

Mindfulness Practice and Stress Reduction by Leslie Carter Rawls*

*Take away my trouble, take away my grief,
Take away my heartache, I go right to sleep.*

“Crazy Love,” Van Morrison

How we long for a magic potion to do what Van Morrison’s lover does for him in this song! But no trouble and a full night of restful sleep for a conscientious lawyer? “Preposterous!” we chuckle. Our legal careers are too weighty. Our responsibilities to clients, staff, and family are too significant. Financial stress...pandemic stress...so much!

And yet, we yearn for respite from the worries, pain, and pressures of our careers and our lives. We grasp at myriad promises of fleeting relief: 20-year-old Scotch, a nicely rolled joint, a new boat, a computer program, the right vacation, a better law partner, a better life partner.... But these things offer, at best, only ephemeral relief, which quickly fades. And nearly all involve running away from the present, from both stress and happiness.

Mindfulness is different. Mindfulness is the practice of being present with life—both pain and joy—instead of being carried away with thinking about the past or the future. Mindfulness does not mean we cannot learn from the past or plan for the future. The key is not being carried away. Instead, we reflect on the past or plan for the future while grounded in the present.

Leslie is a sole practitioner and certified state and federal appeals specialist, practicing in Charlotte, North Carolina. She is the former editor of The Mindfulness Bell, a journal about meditation and mindfulness practice in daily life and has taught mindfulness in retreat centers, hospitals, prisons, churches, and yoga centers.

“Mindfulness” has become a term of art meaning a combination of techniques, strategies, and practices that enhance our ability to connect body and mind in the present moment. Many studies show that mindfulness practice can reduce stress, improve focus, and increase productivity. Mindfulness can nurture our sense of stability, peace, and happiness. Mindfulness-based stress reduction programs train people to live in the present by focusing their attention on simple acts. These programs have proliferated in the years since Jon Kabat-Zinn’s first Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. Presbyterian Hospital in Charlotte has offered a mindfulness-based program for lawyers through the Mecklenburg County Bar. Duke University Medical Center has a mindfulness-based stress reduction program. Even the National Institute of Health recognizes the value of mindfulness practice within the context of mind/body healing and psychoneuro-immunology. Mindfulness seems to be everywhere—even the grocery store checkout line.

Elements of mindfulness are found in many other programs. For example, Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous encourage people to focus on the present by living one day at a time. Participants are also encouraged to be aware of situations that cause stress, fear, or suffering and may lead to ingesting intoxicants. Similarly, with mindfulness of consumption, we know that what we take in may lead to negative behavior and harm. That includes “ingesting” situations that encourage us to engage in harmful behavior. Mindfulness compels us to consider the effect of everything we consume, including television programs, books, films, magazines, and conversations.

So, what is mindfulness? It is the practice of concentrating our awareness on the present, of being fully alive and present here and now. Stress reduction is a by-product of living in the present moment rather than in the turmoil of our minds.

Without mindfulness, we are easily distracted by the incessant internal chatter of our minds, the barrage of shallow advertising, the

seduction of consumption. Mindfulness allows us to be aware of these things, but not caught by them. It allows us to touch the miracle of life instead of thirsting for things we hope will bring us happiness.

Mindfulness does not exist in the abstract. Mindfulness is always mindfulness *of something*. Traditionally, mindfulness involves being in touch with one of four elements: body, feelings, mind, and objects of mind (*i.e.*, things outside us, or thoughts and perceptions). Because these four elements are always changing, our mindfulness practice may be different from one day to the next even if our focus is the same.

In mindfulness, we need not suppress or deny negative thoughts and feelings, but neither do we need to act on them. For example, when aware that impatience is arising, I am aware of my habitual reaction to the feeling: sharp speech, tension in my shoulders and forehead, clipped brisk movements. I also know impatience is an impermanent feeling. I can watch it rise and fall. I do not need to judge whether the feeling is justified or feel guilty for experiencing it. Not judging simply means not condemning myself for my feeling. Still, not judging our unpleasant thoughts or feelings does not give us permission to cause suffering to ourselves or others. When we recognize an unpleasant feeling, we can acknowledge it. We may be aware that we do not wish to feel this way and through deep looking, we may see what led to the feeling. (Hint: It's almost never someone else's fault.) When I am impatient, I know that I am impatient, and I know that patience will return. In mindfulness, I may respond to my impatience by practices that calm the feeling without suppressing or condemning it. I am able to recognize that the impatience will pass and my stability will return.

There are no drugs that will make you immune to stress or to pain or that will by themselves magically solve your life's problems or promote healing. It will take conscious efforts on your part to move in the direction of healing and inner peace. This means learning to work with the very stress and pain that is causing you to suffer.

—Jon Kabat-Zinn

In daily life, we often focus on the past and the future rather than the present. Drinking a cup of coffee in the morning, our thoughts are on the motion due by 5:00; we are barely conscious of the coffee. Wolfing down a sandwich at lunch, we re-live our direct examination that morning; the sandwich is gone without our ever being fully aware we are eating. Driving, we realize that our thoughts were on a project and we passed the turn. We miss the present because we are reliving the past or dreaming about the future. In truth, the only way to take care of the past and the future is to take care of the present, to really be here. Mindfulness encourages us to be aware of each moment, instead of letting life go by while we make other plans.

The practice of mindfulness does not mean ignoring the lessons of the past or failing to plan for the future. Living deeply in the present includes thinking about the past and the future. To ignore the past is foolish; to not plan for the future is reckless. In mindfulness, however, one is not preoccupied by or daydreaming about the past and the future. Living in awareness, the mindfulness practitioner knows she is thinking about the past or planning for the future without becoming absorbed in the thoughts. It sounds simple, but how often are we swept away from the present when thinking of the past and the future? In such times, we miss the present. We miss life by grasping for the shadow of other times instead of the substance of the present, the only time we can live.

Mindfulness is not grasped with the intellect but practiced with the entire being. The practice of mindfulness involves discipline and commitment. The theory is simple; the practice profound.

*Life is not a particular place or a destination.
Life is a path. . . . Our appointment with life is here
and now. We should not miss this appointment.*

Thich Nhat Hanh

Mindfulness is engaged meditation. Meditation is the act of focusing and concentrating, not of closing oneself off, trying to alter one's consciousness, or trying to reach some divine state. While sitting meditation nourishes the ability to focus and concentrate, mindfulness also involves focus and concentration in action. The act of mindful walking, for example, can be quite profound. (See Walking Mindfulness in the Mindfulness Exercises at the end of this paper.) Often, as we walk, we are thinking of where we're going and what we're going to do rather than focusing on walking. Focused on walking itself, we can be truly present as we walk. We can enjoy each step of our body and be in touch with what is around us. As a result, we will also be truly present, focused, and aware when we reach our destination.

Breath is the tool most used to practice mindfulness. Our breath is always with us. You can't leave your breath at home or in your other suit. It's perfect! Use your breath as a tool to focus awareness. Do not alter your breathing. Simply become aware of the natural flow of your in-breath and your out-breath. You may like to support the awareness through words, such as "Breathing in; breathing out." A few mindful breaths like this can relax us and bring us into the present moment.

A basic meditation practice is to be completely aware of each in-breath and each out-breath, counting 1-in, 1-out, 2-in, 2-out. Try to count to three full breaths, or maybe ten! Each time the mind wanders from the count, begin again with one. Although best practiced when you can be quiet and uninterrupted, this exercise can be used anytime you have a few moments to be still — waiting for your next client, waiting for your

case to be called in court. To focus for a full ten count is a greater challenge than one might expect. Not reaching ten does not mean failing, it simply means getting another chance to focus. And in a full practice of mindfulness, one continually has the chance to begin again, for the practice of mindfulness in each moment takes a lifetime.

Stephen Levine, renowned for his work with death and dying, said most people on their deathbeds remember not major life events, but precious single moments. Life is made of moments. We cannot make an appointment with life. To live in mindfulness is to live in this moment—the only moment available to us.

Mindfulness is a practice to use throughout the day. There is not one “right” way to be mindful. One day, our mindfulness practice may be walking or jogging. One day, it may be a long period of sitting meditation. One day, it may be listening with an open heart. One day, it may be recognizing that we are completely drained and need a nap, or just need to get up from the computer.

Mindfulness practice can also vary depending on many personal factors. For example, those of us who have experienced trauma may need to practice in a way that does not trigger the trauma. Those of us with great worries may find it helpful to sit in nature or go for a walk while aware of our surroundings. Mindfulness is not one-size-fits-all or even the same size every day for one person.

The following pages include some exercises that may be helpful as well as a book list. Most of the books includes mindfulness exercises. Some address trauma and mindfulness, some racial awareness and mindfulness, and some, simply, mindfulness practice. I hope they may be useful to some people.

But the exercises and books are only offerings to support practice. There are many, many books on mindfulness practice. Yet mindfulness is more than intellectual knowledge. It is a living and profound practice with the capacity to transform our lives. Enjoy!

MINDFULNESS EXERCISES

These exercises involve everyday acts. Focusing on them helps us focus in everything else we do. We use the breath to bring awareness to the present moment. Do not alter your breathing. Simply be aware of each in-breath and each out-breath. Breathe naturally. Being aware of your breath brings your mind and body together in the present moment.

Walking Mindfulness

This practice can be done anytime, anywhere, at any speed. If you can walk slowly, you will simply enjoy it more. If you are rushing to court, be aware you are rushing. As Zen master Lin Chi said, “The miracle is not to walk on water or in thin air, but to walk on Earth.”

Walk with complete awareness of each step. Pay attention to your breath and see how many steps you make for each in-breath or out breath. Watching your breath helps you focus on the act of walking. Pay attention to the contact of your foot with the ground. Feel your weight shift from your back foot to your front. Just walk. If you would like words to support your walking practice, you can use a favorite prayer or verse, matching the prayer’s cadence to your breath and steps. One of my favorite verses for walking meditation is: “Yes” with one step and “Thanks” with the next step.

Telephone Mindfulness

Phone calls often interrupt us. We answer so quickly we are still involved in the last task and not focused on the call even as we speak. With telephone mindfulness uses the ring as an invitation to return to our breath and focus our attention, before we pick up the receiver.

If you can allow the phone to ring while you take three full breaths, great! You will pick up the phone focused and present. If three breaths are not possible, even a single conscious breath before answering can be useful. You will be calmer and more present for the caller.

Before calling someone, pause and take three conscious breaths. You will be more focused during the call.

Stoplight Mindfulness

Are you gripping the wheel, figuring out how late you'll be, glancing at the cross light, wondering if you should have taken the other lane? Forget it. You have stopped. Be grateful to the stoplight for a brief pause. You have no choice but to sit still and breathe.

Let go of the steering wheel. Allow your gaze to relax. Pay attention to your in-breath and your out-breath. If you get three or four full breaths sitting at the light, you will feel relaxed and refreshed. If you don't quite get three breaths, you will look forward to the next stoplight for another chance. Here is a verse to help focus and relax at stoplights. (It's useful other times too.) You can use the longer version with a line for each in- or out-breath or the shorter form with just a word for each.

(Long version)

Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.
Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.
Breathing in, I calm my body and mind.
Breathing out, I smile.
Breathing in, I dwell in the Present Moment.
Breathing out, I know it is a Wonderful Moment.

(Short version)

In, Out.
Calm, Smile.
Present Moment, Wonderful Moment.

The smile is simply a half-smile to relax your face. The verses can be used anytime you want to bring your attention into the present.

Eating Mindfulness

When possible, begin your meal with three conscious breaths to return your attention to the present. Contemplate your food before you begin to eat. Looking at the food in mindfulness, you are aware that many things come together to bring you this food: rain, sun, nutrients from the earth, the labors of planting, tending, harvesting, and preparing the meal. Chew slowly and with gratitude.

Hugging Mindfulness

Be aware of the preciousness of life. Know you are hugging your friend, your child, your loved one. Do not pat or speak. Just hug.

Breathing in, I know my [friend, child, lover, spouse] is alive
and warm in my arms.

Breathing out, I am so happy to hold her.

You will find the quality of your hug changes in mindfulness. The person you hug will know you are really there, really hugging. What better gift could we give than our true presence?

A FEW READINGS ON MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness Practice in Difficult Times

Flowers in the Dark: Reclaiming Your Power to Heal from Trauma in Mindfulness, Sister Dang Nghiem, M.D.

We Were Made for These Times: Ten Lessons for Moving Through Change, Loss, and Disruption, Kaira Jewel Lingo.

Racial Awareness and Mindfulness

Mindful of Race: Transforming Racism from the Inside Out, Ruth King.

America's Racial Karma, Larry Ward.

Simple Mindfulness in Daily Life

Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness, Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Wherever You Go, There You are: Mindfulness Meditation in Everyday Life, Jon Kabat-Zinn.

Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life, Thich Nhat Hanh.

Being Peace, Thich Nhat Hanh.

Touching Peace: Practicing the Art of Mindful Living, Thich Nhat Hanh.

The Miracle of Mindfulness: A Manual on Meditation, Thich Nhat Hanh.

A Year to Live: How to Live this Year as If It Were Your Last, Stephen Levine.