

IF YOU COULD BE WHO YOU REALLY WANTED TO
BE, WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO FEEL IT ALL?

HOW TO FEEL

A GUIDE TO THE
MINDFUL LIFE



BY

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FEEL BETTER OR FEEL BETTER?

I think it's safe to say that most everyone wants to feel *better*, don't they? That would be a pretty easy thing to sell. The wellness industry is a behemoth nowadays. Even the term "wellness" has become synonymous with feeling good. There are so many things you can do to feel better, from exercising, to getting massaged, to taking a shot of wheat grass before pushing back into downward dog.

And yes, even meditating. All of these things are wonderful, and I would agree that you might even feel *better* after doing them. But is feeling *better* the true measure of wellness?

As a psychotherapist of sixteen years, I can tell you that most of the folks who walk through my doors are looking for a way to feel *better*. They see their current situations, thoughts, and feelings as problematic and are looking for a way to minimize their pain and increase their happiness.

We are all under the cultural influence of "happiness" as the primary measure of wellness. Many are looking for ways to achieve that cultural ideal, and find that their attempts fall short. The reason for this is simple. Happiness cannot be obtained directly, but only as a byproduct of a well-lived life. So what does it really mean to live well?

I'm not really all that interested in helping you feel *better*. I mean, don't get me wrong. I don't want you to feel bad, but my goal is not to help you feel *better*, per se. My goal is to help you **FEEL** better. There are many ways to feel *better* without having to *feel*.

Prozac is one example. Eating an entire box of Cheez It's® while binge watching Netflix is another. Apparently, smoking meth feels amazing! Our society has concluded that it is

better to cover up your feelings than it is to actually feel them. It's much easier to sell you a distraction.

Being fully alive requires us to be present for all that life offers; the pain and the joy. You can fall deeply and devastatingly in love and spend years recovering from the loss of that love. You might succeed financially beyond your wildest dreams and, at the whim of the market, lose everything you've built. You can experience moments of wonder and elation at times and at other times your soul can be consumed in darkness with no perceivable escape.

There is just as much living in a moment of sorrow as there is in a moment of joy. If we're constantly seeking ways to maximize feeling good and minimize feeling bad, we're essentially in denial about the fullness of our existence. Life has a way of balancing it all out, regardless of your attempts to manipulate it.

Not to mention that anything worth living for usually comes at a cost. Ultimately, success requires a lot more failure and rejection than it does wins. So if feeling good is the goal, you might not be willing to endure the costs associated with a life well-lived.

We need a different aim in life. We need a way to move toward a life well-lived that doesn't require us to minimize, or eliminate, or deny half of our lived experience. We need a way to approach our lives that incorporates the entire spectrum of living without needing to preoccupy ourselves with changing what is.

By learning mindfulness, you will learn how to be in the present moment with a sense of willingness and acceptance rather than resistance and struggle. You'll learn how to accept change as it comes and be able to respond to life rather than running from it. You will learn how to accept others as they are, rather than expecting them to change. Are you willing to accept life on its terms?

Are you willing to *feel* better?



Chapter One

Finding the Present Moment

People don't realize that now is all there ever is; there is no past or future except as memory or anticipation in your mind. -Eckhart Tolle

Mindfulness is the intentional, non-judgmental, attentiveness to the present moment as it unfolds moment by moment with a sense of openness and curiosity.

There are literally dozens of definitions, but they all include these basic elements. Each of these elements are supported by the others. So when learning mindfulness, it's important to acknowledge that the whole is much, much greater than the sum of its parts.

It's like the blind men describing an elephant. Each one would describe the part they touch, and they are all different descriptions of the same thing. The trunk is different than the ear, and the ear is different than the leg, and the leg is different than the tail, and so forth. Each of these descriptions are accurate yet incomplete.

To begin, we are going to focus on the **present moment**. But in order to really understand why the present moment is so important, you have to also see how it is supported by all of the other elements (non-judgment, openness, curiosity, and intentionality).

Mindfulness is a *relationship* to what is experienced in the present moment. It's a way of being in any given moment without judging or evaluating present circumstances (non-judgment). It's a way of not just tolerating what is there, but willingly allowing and leaning into it with acceptance and invitation (openness and curiosity). And it is always something you choose (intentional).

This intentionality part often gets left out of the definition, maybe because it seems obvious. But here's why I think it's important to emphasize. Mindfulness doesn't happen by default. We are usually on autopilot. Forty-seven percent of the time we are "lost in thought." This is our default state and it's totally normal. Our minds don't automatically lock into the here and now. We have to do that on purpose, *manually*.

The reason I mention this now is because so many people love the sound of mindfulness and want to be more mindful in their lives, but they expect that it's suppose to happen naturally. And it doesn't. So they get discouraged and go back to their old mind/less habits.

Creating New Habits

Our minds follow the path of least resistance. We are creatures of habit. So doing anything that is new requires purposeful effort. And if you're willing to make this effort, regularly, mindfulness is really quite simple. The hardest part is making the choice to do it.

“MINDFULNESS ISN'T DIFFICULT, WE JUST NEED TO REMEMBER TO DO IT.” — SHARON SALZBERG

You can only be mindful in the present moment. It's the only time you can ever make a choice. The past is gone. We can never go back. We can never do anything to change it. The future is imaginary. When we think about the future, we are only fantasizing that there even is a future at all. The future is only anticipation in our minds, not an actual time until it gets here, at which time it becomes (you guessed it) the present.

So if you are ever going to take action to be mindful, now is the only time you can do it anyway. That's the good news. You're already here!

Exercise:

OK, enough philosophizing for now. Let's get right into it. Mindfulness makes for great books and lectures, but it makes for even better experiences. So let's have an experience right now. (You'll need to read this exercise through first and then go back and do it on your own.)

Posture

1. Find a comfortable seated position either cross-legged on the floor supported by a firm cushion or in a chair.
2. Sit upright and place your hands on your lap.
3. If you're seated in a chair, place both feet flat on the floor.
4. Rock side to side to center yourself on your sits bones.
5. Pull your shoulders back, letting your arms fall naturally by your sides and open up your chest.
6. If it feels comfortable, close your eyes or you can choose to lower your gaze and place it on a fixed spot on the floor about four feet in front of you.

Observe

Notice your body as it expands and contracts with each breath. Don't worry about controlling your breath or breathing in any particularly way. Just notice the movement of your body as your breath naturally moves in and out of it.

Eventually, your mind will begin to generate thoughts. This is normal. This is just what minds do so there is no need to stop or eliminate any of your thoughts. When thoughts arise, notice that the thought is there and available, but instead of grabbing ahold of it or following it to see where it leads, simply let it be there and gently bring your attention back to your breath. Do this for a minute or two and when you're ready, open your eyes.

You just meditated! Nice. Now I'd like you to take some time and answer the following questions in a notebook or journal:

1. What thoughts came up for you when you were trying to focus on your breath? List as many of them as you can remember.
2. Were they about what you were doing in the moment, like a running commentary? Were you wondering if you were doing it correctly? Or was it about something else entirely. Maybe something that happened in the past or what you imagine might happen in the future?
3. What was your stance toward these thoughts? Adversarial? Accepting? Were they objects to contend with, or were you comfortable having them there?
4. What was their effect? Did they cause you frustration or pain? If so, how would you describe how you were engaged with this thinking? How did you hold these thoughts?
5. What was it like to let the thoughts be? If you could leave those thoughts where they were and successfully turn your attention back to your breath, what was it like to allow them to be there unattended to?

The breath is your anchor to the present moment. What was that experience like, to just watch the breath move in and out of your body? Peaceful? Boring? Frustrating? What was it like to have those feelings? Do you assign any of these impressions as "good" or "bad?" If so, that is judgment.

But it is bad to be frustrated or bored, isn't it?

Just because we have an experience that we don't like doesn't make it "bad." Good and bad are evaluations. Mindfulness is attending openly to all experiences without judgement. The "open" part of the definition means that you can allow those so called "negative" experiences to be exactly as they are in the present moment without needing them to be any different.

The same would be true of so-called "positive" experiences. How many times have you wished a joyful moment to be more permanent? And then the more you focus on its impermanence, the sadder (and less joyful) you become.

Equanimity

All experience is transient. Nothing ever stays the same. So when you can accept what is present, you aren't signing up for a lifetime of this. You're accepting it for now, knowing it will change regardless of how you evaluate it, or whether you like it or not. This is the nature of all the universe.

The only thing that never changes is that everything is always changing. The ability to flow from moment to moment with all the changes that continue to occur is called "equanimity."

Equanimity is a characteristic of a mindful life. It reminds me of a rubber ducky floating in the ocean. Even though the waves may push it around, that little yellow duck always stays upright and continues to wear that big grin. It is always bobbing up on the surface no matter what the water is doing below it. Even if it does get pushed under by, say, a heavy wave, it will soon find its way back to the surface.



In this metaphor, the surface of the water is our present moment. The buoyancy is our ability to find it. And the smile is our attitude toward being out there in the first place!

So in one sense you might surmise that the present moment is always changing. But if you look closer, it's not the present moment itself, but the content of that moment that changes. You can think of the present moment as the context or the space in which things happen. The space can include the physical world like a dog catching a frisbee or it can be that which occurs privately, or in your mind, like a worry or a memory.

The present moment is the only time that exists. The past is gone. The future is imaginary. When the future does happen, it will be the present. Life can only happen in the present. So where are you most of the time? Are you mostly in the past? Mostly in the future? What would it be like to experience the present moment without anticipation of the future or preoccupation with the past?



Chapter Two

COMING TO YOUR SENSES

Realize that this very body, with its aches and its pleasures . . . is exactly what we need to be fully human, fully awake, fully alive. -Pema Chodron

Your body is your anchor to the present moment. You can *only* experience your body in the present moment and that's why the body is such a helpful tool. When you use your five senses (sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch) you are making direct contact with the world around you in the present.

This does not require *thinking* about what you're experiencing. You do not need to label, judge, or comment on your experience in order to experience it directly through your five senses.

Exercise:

For example, take a full minute (you can set a timer on your phone) just to listen to what you can hear through your ears. Before you start, imagine that you can hear a clock, or the refrigerator. You know that these sounds are emanating from these objects. Your mind is going to be a good helper and tell you, "That's a clock. That's the fridge." Just notice that you can experience sound without needing the help of labels and categories.

Remember how you treated your thoughts when you were meditating on your breath? This time it is the sensation of sound that is the target of your attention. So you'll treat your thoughts in the same manner. Just let them be. You don't need the information anyway, because it's not a test to see if you can identify where the sound is coming from.

The exercise is to simply attend to sound. Simply experience the sound waves as they enter your consciousness through your ears. Notice the variation in pitch and volume. Notice where sounds begin and end, and how they overlap. Notice how you may hear a certain sound more prominently in one ear than in the other. Go ahead and do this now. I'll wait . . .

. . . (60 seconds later)

What was that like? Did you find yourself thinking about what you were hearing or labeling sounds? That's o.k. if you did. Our minds can't help it. But were you able to let those labels be there without having to pick them up?

Could you just be with the sound and leave the thoughts about the sounds there as a background experience? Maybe like the way you treat sounds when you're trying to focus on anything else like having a conversation or writing an email. Funny how you can reverse that!

Your Body Is Always Changing

The ability to even notice your breath is body awareness because you have to be able to feel the breath moving in and out of your body in order to experience it. You can track the sensations of your breath as air from outside your body enters your body through your nose. Then that air *becomes* your body as oxygen is extracted and sent to vital organs through your blood stream. So every time you take in a breath your body is no longer the same. Your body is always changing, constantly.

It's easy to identify with our bodies. When you think of yourself, do you not imagine your reflection in the mirror? If we see a photo of ourselves, we say, "Yep, that's me."

Is it?

I mean, of course this is just how we talk. I'm not suggesting that it's wrong. But just think for a moment about how you've changed over the years. You've had a body since before you can even remember. You were a tiny baby once. Then you grew and s-t-r-e-t-c-h-e-d and got taller and the proportion of your body parts have changed over time.

And now you have *this* body. It sure is different now isn't it? You may have even had parts removed, like in a surgery, or every time you clip your finger nails or get a haircut. The cells of your body are replaced on average, every seven years. So it's just not the same body from moment to moment. Your body is always changing.

But YOU are the same.

So even though you *have* a body, you are not your body. You can observe it. You can feed it. You can move it and alter it. You can care for it and you can abuse it. But you are *not* your body. *Then who am I?*

You are the witness.

As the witness, you are the arena for all you experience. You have always been you. Regardless of what your body looked like, or what you think or feel, you have always been an observer of your experience. You are the context for all that you can experience. So you do not exist somewhere inside your body. Your body exists inside of an expansive and continuous you.

And you need it. You need your body to be able to experience your life. Your senses provide you with the input you need to track the present moment as it unfolds. Your body is always present. Your mind is not. So if you want to be present, get into your body!

Exercise:

Here is a simple way to connect with your body as you are going about your day. I call it "Name 5 Things." Start with your sense of sight and name 5 things you can see. Next, 5 things you can hear, smell, taste, and touch (and for this one I do both what you can feel inside and outside your skin).

Sight: *desk, painting, lamp, tree, coffee cup*

Sound: *the air conditioner, a dog barking, a car driving by, someone talking in the next room, my breath*

Smell: (it's not super important that you can do 5, do what you can) *fabric softener, coffee, air diffuser, leather, books*

Taste: (again, whatever you can notice) *sweetness from the apple I ate, coffee, gum, toothpaste, cinnamon*

Touch (Outside your body): *air on my arm, hair on my ears, shoes around my feet, shirt on my shoulders, hand in my lap*

Touch (Inside your skin): *tightness in neck, pulse in my hand, flutter in my belly, ribs moving in and out with breath, my heart beating*

You can pretty much do this anywhere, anytime: sitting at your desk at work, waiting for an elevator, walking to your mailbox. If you feel yourself getting stressed out or worked up about something, take a few moments to get out of your head and run through your senses in this way.

Pain and Discomfort

There is no way to avoid it. Pain is inevitable. The day you are born you are introduced to pain: bright lights, loud noises, cold air, rough handling, hunger. Pain is a ubiquitous experience of living this human life. Mindfulness cannot solve this. But it isn't really a problem to be solved. It's a reality we live with and to "solve" it would be to somehow escape what it means to be human.

There are two kinds of pain. Let's call it **clean pain** and **dirty pain**. Clean pain is the kind of pain that is unavoidable. If you fall off your bike and skin your elbow, it's probably going to hurt. There is nothing *wrong* with that. Your body has pain receptors for a reason. It isn't wrong that they are activated under normal conditions to alert you to injury or trauma.

This is how our bodies are suppose to work. If you have a headache, there is a good chance you may be dehydrated and this is your body's way of telling you to drink water. Clean pain happens for a reason and learning to accept this kind of pain facilitates growth.

Just because we don't like something, doesn't make it wrong. It's the judgment that creates dirty pain. Dirty pain is the pain we experience when we resist or struggle with clean pain. When we judge ourselves, or the bodies we are identified with, as wrong, or broken, or damaged, or weak, we experience dirty pain. Dirty pain is optional. Mindfulness can help us with this.

Can we be with our bodies in a way that doesn't exacerbate or increase our pain and discomfort? Of course. But that means letting go of our struggle against it. We have to develop a new relationship with our bodies as they are in this moment.

Allowing discomfort, opening up to and making space for whatever sensations are present in our bodies. We've been struggling all our lives to avoid and get away from pain. Yet, we still seem to have it. Mindfulness teaches us another way.

Mindfulness brings a sense of curiosity and appreciation to our experience. You cannot be resistant to your body if you are going to appreciate it. To be curious means to move toward it, not away from it. So mindfulness of the body is a way of tuning in to it, "listening" carefully and with great interest. Exploring the nuances of your physical sensation as it unfolds moment to moment.

Exercise:

The Body Scan is a systematic way of moving your attention throughout the different regions of your body starting at your toes and moving slowly up through the body (as if being scanned) up to the top of your head. The pace of this attentional movement can vary, but you can take as long as you wish.

You will notice how normally ordinary, mundane sensations become visceral and alive when you pay close attention. We usually do not have cause to attend to our bodies in this way, so we can end up taking it for granted. On a macro level, is this not what happens in

our lives in general? Do we not sort of skim over what seems obvious or familiar? You carry this body around every day. What's so special about it anyway?

Let's see!

To begin the Body Scan, lie down on the floor with a pillow under your head. You may also lay on a bed, but please remember, there is a chance you might fall asleep if you do this before bed or when you're tired. Mindfulness is about falling *awake*.

Laying face up with your feet uncrossed and your hands resting by your sides. Start at your big toe on your left foot and move your attention slowly to each toe, the bottom of your foot, your heel, the top of your foot, your ankle, your shin, your calf, your knee, the back of your knee . . . you get the picture.

Go up one leg and then start again on the right leg. Then go from your pelvis up to your stomach and back and chest and shoulders. Then do your arms like you did your legs starting with your fingertips and working up to the shoulders. Then your neck and each part of your face and head. When you get to the crown of your head, you're done.

How do you feel? Can you more easily express gratitude for your body?



Chapter Three

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Be conscious of yourself as consciousness alone, watch all the thoughts come and go. Come to the conclusion, by direct experience, that you are really consciousness itself, not its ephemeral contents. –Annamalai Swami

Mindfulness teaches us a way of relating to thoughts so that they lose their restrictive influence over our behaviors and attitudes. Otherwise, we are beholden to thoughts and our behavioral responses become limited.

I want to start with a common misconception about mindfulness and another movement in mental health called positive psychology. Positive psychology is great and has valid scientific findings. It even ascribes mindfulness to having a happy life. But these philosophies are not synonymous.

In positive psychology, positive thinking is valued over negative thinking. Makes sense. If you're consumed with negative thinking, you are going to behave in negative ways. So if I had to choose, I would take positivity over negativity any day.

But mindfulness actually doesn't take sides. Positive and negative are evaluations, or judgments. Mindfulness is about *non*-judgment. So I am not going to teach you to change your thoughts. Thoughts are thoughts. Mindfulness is a way of relating to all thoughts, positive, negative, or neutral.

If you've been to therapy where positive thinking is used as a way to combat negative thinking, (CBT calls this "cognitive restructuring") what I am going to teach you may seem contradictory. It isn't. It's just that mindfulness has no interest in combating any kind of thoughts.

Mindfulness is about observing thought without judgment. So if positive thinking has helped you in the past, mindfulness is not taking that away. It's just another way of relating to your thinking.

Have you ever been "of two minds" about something? In one moment you assert some thought or premise, and in the next moment, your mind flips to its contradictory position. Aren't both thoughts coming from the same mind? Now let's imagine that these two teams of thoughts are chess pieces on a giant chessboard that extends infinitely in all directions.

Sometimes you're on the side with the black pieces and other times you are on the side with the white pieces. And you go back and forth depending on a number of various factors. Are you ever identified with either of these sets of thoughts? How can you be both? If you aren't the pieces in this chess game, who are you?

The chessboard doesn't have any stake in which set of thoughts wins out. It has no interest in the battle. Because this metaphorical board stretches out indefinitely, it can hold this game forever no matter who wins or loses. **You are the board.** You can have any kind of thoughts, even contradictory ones at the same time, and *you* don't change. You are constant. Your thoughts are fleeting.

Mindfulness develops an awareness that you are not the content of your experiences. Your thoughts are part of your experience, but you are the one that notices all of it. In order to notice your thoughts, you have to be separate from them. When there is no separation it's like looking through a pair of sunglasses that you forgot you were wearing.

You still see all the colors, your depth perception is not impaired. But you are unaware that you are looking through a lens. When you think your thoughts, you are looking *through* them. When you are observing your thoughts, you are looking *at* them.

How do I know when I am thinking rather than observing?

If you are aware that you are thinking it's as simple as saying to yourself, "I'm having the thought that . . ." or "My mind is telling me . . ." You can take it a step further and say, "I'm noticing I'm having the thought/my mind telling me . . ."

This highlights the process of noticing. And maybe this will sound redundant, but "I notice that I'm noticing my mind telling me . . ." This extra step acknowledges the *you* there behind your eyes, the you who notices. The witness. The chessboard.

Exercise:

Read through these instructions a couple of times first and then do the exercise on your own.

1. Sit comfortably in a quiet space with your eyes closed.
2. "Look up" into your mind space and wait for a thought to arrive. It won't be long. (And if you think, "I'm not thinking," that qualifies as a thought.)
3. Did you see it? Now say that thought out loud exactly like you heard it in your head.
4. What does that feel like?
5. Now say, "My mind is telling me (insert thought)."
6. Does that feel any different?
7. Now, "I'm noticing my mind is telling me (insert thought)."
8. How about that?

9. And finally, "I notice myself noticing my mind telling me (insert thought).

10. Where is the thought? Does it have the same impact? Do you experience it differently?

All thoughts are the same in that they can be observed. You can look at them from a distance. And you don't have to be pushed around by them. You don't have to be subjugated or bullied by fleeting thoughts.

Thoughts As Language

It's easy to automatically buy into your thoughts because they come from inside your head. This gives them a huge advantage in the fight for your attention. But thoughts are just mental events made up of language; words. And words are symbolic representations that refer to something else.

In 1929 the Belgium surrealist artist Rene Magritte painted *The Treachery of Images*, which is a painting of a pipe with the French script "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" written below it, which translates in English to: "*This is not a pipe.*"



There is such a thing as a pipe. But a painting of a pipe is not a pipe. This is how we think. The words and images we experience in our minds are representations of something else that may or may not actually exist in the real world. But instead of seeing thoughts as referential, we often see them as the actual thing.

Exercise:

Let me give you an example. Close your eyes and bring to mind a bright yellow lemon. Imagine that you place that lemon on a cutting board and slowly cut it in half. Imagine the spritz of lemon juice squirting up as you slice into the rind. Now take one of the lemon halves and bring it up to your nose. Imagine taking in the lemony fragrance.

Now imagine bringing the lemon to your lips, opening your mouth wide, and deliberately biting into the lemon. Notice what is happening right now in your mouth and throat. Did you scrunch up your face at all? Did you salivate?



That lemon was just in your head!

It's amazing what words can do. I'll give you another example. When I was very young, maybe 8 or 9 years old, I remember watching the movie Rocky on VHS. I remember being aware of how I was moving my head from side to side with my fists up in front of my face during the boxing scenes. And I remember thinking, "That's weird. I'm not even in the movie!"

There I was sitting on my couch watching a movie about boxing and my body was responding as if I needed to protect myself. Good movies will do that! Even though you *know* it's just a movie, our bodies respond as if it were really happening.

Now imagine that the movie your body is responding to is always playing in your head. It's no wonder we get stuck sometimes. Of course, if you made the choice to remain still during the fight scenes in Rocky, you *could* do it. And if you made the choice to disengage from your thoughts, you could do that as well. But it would have to be a choice. Mindfulness is always intentional.

What is the movie that plays in your head?

Exercise:

In a journal or notebook, make a list of the kinds of thoughts you tend to struggle with the most. Some examples might be:

I always mess things up.

What's wrong with me?

I'll never be enough.

I'm so far behind.

What if they laugh at me?

I'm such a loser.

I should be able to get it together.

I could go on and on, but now it's your turn. Take about 5 minutes to examine the thoughts that tend to come up the most for you. Do this now . . .

Did you notice any themes? Were some of your thoughts sort of grouped together? Do they usually show up as a group or follow one another? If these thoughts were a movie, what would you call it? Give it a title. Maybe something like, "The Why Me Story," or "Never Good Enough." Perhaps you have more than one movie always cued up and ready to play when the timing is just right.

Giving these thoughts or groups of thoughts a title, or a theme, is a way to create some distance between you and the thoughts when they arise. It may take some practice, but when you're familiar with the content of your thinking, it's easier to notice it when it comes up, which makes it easier to let them go.

Letting Go and Letting Be

When someone says "just let it go," doesn't it seem like the goal is to get rid of it? Like when you let go of a helium balloon and it *goes away*? From a mindfulness perspective,

when we say let it go, we mean *let go of your grip of it*. There is no expectation for the thoughts to go away, or diminish, or change. To let go is to realize your inherent separation from thoughts in the first place.

Thoughts are content. You are the context. To rest in your expansiveness is to detach yourself from content.

Letting be is to allow thoughts to be there, without having to do anything with them. Thoughts are simply information. You are bombarded with information every single day. How much of it do you really pay attention to?

Think of all the advertisements on billboards or pop up ads on your computer. Imagine if you had to read or click on every advertisement you saw when you were just trying to read an article on the Internet. You'd never finish!

We can do it pretty well with advertisements. Most of the time it's stuff we don't need. But every once in a while, it's exactly what we need. And our thoughts can either be helpful, or a waste of time.

Instead of treating your negative thoughts as negative, perhaps they're simply not helpful to you. Mindfulness can help you make that distinction so you're not wasting so much energy and time ruminating, worrying, analyzing and overthinking.

Exercise:

Leaves on a Stream is a visualization exercise where you will imagine sitting beneath a tree next to a running stream of water. After spending some time visualizing the landscape, the sounds, smells, and other sensual elements of this outdoor space, you will simply wait for thoughts to arrive.

And when they do, you will imagine they are leaves falling into the stream from the tree above. You will allow each thought to float on past and remain present until the next thought arrives. At first you may think, "I'm not having any thoughts." My friend, that is a thought. Put it on a leaf and let it go!

Do this for a few minutes and remember to notice: Who is noticing?



Chapter Four

THE WILLINGNESS TO FEEL IT ALL

Clearly recognizing what is happening inside us, and regarding what we see with an open, kind and loving heart, is what I call Radical Acceptance. If we are holding back from any part of our experience, if our heart shuts out any part of who we are and what we feel, we are fueling the fears and feelings of separation that sustain the trance of unworthiness. -Tara Brach

Most of us want to “live in the moment.” But what if that moment happens to be emotionally painful, or boring? Our natural tendency is to move away from pain, to reduce or eliminate it, or pretend it doesn’t exist, shut down. This is called “experiential avoidance.” It means that we may act in ways that are in the service of avoiding unwanted experience. Before we get into that, let’s take a closer look at emotions.

What are Emotions?

Psychologists generally agree on these nine basic emotions: Love, Joy, Confusion, Fear, Anger, Disgust, Sadness, Surprise, and Shame. Of these nine emotions, how many of them would you consider to be “positive?” How do we square that with the societal expectation of *happiness* as the ideal measure of psychological health?

It seems a little unrealistic if you ask me. Of course everyone wants to be happy, but when the absence of happiness is interpreted as pathological, we can be awfully judgmental toward ourselves just for having a normal range of human emotions.

Emotions originate in the mid-brain (amygdala, hippocampus, hypothalamus) and when triggered by certain events, initiates a complex series of physiological changes in the body. You may experience increased heart rate, respiration, perspiration, a rush of hormones, the reallocation of blood to different parts of your body.

These changes prepare us to take action. You may have a tendency to cry, or run, or smile, or laugh, or hide, or express hostility, or eat. But it’s important to note that these tendencies do not *control* our behavior, they can only *suggest*.

It may seem like destructive behavior is *caused* by emotions. But this is an illusion. Just because an emotion precipitates some specific behavior does not imply causation. The truth is, we tend to behave in ways that temporarily alleviate a painful emotion in the short run and because it seems to work in the moment, over time we continue this pattern, and we create habits. But if we are aware of our emotions, thoughts, and behaviors, we can respond more skillfully.

Mindfulness is about disengaging from automatic responses and shifting into a manual mode. So as we bring awareness to our emotions, we do not have to be pushed around by them, and we can begin to undo unhelpful habits. So how do we get to know our emotions and what tends to get in the way?

Barriers to the awareness of emotions

Sometimes, emotions are difficult to identify. There are three main barriers to the awareness of emotions.

1. **Emotions were invalidated in childhood.** You may have been told, “Don’t be such a scaredy cat.” “You shouldn’t feel that way.” “Get over it.” “I’ll give you something to cry

about!" (That was my dad's favorite.) When you hear these messages over and over, you stop trusting the validity of your emotions and you may learn to suppress them.

2. **Confusing "feelings" with "thoughts."** If you say, "I feel *that* . . ." or "I feel *like* . . ." you are about to express a thought, not a feeling. Thoughts can cover up feelings by keeping you in your head. Always follow "I feel" with a feeling word, which brings me to the third barrier.
3. **Lack of emotional language.** Without the words to describe the feeling, it's often difficult to identify it clearly. Emotions are elusive and intangible, and language gives us a way to deal with them more skillfully.

Exercise:

This exercise will help you develop a more vivid emotional vocabulary and more body awareness when experiencing emotions. After all, we call emotions *feelings*, because we *feel* them in our bodies.

In your journal write about each of these nine primary emotions. The list below includes each primary emotion and their emotional sub-varieties. Think of a time when you experienced each of these emotions. Take some time to connect with that event from the past and with the feelings that arise in the present. Notice where you feel these emotions in your body. Include sensory words that describe their physical characteristics.

Love: affection, arousal, attraction, caring, compassion, desire, fondness, infatuation, kindness, liking, longing, warmth, sympathy, sentimentality

Joy: amusement, bliss, contentment, eagerness, elation, enjoyment, enthusiasm, excitement, exhilaration, hope, optimism, pleasure, satisfaction

Confusion: bewildered, uncertain, puzzled, mystified, perplexed, chaotic, foggy, unaware

Anger: aggravation, agitation, annoyance, destructiveness, jealousy, frustration, irritation, grouchiness, grumpiness, rage

Disgust: revulsion, repugnance, repulsion, aversion, distaste

Fear: apprehension, anxiety, distress, edginess, jumpiness, nervousness, panic, tenseness, uneasiness, worry, fright, overwhelm

Sadness: alienation, anguish, despair, disappointment, gloom, grief, hopelessness, insecurity, loneliness, misery, unhappiness, rejection

Surprise: astonishment, horror, startled, wonder, amazement

Shame: guilt, embarrassment, humiliation, invalidation, regret, remorse, mortification

What was it like to track these emotions in your body? Was it difficult? If so, this is pretty normal, especially if the barriers listed above have anything to do with it. The body scan meditation is an important practice in bringing more awareness to your body. The more you practice and become more connected with your body, it will be easier to discern the physiological impact of emotions.

Avoiding Painful Emotions

Obviously, we would all prefer to mostly have pleasant emotions. It's natural to want to minimize the so-called "negative" emotions and increase the "positive" ones. When this becomes a priority, we can spend way too much time and energy trying to avoid pain at all costs. We develop strategies of avoidance and navigate our lives according to these strategies, which become habits. These habits become second nature and we are often unaware that we are even doing it.

Our minds implement these strategies in many various and creative ways. Here are just a few: prescription drugs, illegal drugs, eating cookies, binging on Netflix, intellectualizing, excessive exercise, procrastinating, staying late at work, opting out of social events, lashing out toward others, isolating, and the list goes on and on.

These behaviors are not bad, in and of themselves. But when they are utilized in the service of eliminating or reducing negative emotions, they can exacerbate or extend the initial pain further than necessary.

While avoidance may provide immediate respite from pain in the short run, it simply postpones the pain until later, or creates additional problems. For example, Kevin has social anxiety. He desperately wants to have friends, but gets sweaty and self-conscious anytime he is in a social situation. He keeps thinking, "Everyone here thinks I'm boring and weird. I don't belong here." So he leaves.

The next time an opportunity comes up to be social, he may opt to just stay home. He thinks, "I don't want to embarrass myself. Nobody likes me anyways." So now he doesn't have to feel self-conscious and awkward—hooray! But he continues to feel lonely and disconnected and doesn't get to make new friends or be social.

Exercise:

"Join the DOTS", from *ACT Made Simple* by Russ Harris, MD.

In your journal, take some time to do the following exercise. What are the main thoughts and feelings that are problematic for you? Write these down under "Body" and "Mind."

Body: (feelings, sensations, urges)

Mind: (thoughts, memories, beliefs, worries, judgments, etc.)

Next, write down everything you've tried in order to get rid of, avoid, suppress, escape, or distract yourself from the emotional experience.

D- Distraction: How have you tried to distract yourself from these feelings (TV, shopping, Internet browsing, etc.)

O- Opting Out: We often opt out (quit, avoid, procrastinate, or withdraw from) people, places, activities, and situations when we don't like the thoughts and feelings they bring up for us. What are some of the things you opt out of?

T- Thinking: How have you tried to think your way out of it (blaming others, worrying, rehashing the past, fantasizing, problem solving, planning, self-criticism, analyzing, trying to figure it out, second guessing yourself, denial, minimizing it)? Have you dwelled on thoughts such as "What if?" "If only . . .," "Why me?" "Not fair!"

S- Substances, Self-harm, other Strategies: What substances have you tried putting into your body (including food and prescription medication)? Have you ever tried self-harming behaviors like attempting suicide, cutting, risky sexual behaviors?

Did these strategies get rid of your painful thoughts and feelings in the long run so that they never came back?

When you have used these strategies excessively, rigidly, or inappropriately, what have they cost you in terms of health, vitality, energy, relationships, work, leisure, money, missed opportunities, wasted time, or emotional pain?

You may want to extend this exercise throughout the week, or come back to it time and again, under different circumstances. The more time you spend exploring these strategies, the more fully you will come to understand yourself.

Acceptance

Acceptance is a willingness to allow whatever is there in the present moment to be there, just as it is. Another way to say it might be: giving permission, making space, softening toward it, letting go of your struggle with it, leaning into it. If the word "acceptance" doesn't resonate with you, feel free to use any of the above terms.

Acceptance is also not the same as tolerance. Imagine you were visiting family and you knew they were *tolerating* you until you left. How does that feel? Acceptance is not white knuckling your way through the pain. Nor is it giving into it, or resigning yourself to it. It's moving toward it and welcoming it to be right there, because it's *already* there. You're not inviting pain that isn't already there, see? You're also not signing up for a lifetime of pain, because a lifetime requires a future orientation. The present moment is as far as you need to practice acceptance.

Why would you want to accept pain? Because to struggle with it, or avoid it often creates more suffering (ie. dirty pain). Letting go of the struggle with painful emotions allows you to acknowledge them as they are, and not what they say they are, so that you can move through it gracefully with equanimity.

The stories we create around our pain are often much more painful than the pain itself. So mindfulness of emotion is the ability to look at it for what it is, without judgment, and letting it do what it needs to do without getting in its way. Think of how the sky allows the storm to move through it and doesn't interfere. You can do just that with your emotions.

How to Survive Quicksand

Fortunately, I've never had to experience this. And it's likely you haven't either, but you've seen the movies. What's the worst thing you can do when you get stuck in quicksand? Struggle! The more you try to "swim" your way out, the more the quicksand pulls you down into it. So what are you suppose to do?

Be still. As best you can, try to stretch out like you're trying to float on water and eventually, the quicksand will push you to the surface. (After that, I don't know. Use your imagination; call for help, reach for a vine. This metaphor ended when you didn't drown.)

Emotions are like that. As much as you may not want to be stuck in quicksand, if you know how to drop the struggle, you will survive. Jon Kabat-Zinn says, "As long as you're breathing, there's more right with you than there is wrong with you." So the next time you experience sadness, frustration, or anxiety, be still. Drop the struggle. And breathe.

Exercise:

To begin the Expansion Meditation, you will sit on the floor or in a chair or you may lay on the floor with a pillow supporting your head. You will begin as you do in the breathing meditation, connecting with the breath and the body. I will then invite you to recall a painful event in your recent past.

Allow yourself to become immersed in this memory for a few moments and notice any emotions that arise. Then we will leave the story behind and simply hold the emotional experience in awareness, noticing where in your body you feel it the most intensely.

We will move through a process of physicalizing the emotion so that it becomes a three dimensional object to be observed in the body and we will move toward it and explore it with openness and curiosity.

What shape does this sensation take? Can you view it from all angles? What color is it? Does it have texture? Is it hard or soft? Can you sense its weight? Temperature? Is it moving or still?

After getting intimately familiar with this object we will visualize that we are creating space around it with each inhale. Not doing anything at all with the object itself, but just expanding the walls around it, further and further with each inhale to give it all the space it needs to do whatever it needs to do.

Watch this object closely for a few minutes as you loosen around it and allow it to be just as it is, without interference or manipulation. When you're ready you can shift your focus back to the breath for a minute. Sense the entirety of your body as it breathes. Slowly come back into the room and gently, in your own time, open your eyes.

How do you feel? It may be helpful to journal your experience before and after this exercise.



Chapter Five

DOING WHAT REALLY MATTERS

*"I have learned that as long as I hold fast to my beliefs and values - and follow my own moral compass - then the only expectations I need to live up to are my own."
-Michelle Obama*

I deliberated on whether to make this the first chapter. The whole reason any of this mindfulness business even matters is that there are important things in life that are worth living for. Why open yourself up to all these painful thoughts and emotions if there isn't a really good reason to do that? Those reasons are called values.

I wish there was a better word for this, because "values" is a pretty loaded term and it means many things in different contexts. Let me define what I mean by values so we're on the same page.

VALUES ARE DESIRED QUALITIES OR CHARACTERISTICS THAT DESCRIBE HOW YOU REALLY WANT TO BE.

Values describe the way you want to be. It's how you want to show up for others and for yourself, if you could be who you really wanted to be. Your values are a guide or a compass in life, that when followed gives your life meaning and purpose. A rich and fulfilling life is one that is lived in the service of values.

Goals are not Values

Goals are more like a destination, while values are more like a direction. If I wanted to go to California (I'm in Arizona currently.) I'd have to travel West. Once I got there I would have achieved my goal. I could cross California off a list. But a value is a direction; West. If I were following my value, I'd check off my goal of getting to California, and I'd have to keep going West. Goals stop being goals once they're achieved, while values are ongoing.

It's good to have goals. Just make sure they're aligned with your values. Values describe how you want to be while you work toward your goals (and how you want to be after that). Let me give you a better example. Let's say you want to get married. That's a fine goal. You can check it off a list. You can go to Las Vegas this weekend and with the right amount of substances and willing conspirators, you can achieve it. But if you don't have values in the ballpark of being loving, kind, supportive, honest, faithful, appreciative, etc. your long anticipated life goal of marriage is destined to fail.

The difference is that you can always choose to act on values. They are present. Goals are in the future. You can take steps toward goals in the moment, but the outcomes are never guaranteed. Values do not require any waiting or prerequisites. There is no distance between you and your values. They're right here, right now, always.

Values are Freely Chosen

You are the only one who can decide what your values are. We definitely get “values” from our parents, religion, our society in general. These are hand me down values. They aren’t necessarily your own. They’re more like morals or codes of conduct. You can appreciate these hand me downs, but that doesn’t make them meaningful to you personally, and if they’re not meaningful to you personally (when nobody’s looking) then they won’t be strong enough to make valued choices in the face of painful thoughts and feelings. Hand me down values are just not as effective as freely chosen values that are meaningful to you just because they are.

You never have to justify your values to anyone. Your values are independent of anyone else’s opinions or approval. In fact, when exploring values, it might be a good idea to pretend no one is watching. If you’d act in a way that is meaningful to you just because, then it wouldn’t matter if anyone was there to approve or validate your actions. You do them because you want to, not because you *should*.

Following your values is naturally satisfying. They are their own reward. They are not instrumental. They are not a means to an end. Values are an end in and of themselves. They are intrinsically rewarding because when you are living your life in connection with values, there is a sense of expansiveness and vitality because you are exercising true freedom.

Clarifying Your Values

Most people don’t automatically know what their values are if they haven’t taken the time to reflect upon it. There are several ways to explore values and I will suggest a few exercises to get the ball rolling.

Exercise:

Imagine it’s your 100th birthday, and you’re as healthy as can be. The people closest to you decide to throw you a huge celebration. Maybe it’s at a family home or a fancy hotel or resort. Everyone you have ever loved or cared about are there, dead or alive. (I mean, they’re there alive, not dead. You get what I mean.)

So everyone is there and they’re all dressed to the nines, smiling, dancing and having a great time. At some point the band stops and someone in the crowd clinks their glass with a fork and everyone gets quiet.

Who is this very important guest? Is it your spouse, a child, a sibling, a mentor? This person stands up and raises his or her glass and begins to give a toast. They say everything you would most want to hear them to say about you to honor you on this very special occasion. Not necessarily what you think they would actually say. This is a fantasy after all.

What characteristics or qualities would they highlight to capture the essence of who you are and what you meant to them? Write down this toast. Now do it again for two other people you care deeply about.

This exercise helps you to see yourself through the eyes of the people you most care about, not so much who you have been, but as the man or woman you most want to be. It helps you to consider the impact you would like to have on others. After all, we are relational beings, interdependent and interconnected. Being true to yourself is far more meaningful to others than being who they want you to be.

Exercise:

Here's another time traveling exercise. Imagine that you are ten years in the future and you're looking back on your life as it is today. Complete the following sentences.

Ten years ago, I spent too much time worrying about . . .

Ten years ago, I didn't spend enough time doing . . .

If I could go back 10 years, here's what I'd do differently . . .

Here's another similar exercise. Imagine that a year from now you're looking back at the challenges you are facing today. Let's say you handled it like a champ, in the best way possible, in the way that only your best self could handle it. So from that perspective answer the following questions.

What qualities or strengths did you live by or act upon in the face of these challenges?

How did you treat yourself and others you care about in how you handled it?

Eventually, you will have dealt with these challenges, somehow. The fact that there are challenges is a given. It's not a question of how you solved the problems, but the manner in which you approached it. The qualities and characteristics that represented who you most want to be in the face of hardship or struggle. These are your values.

Putting Values Into Action

Great! So now you know what your values are! Now what? Here's where things get interesting. I wish I could say that always following your values was easy. It's not. Obviously, just because you know what your values are doesn't mean that it's all smooth sailing from there. Inevitably, as you start to move in the direction of your values, certain barriers are

likely to crop up. These barriers often take the form of thoughts and feelings. And now we are at full circle.

All of the mindfulness skills you have learned about in previous chapters are the tools you will utilize so that you can let go of the struggle with unwanted thoughts and feelings and be available to pursue your freely chosen values. Because if you are preoccupied with unwanted thoughts and feelings, you are not free to fully engage in mindful living.

Sarah's Story

Sarah, who had just moved to a large city from a more rural community, wanted to pursue her value of social connection, but every time she was invited to hang out with peers from work, she began to feel anxious and had thoughts like, "I don't want to make a fool of myself," "What if I say something stupid, or say something that everyone disagrees with?," or "I never have anything interesting to say anyways."

She dealt with these thoughts and feelings by keeping conversations at work, strictly about work, which was easy to do at first, but eventually others wanted to get to know her on a more personal level, and she was running out of excuses.

She really did want to make friends with these women, but every time an opportunity arose, she sabotaged herself. She'd find a reason to leave the situation, or give ambiguous responses to invitations. Her mind would talk her out of moving toward her values and it convinced her that she didn't deserve to have friends and that she would embarrass herself eventually. She bought into these thoughts and played into her fears. So she'd go home to her cat and watch *Friends* on TV.

One day, she overheard two women talking about music and they mentioned a specific band that was on tour and would be coming to town in a few weeks. Sarah hadn't heard of this band before, but she had been wanting to go see live music since she arrived in town. She looked them up online and saw that only a few tickets were still on sale.

The idea occurred to her that she should buy three tickets and see if anyone might want to go with her. But as soon as this thought came into her head the next few thoughts rushed in to save her. "It's too late now, they stopped asking me to hang out weeks ago." "That would be a big mistake. They'll think I'm desperate." "Why would they want to go with me? I'm so boring."

She was just about to give up on this idea, but something happened in that moment. Sarah was able to see something she hadn't before. In that moment, she had a memory from when she was seven years old. She had decided to pick out her own outfit based on a character from a television show she used to watch when she was a kid.

The outfit consisted of brightly colored pieces that didn't exactly match, and lots of accessories like bracelets, a scarf, a headband, and a generous amount of lip gloss. She attached colorful little pom-poms to her shoelaces that bobbed with each step. She was quite proud of what she had put together.

When she came downstairs for breakfast, her mother took one look at her and said, "You look ridiculous. Go take that off right now!"

Sitting there at her work computer, Sarah heard that message loud and clear, "You look ridiculous!" And she felt the same feeling she felt when she was seven; a sinking, deflating, diminishing feeling in her chest and in her face. Her head and shoulders actually sunk in that moment.

She flashed forward through time and heard the same self deprecating message again and again. And she could see herself retreating, withdrawing, isolating in various situations throughout her life. She considered the cost; friendships that never were.

A tear fell onto her keyboard. On the computer screen a timer had been set indicating how long the tickets would have been available. It was counting down: 00:14, 00:13, 00:12 . . . The thoughts came back, louder this time. But this time she wasn't thinking her thoughts, she was seeing them. "Don't be stupid!" "You are so pathetic." "YOU LOOK RIDICULOUS!" 00:07, 00:06, 00:05 . . . and without thinking another thought, she hit BUY NOW.

An email immediately appeared in her inbox with the purchase confirmation. Her heart began to beat firmly and rapidly in her chest. A sinking sensation pulled downward inside her torso. She recognized the pull to avoid. Another thought popped in, "Maybe you can still get a refund."

Sarah took in a deep breath. Then another. She pulled her shoulders back and lifted her head. She connected with something in that moment that she hadn't allowed herself to embrace before. She felt a bit like her seven year old self looking delightedly into the mirror after creating that colorful ensemble, before the shame and self doubt began to take hold.

This part felt real and vulnerable. Was she willing to put her true self back on display, even at the risk of being rejected? Even at the risk of judgment and disapproval? As she connected with that younger part of herself, she determined that it was worth the risk. That little girl deserved a second chance.

She stood up slowly with wobbly legs. Her body seemed to be pulling her back toward her office chair. Her heart continued to beat rapidly. Her vision was blurred. Self critical thoughts rained down upon her consciousness. Internally, she held her seven year old self's hand and "walked her down the stairs." She approached the two women without even knowing what she was going to say, and at first no sound escaped her open mouth. She squeezed her seven year old self's hand and proceeded to start a conversation.

Sarah's story demonstrates how a little bit of willingness to feel is all it takes to overcome years of self-inflicted oppression. Yes, it may have been her mother who introduced her to self-limiting beliefs, but she internalized it and used it as a shield against further rejection throughout her life. In order to avoid rejection, she had to deny herself. And when the pain of that strategy became more intense than the pain she was trying to prevent, it was time to face it head on.

Sometimes we get rejected. Sometimes we experience loss, or abandonment, or humiliation. Our values do not exclude these feelings. Often times moving toward values necessarily means opening up to painful feelings and experiences. Efforts to avoid or circumvent the feelings, we simultaneously move away from our valued directions.

There is no life without pain. Pain is not the enemy. Our purpose is not to be pain-free. Pain is often the cost of admission. If you want a life of meaning and purpose, you have to be willing to feel it all.

I encourage you to make it a point to learn to **FEEL** better, rather than always trying to feel *better*. Know what really matters to you and challenge yourself to make bold moves in the direction of your values. Be present and open up to your experience as you move courageously into your life. Not only is this your right. It is your responsibility, and yours alone.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jiovann Carrasco, MA, LPC is a Licensed Professional Counselor in Arizona and Texas. He has been in clinical practice for over 16 years. Jiovann is the founder of the Austin Mindfulness Center in Austin, Texas, a community resource for mindfulness education and training as well as providing mindfulness based counseling services. He served as lead clinician and supervised therapists in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. He founded the Texas Chapter of the Association for Contextual Behavioral Science in 2012 and was president until 2016.

Jiovann moved to Tucson, Arizona in 2018. He opened a small private practice where he continues to serve the local community through Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and mindfulness education.

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