance is a style of pure mindfulness. We see all that is and feel all that we feel about what is, but then we focus only on **what is as it is**.

Acceptance is **approval**, a word with a bad name in some psychologies. Yet approval from those we respect is a necessary component of self-esteem. It becomes a problem only when we give up our true self to find it.

In attention, you are heard and noticed. In acceptance, you are **embraced as worthy**, not compared to others, but trusted, empowered, understood, and fully approved of as you are in your uniqueness. You sense a **kindly support** for your path, no matter how unusual; of your feelings, no matter how disturbing; of your deficiencies, no matter how irritating. These are not only tolerated but **encouraged and cherished**. You are perfectly you, and that is enough.



Heinz Kohut wrote: "The more secure a person is regarding his own acceptability, the more certain his sense of who he is, and the more safely internalized his system of values, the more self confidently and effectively will he be able to offer his love."

## Acceptance in Mindfulness

Accepting the reality of one's current experience is particularly important when it comes to potentially **intense negative emotional responses**. Once such emotional reactions have arisen in one's current experience, neither mindlessly being carried away by them nor attempting to suppress them will be particularly helpful.

The practice of acceptance in mindfulness allows one to see emotional reactions more clearly for what they are – unwanted and intense, but passing experiences – and choose how to respond to them, perhaps with acceptance and nothing more.

Accepting rather than rejecting what is happening in the current moment does **not** mean believing or **"accepting" that one can do nothing** to prevent the situation from continuing or getting worse in the next moment.

Nor does it mean accepting and allowing one's own automatic and habitual reactions – no matter how compelling or "justified" such responses may initially feel. Just the opposite: accepting the current moment enables you **not to allow the external situation, or your internal reactions, to rob your capacity for freedom** in the next moment.

## Mindfulness and Labeling

Labeling refers to **mentally applying a word or brief phrase** to a particular content of experience.

The idea is to **help oneself simply notice** something arising in your experience, without judgment, so that you can get back to observing the flow of experiences arising and passing away. This practice can also eliminate the control of particularly "sticky" thoughts and feelings over one's attention.

For example, one might use the labels *"sadness"* or *"anger"* when these emotions arise; or *"planning,"* *"worrying,"* or *"remembering"* when those common cognitive processes arise. More specific phrases can be used for other experiences, for example, *"remembering something painful"* or *"fearing how others see me."*

Some repetitive patterns of thought may be compared to "tapes" playing in the mind, and labeled with phrases like, "there's the 'it's my fault' tape," "there's the 'I don't deserve this' tape," or "there's the 'he's such a jerk' tape."

## Mindfulness is Non-reactivity

Non-reactivity is responding to experiences, including emotions and impulses, **without getting carried away by them or trying to suppress them.**

All organisms, including human beings, are conditioned to **react automatically** to most of the experiences they have. We grasp at what we want and like, and push away what we don't want or like. Before we even know it, such **conditioned responses** to stimuli and emotions carry us away.

Mindfulness involves the skill of non-reactively **observing** split-second conditioned reactions, which provides the option of **not acting out the entire chain reaction** that would normally follow. This non-reactivity **opens up space** for new observations, reflections, learning, and freedom. It also saves one from a lot of regrets later.



## Relationship Key: Appreciation

Appreciation gives depth to acceptance: "I admire you; I delight in you; I prize you; I respect you; I acknowledge you and all your potential. I appreciate you as unique." To acquire the riches of personal worth and self-confidence, we need just such **encouragement**. A person's evolution proceeds from their accomplishments and subsequent **validations**. But it also proceeds from one person's faith in another's value.

Appreciation is also **gratitude** for any kindness or gift we might bestow. Because intimacy is about giving and receiving, appreciation fosters closeness. The ratio of appreciation to complaint in couples that stay together is five to one, according to John M. Gottman.

Indeed, behind every complaint is a wish for one of the five A's. When we blow up or feel dejected, we may be experiencing the lack of one or more of the five A's. "**I see you are feeling unappreciated,**" may be an accurate and compassionate response to a partner who is angrily complaining.

Is the following description of mindful appreciation familiar to you? Someone **acknowledged and cherished your unconditional worth** without envy or possessiveness, expressing those feelings verbally and nonverbally. The appreciation came as an understanding of what you were capable of or what you felt, **validating the mystery** of you. It also came as a word of **praise**, a pat on the shoulder when you excelled, a loving look when you were just yourself, thanks for something you did or gave or simply were.

## Noticing and Enjoying Positive Emotions in Mindfulness

Stressful times, and too much of life in general, can involve repeatedly focusing on difficult experiences and unpleasant emotions. It's extremely important to **train the mind to notice and enhance positive emotions** too.

Mindfulness can help you notice the positive emotions that spontaneously arise in your experience. If you're going through your life feeling down much of the time, re-experiencing negative emotions resulting from past negative experiences, it can become hard even to notice positive emotions. Or positive emotions can be swamped and overwhelmed by more familiar negative ones before you even notice.

Practicing bringing your attention to whatever arises in the present moment, and noticing it without judgment, makes you much more likely to notice positive experiences and emotions and much less likely to judge or dismiss them.

Particularly when your mind is moving more slowly, and is relatively spacious, positive feelings have an opportunity to grow, last longer and lead to other positive feelings. And many positive emotions, particularly **feelings of appreciation, kindness and love, help to enhance the mind's calmness.**

For many people, particularly who had painful childhoods, **active and disciplined efforts** are necessary to generate and nurture positive feelings. To play a musical instrument, or be successful at a sport, we must **practice**. That's how our brains work. So of course it can be helpful to practice cultivating and maintaining positive emotions.

For starters, you might try this exercise: **Make a list of positive emotions.** Take a day to practice noticing positive emotions as they occur. When did you feel joy today? Curiosity? Ease? Pleasure? Humor? Affection?

Even in the most depressed person, positive emotions happen many times a day. Just noticing these can **challenge such assumptions** as *"I'm sad all the time,"* or *"I was anxious all day."* It is also useful to **look for neutral moments.** Were there moments today when you didn't feel difficult emotions? When you were brushing your teeth? Drinking a glass of water? Reading?

Many people have learned to **block out feelings**, or never learned how to be aware of some, which means they often don't recognize an emotion in themselves until it's become extreme. This does not mean that one lacks emotional responses to things that happen, just that one's emotions are mostly operating out of awareness and on "autopilot." This can be particularly true for people who have **numbed themselves** to their emotions with addictive relationships to alcohol, drugs, food, pornography and other "fixes."



### Relationship Key: Affection

An affectionate touch or hug from someone who really loves us can **penetrate our bodies and restore our souls.** All our fears, no matter how deep, can be erased by a single loving stroke. Love in adulthood is a re-experiencing of the love our every cell remembers from childhood.

Most of us know just what it takes for us to feel loved. What we have to learn is **how to ask** for it. A partner is not a mind-reader, so it is up to each of us to tell our

partner what our brand of love is. And if we have to teach our partner how to love us, **we also have to learn how to love him.** Knowing this makes it clear that love is not a sentimental feeling but a conscious choice to give and receive in unique and often challenging ways.

Psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut wrote: "The child's bodily display is responded to with a gleam in his mother's eye." Affection throughout life includes **being loved as we look** - with our body shape, our style of grooming, our choice of clothes, whether or not they conform to the current fashion. Intimate contact is with a living presence not a set of genitals or words that promise love.

Physical affection includes the **spectrum of touch, from holding to sex.** Affection is also a quality of feeling. It includes **kindliness, considerateness, thoughtfulness, and playfulness.** Affection flows from a **genuine liking** of someone.

Affection includes nearness, or **loving presence.** We receive real affection when someone is committed to being beside us often. This does not mean constant cohabitation but reliable availability. It is the opposite of abandoning and distancing.

Mindfulness is the path to loving presence, including compassion. Compassion is love's response to pain. This means being willing to acknowledge pain and caring about how we feel within it. It is a willingness to be in it with yourself and with another.

## Compassion in Mindfulness

"Compassion" is an English translation of the Pali term "karuna." As Sharon Salzberg explains, karuna means "experiencing a trembling or quivering of the heart in response to a being's pain."

The compassionate response of the heart involves **engaging with pain – gently, with acceptance and strength – not being overwhelmed by it**. Many of us have learned first hand that being overwhelmed by pain can lead to depression and despair, even anger and aggression directed against our self or others. Such conditioned responses, while understandable, especially if one was hurt as a child and has not yet learned to respond compassionately to one's own suffering, must not be confused with compassion.

## Compassion Practices

Here are some compassion practices to try out and experiment with. Remember, don't try to force things, and give the practices and yourself some time. It's not helpful to judge yourself or give up hope – but if judgments or hopeless thoughts and feelings arise, don't judge yourself for having them or lose hope!

Simply repeat, with a genuine intention, a few **phrases of kindness and compassion toward yourself**. Some commonly used phrases are, *"May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I be free of suffering."*

Another option is, *"May I have a calm, gentle, and loving mind."* Or you can make up phrases of your own, experimenting until you find ones that work for you.

After a few minutes of repeating these phrases, and continually reconnecting with the intention behind saying them, you may find that feelings of kindness and love, a state of calm, and/or other nice things are happening in your mind and body. Doing this practice for 10 to 20 minutes once a day can be very powerful, and can create a resource to draw on during particularly stressful times.

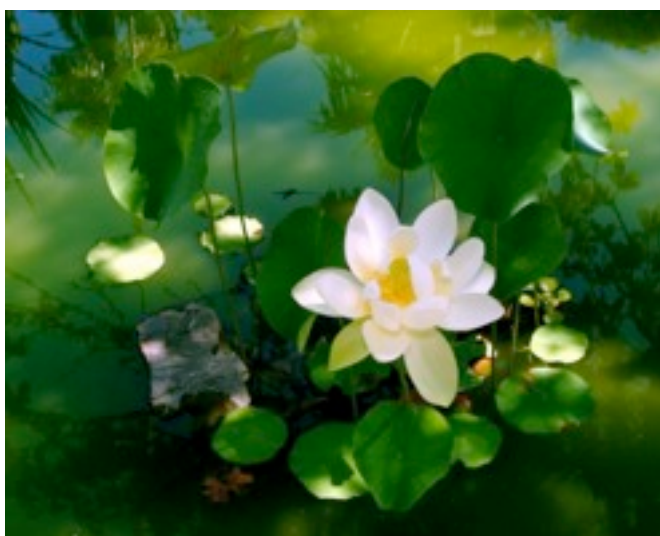
**Offer compassion to your painful feelings.** A common phrase to use is, *"I care about my pain."* Again, you may be surprised to discover the power of simply repeating a phrase like this with a sincere intention.

**When difficult emotions arise, try holding them like you would a crying child.** Hold the fear like you would hold a fearful child. Hold the anger as you would hold an angry child. Ultimately, it's about learning to meet each one of your thoughts and mind-body states with this unconditional love, like welcoming all your children home.

**Offer compassion to the hurt part of yourself.** Bring to mind an image of yourself at a time of hurt and pain, and offer compassion to the child or adult you were then. You might use phrases like, *"may you find peace, may you be free of suffering."*

## Tonglen Practice

Try a practice known as "tonglen," which involves **"sending and receiving" coordinated with breathing**. Picture a person at a time of pain and hurt. On the in-breath, breathe in that person's pain and suffering. On the out-breath send that person support and caring.



Finally, try **directing compassion to the quality of your own mind, or the part of you, that can be mean or cruel to yourself or others.** Recall a time that you were hurtful to yourself or someone else (start with a relatively mild case). Notice how you were responding based on past conditioning, feeling like you were defending and protecting yourself, or justly punishing yourself or the other person.



Offer compassion to that tendency to respond to pain or being wronged with anger and aggression. Offer compassion to yourself for how – like all human beings, especially those who have been deeply hurt – you can create more suffering because of your confusion and your limited ability to respond to pain compassionately.

These fundamental forms of human kindness, lovingkindness and compassion, are indeed essential companions to mindfulness. They will calm your mind and body. They will bring you peace, ease, and happiness. Like mindfulness, lovingkindness and compassion require practice and

discipline, as well as patience with yourself. But the practice and patience are well worth it.

Gradually but inevitably, you will find yourself having kind, loving and compassionate responses to a greater and greater range of experiences – ultimately even the most difficult and painful ones.

## Relationship Key: Allowing

Even as children we know that to be held and cuddled but not allowed **to make choices freely and without blame** is inadequate and untrustworthy. Trying to live in accord with the needs and wishes of others is like being a cygnet and trying to become a duck just because you find yourself in a duck pond. The **false self** is that of a conformist who is a royal heir in hiding.

Psychologically healthy adults come from a background of **flexibility**, not severity. Early needs, (like all needs) are best fulfilled in an atmosphere of **joy and forgiveness**. In such a garden, crocuses ceaselessly pop up, yielding blooms of personal stability and self-nurturant powers, just the qualities that make intimacy possible in later life.

Without healthy allowing in childhood, we may choose a **controlling partner** and tell ourselves, “I have to do it his way or else.” We do not notice others’ attempts to manipulate us. We can be fooled by a relationship that looks good but is full of **demands and expectations**.

We do not allow others to control us once we are healthy, but we do understand and feel their pain when we realize that **control is a compulsion**. Most controlling people cannot help themselves; they are not in control of the controlling. They take control and dominate because of the chilling fear that they cannot handle letting the chips fall where they may.

The poet W.B. Yeats wrote of the special person who “loves the pilgrim soul in you.” Mirroring freedom means **encouraging the liveliness and passion in others** rather than squelching it for your own good and safety. The “pilgrim soul” also implies going. True allowing means **letting someone go**. To allow is to **stand aside when someone needs space** from us or even leaves us. This is an “A” in courage.

## How Could Mindfulness Help Me?

There are several ways that mindfulness can help reduce the intensity, duration, and frequency of unhelpful habitual response patterns.

### **Loosening the grip of habitual responses that cause (additional) suffering**

Learning to bring one's attention back to the present moment, including the ever-present process of breathing, over and over again, involves learning to catch oneself entering into habitual patterns that prevent clear awareness of the present moment. With continued practice and increasing development of mindfulness, one becomes increasingly able to notice those habitual reactions that prevent one from responding consciously and constructively.

For example, instead of realizing 5-10 minutes later that you've been lost in bad memories or fantasies of revenge, you can catch yourself after only 30-60 seconds. Better yet, you can learn to catch yourself in the process of getting lost in a memory or fantasy. In time, you can increasingly observe these habitual responses as they arise, and choose to respond in other, more skillful ways.

For example, instead of getting really angry at yourself for feeling helpless and sad when someone makes a harsh comment, or feeling guilty when you start thinking of harsh replies, you might notice, without judgment, that you have the habit of responding to harsh comments with (a) feelings of helplessness and sadness, followed by (b) angry thoughts of come-backs, followed by (c) anger and guilt about those initial responses.

Once you notice such common human responses in yourself without judgment, you can choose to bring your attention back to what's actually happening in the conversation now, to consider whether and how you might redirect or end the conversation without creating more negative feelings.

### **Reducing the intensity of unhelpful habitual responses**

The less time a habitual response has to develop, the less likely it will become intense. Of course, some habitual responses happen extremely quickly and almost instantaneously reach high levels of emotional

intensity and behavioral impulsiveness. But most of the time, it takes a few seconds for a habitual response to reach a high level of intensity, and "nipping it in the bud" prevents a full flowering of destructive emotion.



If within the first few seconds you can recognize, with some reflective awareness, that the habitual response is occurring, then you have an opportunity to prevent further escalation. After all, these are chain reactions in the mind and body, and if you can break an early link, you can stop the process.

The less judgment one has toward a habitual response, the less likely it will become intense. This doesn't mean that one simply accepts one's habitual responses. Rather, it means that you neither accept nor condemn. Instead, you simply observe them for what they are: habitual and, however quirky or

bizarre, quite human responses to unwanted experiences. If you can observe these responses without judgment, no matter how immature or unhelpful they may be, you can avoid adding more emotional fuel to the fire.

### **Increasing positive emotions**

One recent study found that novice meditators stimulated their limbic systems - the brain's emotional network - during the practice of compassion meditation, an ancient Tibetan Buddhist practice. That's no great surprise, given that compassion meditation aims to produce the emotional state of "lovingkindness."

These changes included **ramped-up activation of a brain region thought to be responsible for generating positive emotions**, called the left-sided anterior region. The researchers found this change in novice meditators who'd enrolled in a course in mindfulness meditation - a technique that borrows heavily from Buddhism - that lasted just eight weeks.



## Mindfulness and Structural Brain Changes

Numerous research studies have demonstrated that the following changes in the structures of the brain can be seen when people practice mindfulness meditation:

**Activation of brain regions associated with self-monitoring and cognitive control.**

**Decreased grey-matter density in the amygdala**, which is known to play an important role in **anxiety and stress**.

**Stronger activation levels in the temporal parietal junctures**, a part of the brain tied to **empathy**.

**Change in a self-awareness-associated structure** called the **insula**.

**Thickening of the cerebral cortex** in areas associated with **attention and emotional integration**.

**A higher amount of grey-matter in the hippocampus**, an area that is important with regard to traits like **introspection, self-awareness, and compassion** and for memory led learning.

**Ramped-up activation** of a brain region thought to be responsible for generating **positive emotions**, called the **left-sided anterior region**. Heather Urry and colleagues correlated left prefrontal asymmetry, as evidenced in both the mindfulness and loving kindness forms of meditation, with eudaimonic well-being, defined by Siegel as enveloping "the psychological qualities of autonomy, mastery of the environment, positive relationships, personal growth, self-acceptance, and meaning and purpose in life".

This left anterior activity has also been correlated with resilience, the capacity to rebound after particularly negative experiences (Davidson, et al), which would make mindfulness meditation a viable modality in the treatment of bipolar affective disorder, sufferers of which can experience great difficulty in rebounding after difficult depressive periods.

**Decreased activity** in an area of the brain called the **default mode network**, a region that is usually at work when the **mind wanders**. A wandering mind is also an unhappy one. This is because when our minds are wandering, most of us are worrying rather than living in the moment. The psychological hallmark of many forms of mental illness - anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and schizophrenia - is a preoccupation with one's own thoughts, specifically the negative ones. These disorders are linked with overactivity or faulty neurological wiring in the default mode network, the brain region that is less active in meditators.

## Unconditional Presence Versus the Five Mindsets of Ego

There are five major mental habits that interrupt authentic, unconditional presence and may cause others to feel unloved. These mindsets are universal and virtually involuntary mental reactions that are like bullies who enter unbidden and intrude upon our pure experience of the present and of the people we meet in the present. The spiritual practice of mindfulness is a rescue from the siege of these invaders.

Here are the five fundamental mindsets of ego that interrupt our ability to be here now and that distort reality:

- **Fear** of or worry about the situation or of this person: "I perceive a threat in you or am afraid you may not love me so I am on the defensive."
- **Desire** that this moment or person will meet our demands or expectations, grant us our needed emotional supplies, or fulfill our wishes: "I am trying to get something from this or you."

- **Judgment** can take the form of admiration, criticism, humor, moralism, positive or negative bias, censure, labeling, praise, or blame: "I am caught up in my own opinion about you or this."
- **Control** happens when we force our own view or plan on someone else: "I am attached to a particular outcome and am caught in the need to fix, persuade, advise, or change you."
- **Illusion** overrides reality and may occur as denial, projection, fantasy, hope, idealization, deprecation, or wish: "I have a mental picture of or belief about you or this and it obscures what you are really like."

Any of these five interpretations by **the editorial board of the ego** may be accurate but they still interfere with our experience of the present. Each is a minimization that imposes our personal dramas upon reality and **makes fair witnessing impossible**.

**The gate to enlightenment opens when mindfulness closes down the show, even for a moment. The gate to compassion and empathy opens when we see human experience, no matter how unsavory or disfigured, without the mindsets of judgment and fear. At both gates we pronounce the "open sesame," the unconditional "yes" to reality.**

The five mindsets are not to be construed as bad. Each of these pirates if full of energy that can be recruited for the invincible ship of mindfulness. **The task is not to disown the mindsets but to redirect their energies so they can serve us and others.**

Thus, **fear** can be mined for **wise caution**. **Desire** makes it possible to **reach out**. **Judgment** includes **intelligent assessment**. **Control** is necessary in most **daily activities**. **Fantasy** is the springboard to the **imagination and creativity**. When we find the useful kernel of these mindsets, the trespassers can become our bosom buddies.

We cannot stop our minds from engaging in these distractions, but mindfulness reduces their impact and helps us catch ourselves in the act. **Mindfulness is the watchdog or rather the seeing-eye dog of the psyche, watching for the raiders of reality and walking us safely past them.**

When we come to others with the five A's - **Attention, Acceptance, Appreciation, Affection, and Allowing**, we are profoundly present and closeness happens. When we come at others with the five mindsets, we are caught in a personal agenda and distance happens. The commitment to intimacy is a journey from the ego's favorite resorts to the paradise of mindful love.



The unconditional presence of someone who loves us harkens back to the past and repairs our childhood sense of being unwanted. At the same time, no human being can or is expected to be fully and unconditionally present all the time. **An individual can only offer moments and perhaps hours of presence without mindsets.** Only pieces of presence can come from beings like us, "kings of shreds and patches."

If any one of us were whole and totally satisfactory, we would not be motivated to go on the journey that makes our life so wonderful. Adults have always known this. Religion has responded with a comforting assurance that there is an

eternally and unconditionally loving presence, not in pieces but whole. The mature religious view finds that reality deep within our own souls.

Finally, keep in mind that it is always acceptable not to know what something is or means. This **ability to endure mystery** is what Keats called "negative capability," or "being in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts without irritably reaching after fact and reason." It is in mindfulness that we act in just that way: **enduring our unknowing and yet sitting serenely**. From that position a unique meaning is allowed to ripen over time, in its own time. This is an alternative to the ego's frenzy to impose makeshift meaning from its lexicon of standard mindsets.

**Mindsets are minimizations, since every reality and person is actually an infinite field of potential, a vast open space beyond limit.** Without mind-conjured limits, all is perfect and exuberantly provocative just as it is. Joy is the energy that happens in freedom from mindsets. We no longer feel obliged to figure out what people are up to. We are finally free to be fully mindful.

## Increasing the Spaciousness of Present Awareness

Think of a time you were really stressed recently. Not only were your thoughts moving really fast, and probably somewhat out of control, but your current awareness was "clogged" with negative thoughts, feelings, memories, images, etc. For most people, most of the time, not just when they're stressed, their current awareness is virtually packed with thoughts, feelings, images, etc. – and not only about what they're currently doing.

By practicing focusing your attention on the present, and gently **coming back to the present when you've wandered into the past and future again, you can expand your present awareness**. Not only does the present moment become more vivid and fresh, but your awareness becomes more spacious, less clogged with extra and unnecessary thoughts, feelings and images.

You can probably remember what this experience is like, by remembering a time when you were calm, relaxed, and not under pressure to do anything - maybe lying on the beach several days into a vacation, or on a long and relaxing hike in nature.

The more spacious your present awareness, the less likely that negative thoughts, feelings, and memories, when they inevitably arise, will dominate your experience and become overwhelming.

**With a more spacious awareness, you can have unwanted and painful experiences but have enough "mental space" to remember and experience positive and healthy thoughts, memories, and images of your future. You can tap into larger perspectives on your life and who you are, what you have accomplished, and what you are capable of achieving.**

## Sky Mind Exercise

Try a "sky mind" exercise with a difficult response or emotion (but not yet one that's really difficult). As the negative experience arises, **close your eyes and imagine your mind getting bigger and bigger** to hold it. Imagine your mind as wide as the sky.

**When you feel your mind as wide as the sky, where is the difficulty then?** What happens to it? How does it feel in this "big mind?" This is an experience and ability that, with practice, you can bring to increasingly difficult and painful experiences.

Functionally, making the mind bigger is like this: If you put a teaspoon of salt into a glass of water it will taste very salty and be hard to drink. But if you



put that salt into a lake, you won't even be able to taste it. Like the "sky mind" practice, mindfulness is about expanding the container for difficult emotions, like pouring salty water from a glass into a lake.

When you have that more spacious mind, watch how thoughts come and go and come and go. Thoughts and feelings are always arising and passing away. It is their nature to do this. In some ways, simply seeing this can help us relax and not worry about them. Spaciousness of mind allows this to happen.

## Losing FACE to Gain Love

David Richo writes that we can meet our adult challenges by addressing, processing, and resolving our issues. We can meet our spiritual challenges through the practice of mindfulness and lovingkindness.

We make both psychological and spiritual advances best when we are ready to lose face, the **F.A.C.E of the inflated ego**:

**Fear**  
**Attachment**  
**Control**  
**Entitlement**

This happens through a combination of our efforts and a gift of grace. When we let go of F.A.C.E., we gain the knack of loving our partner and the world.

This happens through letting yourself have your experience, says John Welwood (*Perfect Love, Imperfect Relationships*). Since we can never gain assurance that we are lovable through trying to prove our worth or hiding our flaws, what we need instead is a way to discover our core nature as intrinsically beautiful, already, just as it is.

The journey from self-hatred to self-love involves learning to meet, accept, and open to the being that you are. this begins with **letting yourself have your experience**. Genuine self-love is not possible as long as you are resisting, avoiding, judging, or trying to manipulate and control your experience.

Whenever you judge what you're experiencing - *"I shouldn't be having this experience. It's not good enough. I should be having some better experience than this one"* - you're not letting yourself be as you are.

This aggravates the core wound of *"I'm not acceptable as I am."*

And it sets you at odds with yourself, creating inner division and turmoil. the way to free yourself from shame and self-blame is through developing a more friendly relationship with your experience, not matter what experience you're having.

## Formal Practice Versus Weaving Mindfulness Into Daily Life

Daily meditation practice and intensive meditation practices are formal practices. That is, they involve very specific and structured routines, and take place in time and space separated from one's regular life, whether that's a half-hour of sitting meditation in the morning after waking or a week-long meditation retreat every summer.

The point of such practices, however, is **not to become a better meditator** in such artificial situations. The point is to **transform your mind and heart** in ways that bring greater kindness, freedom and happiness into all aspects of your life. Thus formal practices alone are not enough. It is essential to weave mindfulness, lovingkindness and compassion into your daily life.

One way of expressing this is the distinction between "on the cushion" (formal meditation practice) and "off the cushion" (in the midst of one's daily life and relationships and all their challenges).

Therefore, there are many practices designed to weave mindfulness and kindness into one's daily life. Some examples include:

**Attending whole-heartedly to an activity** that you perform every day but don't actually pay attention to, like brushing your teeth or washing the dishes. Just doing such an activity every day for a week without getting lost in thoughts about the past and future gives one a taste of what mindfulness is like, and how it can be present during basic activities of one's daily life.

**Using simple but common everyday experiences as reminders to be mindful.** For example, instead of automatically answering a phone, you can use the first ring as an opportunity to check in with your current level of stress and mindfulness, and the next ring as an opportunity to take a breath and become more mindful before answering.

Reading the examples above, you might think, *"Come on, that's silly. How can little things like that make any difference?"* But if it's all about **reconditioning your mind and brain**, then every time you tap into the inner resource of mindfulness, you've conditioned your mind and brain in that moment, which shapes the conditions of the next moment, and increases the probability that mindfulness will arise when you need it in the future...

**Using driving as an opportunity to cultivate mindfulness** in daily life. For many people, driving typically involves not just driving but listening to the radio, talking on the phone, or getting lost in memories and plans. Especially if you are in a rush, driving can create stress and even result in anger and aggression toward other drivers. But driving can be an opportunity to whole-heartedly pay attention to the experience of driving, including how you react to the behavior of other drivers.



When used as an opportunity to practice mindfulness and kindness (e.g., thinking toward other drivers, even aggressive ones, *"may you be happy, may you be free of stress"*), driving can be an opportunity to neutralize bad habits, cultivate helpful skills, and arrive at your destination more mindful, calm, and kind than when you got into your car.

For some people, reading the above descriptions may result in the arising of conditioned thoughts like, *"What touchy-feely garbage!"* or *"Come on, what am I supposed to do, just become a wimp who is nice and sends love to everyone?!"*

If this is true for you, consider this: If you want to be strong and powerful, then you might start by mastering your own attention, which is easily carried away by just about any distracting thought or emotion. **To truly be strong and powerful, you can't have a mind that's out of control.** To be strong and powerful, you need to free yourself from enslavement to conditioning and habitual reactions shaped by experiences in the past (especially ones where you felt weak and vulnerable).

Many people have thoughts or concerns like the following:

*"OK, maybe mindfulness is great, but I'll never meditate regularly."*

*"I just don't see myself having the discipline or, considering where I live, finding the support and guidance I would need to really bring mindfulness into my daily life."*

*"I tried meditating for a while years ago, and it did calm me down and reduce my stress level somewhat. But that was about it, and pretty soon those effects wore off."*

*"Truly cultivating mindfulness would take years, and there's just no way I'll ever get that far, given everything I have to deal with in my life."*

These are very common, understandable, and legitimate concerns. I'd like to offer a few reflections and suggestions that I believe could be helpful.

It can help to see mindfulness as a **trait and potential that we all have**, and that can always be increased. In terms of an individual life with its many moments, days, weeks and years, mindfulness is **not an all-or-nothing thing**, either you have it or you don't. Thus it can help to view mindfulness as

being on a continuum, and the extent to which one is mindful as waxing and waning over time, but always capable of being cultivated further.

Cultivating mindfulness is about **cultivating healthy mental skills** (the Pali term "bhavana," which has been translated as "meditation," literally means "mental cultivation"). It's **exercise for your brain**, a way to transform your brain so it is more healthy and free. And like physical exercise, people often struggle with developing the discipline of meditating regularly, then slacking off, then not enjoying being mentally out of shape and getting back to regular practice again. This is true for both formal meditation practice and the practices of mindfulness in daily life and interactions with others.

## **Mindfulness Includes Pain, and Requires Readiness**

Physical and emotional pain are inevitable parts of life. **Our brains are designed to experience pain as a source of crucial information** (e.g., this is harming me, I need to avoid doing that again, that part of my body needs care, etc.).

**While our brains are wired to avoid pain, the function of this avoidance is not to avoid pain itself, but rather to avoid causes of pain** that are harmful to our well-being. And after harm has occurred, causes of pain are avoided because they can slow or prevent recovery from the harm that has already occurred.

A simple example of physical pain's function: When you cut your finger, the initial pain informs you of the harm, leads you to care for your finger, then to think about how this occurred so you can avoid it happening again. Later, after the initial first aid, pain lets you know that your finger is vulnerable, that it needs extra caution in how you move and use it, or ("ouch!") that you've just done something that may be slowing or preventing healing.

**Emotional pain is different from physical pain.** When someone is experiencing physical and emotional pain at the same time, different areas of the brain process the physical sensations of pain and the emotional pain, even though these may be subjectively experienced as inseparable.

Emotional pain is sometimes referred to as "emotional suffering," or just "suffering." Most of us have observed, to some extent in ourselves and others, that the experience of physical pain may or may not be associated with emotional suffering. And of course, emotional pain may arise on its own in the absence of physical pain. For example, experiences of sexual, physical or emotional abuse, and memories of abuse of various kinds, can be associated with extreme emotional pain.

**Experiences of emotional and physical pain can be altered by the nature of our attention.** We've all learned that ignoring (or attempting to ignore) pain can reduce our experience of it, and that focusing on experiences of pain can amplify them.

An important difference between emotional and physical pain makes **emotional pain more capable of being altered by attention**: emotional pain usually involves an interweaving of feelings and thoughts. The thoughts can take many forms, but typically **involve interpretation and judgment** – about the emotional pain itself, about the events the pain is associated with, about oneself, or about others involved in the experience: *"This is horrible!" "How could he have done that to me?" "I can't take this any more!" "I wish she would drop dead!" "There's no hope for me."*

In fact, such thoughts may even be the cause of emotional pain arising in the first place.

And like attention, **thoughts can increase emotional pain**. The greatest amplification of suffering comes from **focusing one's attention on the pain while thinking thoughts that escalate the pain**. Such thoughts can take many forms, including interpretations, judgments, and memories.

Many of the thoughts that escalate pain and suffering are **stories that we tell ourselves** – about the past, the present, and the imagined future. The stories can be very involved and

elaborate, and may revolve around themes of betrayal, rejection, failure, punishment or revenge that are guaranteed to generate more negative emotions and suffering.

We all know how such cycles of thinking, feeling, remembering, and imagining can spiral out of control, and sometimes lead to drastic attempts at escape (which can become causes of new physical and emotion pains).

Mindfulness can help, by allowing you to **catch these cycles of suffering early on, and to cut through the automatically unfolding chains** of associated feeling, thinking, remembering, fantasizing and story-telling.

The present-focused, non-judgmental attention of mindfulness allows one to directly observe the separateness of feelings and thoughts, to attend to feelings without running off into associated memories, and stories.



### Practice: Questions to Break the Escalating Cycle

The following techniques may help you to catch yourself in the midst of this and interrupt the cycle of escalation by creating a moment of mindful reflection:

Stop and **ask yourself**, quite directly, *"Can I know, absolutely, that these thoughts are true?"* If you can't answer "yes" with certainty, then it's probably a story you're telling yourself.

When things aren't going well and you're in danger of escalating further, try asking yourself periodically, *"Aside from the unwanted emotions I am experiencing, however unpleasant they are, am I otherwise OK right now?"* This simple reality check can show that while you may not

be feeling good, in that moment your mind is prolonging the suffering, or even creating additional misery.

### Caution - Problems During Mindfulness

However, this is where the **caution** comes in: Only a solid foundation of self-regulation skills, and disciplined practice, will enable one to attend to emotional pain with a sustained mindfulness that does not bring escalation – as opposed to having one's attention grabbed, dragged, and swept away in escalating cycles of suffering.

That is, for someone who (a) lacks skills for tolerating and regulating the intensity of painful feelings, and (b) typically copes by escaping or acting impulsively, practicing mindfulness can bring a **flood of intolerable painful feelings** into awareness. For some, it will be necessary to learn mindfulness practices in the context of a therapy relationship.

**Important: If you have any of the following problems** at times, then practicing mindfulness before you are ready will tend to make them worse or create new problems:

**Tendencies to become overwhelmed and "flooded"** by painful feelings and memories, due to underdeveloped self-regulation and coping skills. For people with histories of traumatic child abuse, this is common and normal during the "first stage" of recovery, when learning such skills and establishing safety and stability in one's life are the main tasks.

**Tendencies to "dissociate"** – that is, blank out, space out, or leave one's body – in stressful or upsetting situations. These are not uncommon experiences among those with histories of severe child abuse, and can become automatic and habitual. Originally self-protective in otherwise inescapable situations, dissociation can later cause many problems. For beginning meditators with abuse histories, dissociative states are sometimes confused with mindfulness.

Learning "grounding techniques" and other emotion-regulation skills will probably be necessary first steps toward cultivating mindfulness.

**Tendencies to get "lost in your own world"** and withdraw from relating to others, or to not even bother trying to connect with others. In this case, mindfulness practices could possibly be "co-opted" by strong habits of self-absorption and disconnection from others.

How does a mindfulness meditator learn to feel strong emotions and bodily sensations without getting overwhelmed or dissociating?

## Practice: Establish a Base or Safe Place

First, **choose an object of attention that can provide a "base" and "safe place"** to come back to when experiences threaten to become overwhelming. People often choose their **hands, feet, or the center of their belly** as a comfortable or neutral place. For others **the breath** will work, or a **comforting phrase**, or an **image or memory of a safe place or person**.

Practice gently bringing your attention back to this base whenever it becomes distracted or pulled along by something else.

In all meditation traditions, **cultivation of focused attention** precedes cultivation of the open attention associated with mindfulness. For people who can become overwhelmed by "opening" to whatever arises in their experience, including painful feelings and memories, it is even more important to practice focusing one's attention on one object and repeatedly bringing attention back to it.

The idea is not that you will never get distracted (only very advanced meditators achieve this), but that you will usually **be able to bring your attention back** soon after it has wandered (i.e., within 10-20 seconds), and sooner when it wanders into emotionally painful territory (i.e., 1-5 seconds).

Once you have achieved some skill at concentration, when a difficult emotion, sensation or memory arises during meditation, you can choose to **"touch up against it" in small increments**. Briefly touch the pain with your attention, and then back off and return to your safe object of attention until you feel the strength and presence to touch the difficult experience again.

Other ways to back off include **opening your eyes and focusing on something you can see**, or **switching to a lovingkindness or compassion practice**.

Such gradual, tolerable and deliberate re-experiencing of painful feelings and memories can modulate their intensity and foster increasing confidence and mastery. It really is possible to relate to painful experiences and memories without trying to escape or becoming overwhelmed.

## Let's Take a Closer Look at the Brain

Dr Shanida Nataraja (*The Blissful Brain: Neuroscience and Proof of the Power of Meditation*), describes the human brain as a reddish grey mass, with the consistency of firm jelly, which weighs on average the same as three bags of sugar and houses 100 billion individual brain cells called neurons. Each neuron has a cell body which houses its processor, the nucleus.

Branching from the bodies are numerous finger like dendrites which branch and re-branch, fanning out to extensive, tree like structures that intertwine with dendritic trees of other neurons. Each neuron makes up to 1000 different connections with its neighbors and different areas of the brain. This extensive connectivity allows electrical signals, and thus information to travel from one brain processing centre to another in a matter of milliseconds.

The human brain is organized in a hierarchical manner: the **oldest parts** controlling the **more primitive, instinctual behavioral reflexes**; the **newest parts** controlling the **more sophisticated cognitive, sensory and motor functions**.

The brain is made up of three main blocks: the forebrain, the midbrain and the hindbrain.

The oldest part of the human brain, the **hindbrain**, evolved more than 500 million years ago. It closely resembles the brain of a modern reptile, so is sometimes called **"the reptilian**



**brain".** It contains the **amygdala, the brain's "panic button,"** that activates the "fight-flight" response, and is responsible for automatic physiological reflexes that control breathing, heart rate and digestion, and coordinate movement and sense perception.

The **midbrain,** also called the "**mammalian brain,**" contains the neurons responsible for temperature control and the fine tuning of movement. It relays sensory information from the body's sensory organs to the forebrain. It also forms an important part of the **limbic system,** a group of brain structures associated with the expression of emotion.

The most evolved part is the **forebrain** or "**human brain,"** which is composed of cerebral hemispheres, and is what we most commonly think of as the brain, and the hypothalamus and thalamus. In the last 100,000 years, the weight of the human brain has tripled, and most of this growth has been in the cerebral hemispheres. The neurons of the forebrain control cognitive, sensory and motor function, as well as regulating reproductive functions, eating, sleeping and the display of emotion.

## The Neuroscience of Emotions

Emotions are triggered in the brain by thoughts, which are often unconscious.

When we are confronted by a **potential threat,** this can trigger fear, anger or the urge to flee (sometimes called "**amygdala hijack**"). The reaction is often disproportionate to the actual provocation.

When in the grip of these emotions, your **capacity for higher "rational brain" thinking is diminished,** and you are likely to revert to rote behaviors stored in the basal ganglia.

The practice of mindfulness helps us to **recognize and observe our thought patterns.** Practitioners develop the ability to recognize when thoughts arise, and observe them in a detached manner, without the need to become involved in them (thus not triggering an emotional or "automatic" reaction).



One of the enduring changes in the brain of those who routinely meditate, is that **the brain becomes thicker.** In other words, those who routinely meditate build synapses, synaptic networks, and layers of capillaries (the tiny blood vessels that bring metabolic supplies such as glucose or oxygen to busy regions), which an MRI shows is measurably thicker in two major regions of the brain.

One is in the **pre-frontal cortex,** located right behind the forehead. It's involved in the executive **control of attention** – of deliberately paying attention to something. This change makes sense because that's what you're doing when you meditate or engage in a contemplative activity.

The second brain area that gets bigger, is a very important part called the **insula.** The insula tracks both the **interior state of the body and the feelings of other people,** which is fundamental to **empathy.** So, people who routinely tune into their own bodies – through some kind of mindfulness practice – make their insula thicker, which helps them become more self-aware and empathic.

This is a good illustration of neuroplasticity, which is the idea that as the mind changes, the brain changes, or as Canadian psychologist Donald Hebb put it, neurons that fire together wire together."

Buddhism teaches that the mind takes the shape of whatever it rests upon; or, more exactly, **the brain takes the shape of whatever the mind rests upon.**

Because of its neuroplasticity, prolonged **meditative practice with happiness and compassion as its objects will breed evermore happiness and compassion**, and through this we may find the necessary escape from the Buddha's "three poisons." Meditative practice that trains the mind of the contemplative towards ever greater compassion and happiness, due to the brain's plasticity, therefore breeds a repetitive and positive cycle leading towards enlightenment, just as the Buddha taught 2,500 years ago.

## **Mindfulness Helps the Brain Communicate Better With Itself**

A finding from the rapidly expanding field of Contemplative Neuroscience is that regular meditation seems to optimize the way the different **parts of the brain communicate and coordinate** with each other, thus ending the disconcerting feeling that there is more than one person in our heads.

The effects of mindfulness meditation on the brain is that there is a beefing up (in activation and even in size) of the middle prefrontal cortex (mPFC). The mPFC is an area which neuroscientists believe plays an important role in **integrating our higher, "intellectual" brain areas (for example, your frontal cortex) with those down below in our more raw, "emotional" areas (like your primitive hindbrain and your limbic system).**

Having a more formidable mPFC allows your brain to bridge the gap, as it were, between your "thinking" and your "feeling" areas. Your brain can better integrate what's going on in your "emotional" brain areas and your "intellectual" brain areas.

## **Right Brain, Left Brain and Mindfulness**

According to neuroscientist, Dr Shanida Nataraja, westerners use the left hemisphere of their brain too much.

For simplicity of explanation, the **left hemisphere** is associated with **analytical, rational and logical processing**, whereas the **right hemisphere** is associated with **abstract thought, non verbal awareness, visual and spatial perception and the expression and modulation of emotions**. In the western world, most individuals navigate through their everyday life in a fashion dominated by left brain thinking. Missing out on right brain activity results in too much thinking going on: too much frantic doing, not enough time being.

Practicing mindfulness can bring about **calmness, stilling the brain chatter, and help us shift towards right brain mode.**

By engaging our right brain we **activate the parasympathetic nervous system (as opposed to the adrenaline releasing sympathetic system)**. More parasympathetic activity means **less stress** and therefore better health.

According to Neuroscientist Dr Shanida Nataraja's studies, those new to meditation practices such as mindfulness often put pressure on themselves to be successful and "get there" quickly - a left brain "are we there yet?" approach - and consequently take longer to benefit. Shinda suggests that the key is to **be kind to yourself**, acknowledging thought and letting go. This activates certain pathways in the brain which reduce left brain activity.

## **Attention Changes Brain Anatomy**

Richard Davidson of the University of Wisconsin reports, "We all know that if you engage in certain kinds of exercise on a regular basis you can strengthen certain muscle groups in predictable ways. **Strengthening neural systems** is not fundamentally different. It's basically replacing certain habits of mind with other habits."

Michael Stanclift writes that the brain anatomy we inherit from our parents determines the original landscape upon which our brain's "empire" will be built. We inherit individual tendencies, these are like the weather patterns, and natural resources of an area - largely predetermined, but can be nurtured or deteriorated by our habits. The **landscape-anatomy of our brain determines which skills we perform best**, and which habits become automatic, but there's a twist to this story.

Neuroscientists have discovered that **where we direct our attention**, not the environmental conditions alone, **determines which specific areas we develop** and redevelop. Our attention changes the anatomy; it is the land developer and construction crew all in one.

The developed landscape of our brain determines how it will function. This ability to change the landscape of our brains and ultimately augment how our minds will operate is called **neuroplasticity**. We are constantly, willingly, changing the structure of our most fascinating organ as we move our attention here and there. At any moment we can be commanding areas to be restructured and modify the direction of our "empire."

All mental exercises will have this effect, and the areas they influence depends on the skills we are using. This certainly adds a level of complexity to the whole "nature or nurture" question of how our personalities and talents are shaped.

We've also discovered that once a skill can be done without attention, our brains stop shaping those areas. Our brain figures that part of our "empire" is working just fine, puts that area on **auto-pilot**, and directs its resources elsewhere. Walking is a great example: after we've learned to walk well we can practically ignore that we're doing it, and the complex movements don't change much. We don't walk better, even though we constantly practice. We all trip and roll our ankles from time to time, but unless we have a severe injury our brains stick with what worked in the past.



## **Mindfulness and Neuroplasticity**

"So what does neuroplasticity have to do with meditation?" I'm glad you asked! It is useful to develop our concentration through meditation, focusing and refocusing our attention. Through meditation we learn to engage areas of our brains that are otherwise rarely used in our day to day life. Though each technique will have unique effects, all meditations have the common theme of gradually **quieting our minds and allowing us to feel a connection to the present moment**.

By using our attention during a mindful meditation, we are **training our brain** to become more and more connected to the current moment. This has the effect of allowing ourselves to **see what's actually happening**, without getting caught in our opinion of the situation. In the current moment we disengage from the pull of memories, fantasies and worries and this is likely why many forms of meditation can help alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Mindfulness meditation works on similar brain centers as those affected by anti-depressants. So if you are considering sitting for a meditation and wondering "What the hell am I doing this for anyways?" remember that **you're changing the structures of your brain**. Your

improvements to these areas, though laborious, will provide your "empire" with prosperity for years to come.

Mindfulness meditation differs from other forms by promoting concentration on current, physical sensations instead of letting the mind roam free. Recent studies suggest mindfulness meditation works the brain the way **a good workout regimen** works the body - minus the buckets of sweat, of course. But rather than building muscle, M.R.I. scans show this form of meditation **increases the brain's gray matter in regions closely associated with memory, learning, and emotional regulation**. Studies also suggest mindfulness meditation **reduces brain activity in areas responsible for anxiety, stress, and perceptions of pain**. If only we'd known about this back in Calculus class....

Mindfulness meditators' brains have also demonstrated an enhanced ability to suppress distractions, allowing the brain to better interpret, categorize, and respond to a variety of stimuli. After focusing on otherwise ignored actions like breathing, meditators' brains are primed to be **extra perceptive in everyday life**. Definitely a useful advantage in an over-stimulating, strobe light-friendly world.

## **Mindfulness and Brain Wave Frequency Changes**

Antoine Lutz and colleagues report that all meditators exhibit atypically **large amounts of synchronized gamma activity**. Gamma wave synchrony may play a significant role in binding the disparate information conveyed by the central nervous system into coherent perception. In other words, attentional training with compassionate embrace as its focus seems to **develop the brain's capacity for unifying sensory information into coherent patterns of perception that support both personal and interpersonal connection**.

Such a sense of connection can be vital in the treatment of disorders like severe depression and schizophrenia, both of which involve a profound interior experience of isolation. Data suggest that attentional training can induce both temporal and stable changes in neural firing patterns. Attentional training using techniques like the loving kindness meditation, which seem to systematically drive and **educate the brain toward producing more gamma wave activity**, may offer a new set of developmental tools with which to treat schizophrenia.

Austin postulates, within the same context, to link the simultaneous activation of the caudate and putamen, in addition to the long-distance **gamma synchrony between the frontal and parietal lobes**, with the formation of "habits at successively higher-level behavioral and cognitive levels". Taken together, these data could point to meditative training as a means of highly unifying sensory information to the point of **producing unitary-that is, harmonious-interpersonal perceptions and relations**.

The **temporal changes** evoked during meditative practice, such as the **high occurrence of alpha and theta wave activity**, are stably integrated into the brain's neural circuitry when practiced consistently over time. Such alpha and theta wave activity is believed to be indicative of states of **inner calm and stability**.