

MINDFULNESS & GRIEF

WITH GUIDED
MEDITATIONS TO CALM
YOUR MIND AND RESTORE
YOUR SPIRIT

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In loving memory of Don and Doug

Allow

There is no controlling life.
Try corralling a lightning bolt,
containing a tornado. Dam a
stream and it will create a new
channel. Resist, and the tide
will sweep you off your feet.
Allow, and grace will carry
you to higher ground. The only
safety lies in letting it all in—
the wild with the weak; fear,
fantasies, failures and success.
When loss rips off the doors of
the heart, or sadness veils your
vision with despair, practice
becomes simply bearing the truth.
In the choice to let go of your
known way of being, the whole
world is revealed to your new eyes.

Danna Faulds, from *Go In and In: Poems from the Heart of Yoga*

INTRODUCTION

WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK

My meditation students often ask me if I am naturally calm. The answer is “no.” I discovered the practice of yoga and mindfulness meditation on orders from my nurse practitioner after being diagnosed with the stress-related illness shingles. “You need to do something about your stress,” she said. “It’s making you sick. Try yoga.” I took her advice, sold my web development business, and after a few years of practicing yoga and meditation under the guidance of a wonderful group of teachers, I earned my certification as a Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy practitioner and mindfulness meditation instructor.

The better I got to know myself through mindfulness practice, the more I knew I wanted to help others reduce their suffering, so I volunteered as a call specialist on a suicide prevention hotline. My uncle Doug died by suicide when I was seven. I had felt close to him and was surprised by his death—surprised that someone I loved would kill themselves. My natural reaction was to try to make sense of it all. As a preteen I rummaged through my grandmother’s insurance files, found police reports, read books on suicide, and tried to learn everything I could about my uncle’s final days. As an adult, I was able to make use of that energy by helping others on the hotline. I would certainly rather have my uncle back, but given that I cannot change what happened, my ability to make meaning out of the loss by helping others has been incredibly rewarding.

I developed an eight-week Mindfulness and Grief program for my private practice while I earned my Master’s degree in Thanatology (the study of death, dying, and bereavement) from Hood College in Maryland. Participants in my program have included people whose loved ones died from cancer, suicide, heart attacks, overdoses, car accidents, and murder.

I am often asked how I can bear to witness this kind of pain regularly. My answer is simple: I get to see the pain of loss change people in miraculously positive ways. Over and over again I watch people transform from complete hopelessness into the positive states of mind called the Four *Brahma-Viharas*: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. This does not happen overnight, but it does happen, and I count myself privileged to be part of that process.

WHAT IS MINDFULNESS?

Simply put, mindfulness is the art of using your senses to be fully awake in the present moment. You may have noticed that most of your stress comes from

worrying about the past or fearing the future. For many of us, nothing provokes this response more than grief.

Few of us are taught how to cope with day-to-day stress, much less grief. Fortunately, anyone can learn how to turn the stress switch to “off,” even during the most troubling of times. You do not need to be a Buddhist, have a background in mindfulness meditation or yoga, be physically fit, or subscribe to any particular set of spiritual beliefs to benefit from mindfulness.

The only thing you need to approach your grief mindfully is yourself—just as you are, right now. The fact that you are reading this book shows that you have hope for your own ability to weather this storm. You will learn how mindfulness-based techniques can:

- Ease the physical symptoms of grief
- Calm your mind and help you to regulate difficult emotions
- Improve your awareness of the present moment
- Increase your compassion toward yourself and others
- Help you to make meaning from your loss
- Develop your new self-narrative for moving forward.

POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH

The good news is that not only do people survive grief, but many emerge on the other side changed for the better. This phenomenon, described as “posttraumatic- growth” by Lawrence G. Calhoun and Richard G. Tedeschi of University of North Carolina, Charlotte, applies to any major life event—including grief—that challenges your emotional balance, beliefs, and personal narrative (2006.)

Right now, the concept of adapting to your loss, let alone transforming your life in a positive way, may sound far-fetched. However, if you follow the mindfulness practices offered in this book, you will experience, breath by breath, a subtle but profound shift in your world view.

The reality is that when you have worked through your grief you will not be the same as you were before your loss; you will not be the same as you are now. Changes will occur with or without mindfulness in your life, and while you would rather have your loved one back, I imagine that since you are probably feeling a high level of distress, it may be helpful to know that on the other side of grief you may experience the following benefits:

- Improved self-perception
- Sense of strength
- Openness to new possibilities
- Improved level of compassion
- Better relationships with others.

Grief, after all, is not a pathology or an illness. It is a natural part of life that causes us to experience suffering. Since the goal of mindfulness practice is the cessation of suffering, it can only make sense to bring the two together.

A key element of grief-work is reconstructing your personal story. The mindfulness practices will help you to move forward through your experience of loss while creating a continuing bond with the person you will always love.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

For the next eight weeks you will be introduced to a new theme in each chapter that includes supportive meditation and journaling exercises. It is suggested that you set aside 20 to 90 minutes each day to practice. There is also a daylong retreat scheduled between weeks 4 and 5. You may want to clear your schedule or arrange a day off ahead of time at this stage, if you would like to carry out the retreat.

Feel free to move through the book sequentially, or repeat the same topic again and again until you are ready to move to another section. Read through each exercise once or twice before you try it for the first time. You can also download audio versions of key exercises at www.mindfulnessandgrief.com. Each week may include:

- Mindfulness meditation to teach you how to approach each moment with awareness and compassion
- Guided relaxation to help your body benefit from the relaxation response, which will restore your health and calm your mind
- Gentle stretching to help you increase flexibility, build strength, and feel more at home in your body
- Mindful journaling and expressive arts to help you express your feelings without judgment, while at the same time externalizing your “story” so that you can witness it with compassion
- Contemporary theories of grief to put mindfulness practices in the context of the modern understanding of adapting to loss.

Week 1

Mindful Awareness: *How to Find Refuge in the Present Moment* will show you how your breath and body can be your safe harbor when you are overwhelmed or unsteady by grief.

Week 2

Conscious Relaxation: *How to Care for Your Grieving Body* will teach you relaxation techniques that will help you to release tension and steady your mind after a loved one has died.

Week 3

Compassion and Forgiveness: *Attending to Grief with Loving-Kindness* will guide you through meditative practices that will open a closed heart and engage the healing power of loving-kindness towards yourself and others.

Week 4

Skillful Courage: *The Dance of Strength and Vulnerability* will help you cope with the rollercoaster of grief as you move up and down between hope and despair.

Daylong Retreat: *Your Personal Daylong Retreat* gives you a “day off” from tending to others and an extended period of time to practice and deepen your newfound mindful awareness.

Week 5

Getting Unstuck: *Tending to the Five Mental Hindrances* will show you how to meet resistance with curiosity and transform barriers into opportunities for personal growth and awakening.

Week 6

Meaning Reconstruction: *Learning to Live After Loss* will explain how the processes of sense making and benefit finding will help you honor your loved one’s legacy while continuing your own life’s journey.

Week 7

Allowing Transformation: *Who Am I Now?* will help you to rewrite your post-loss narrative and tap into the power of meaning-making in spite of uncertainty and change.

Week 8

Perpetual Mindfulness: *Practicing Beyond Grief* will help you to develop a relationship with your practice so that you can live your life with equanimity and transcend common “practice pitfalls.”

As you work through each chapter, be gentle with yourself. There is no right or wrong way to practice. Remember that your intention in starting this mindful journey is to reduce suffering, and while there may be times when unpleasant feelings arise, always treat yourself with loving-kindness. Look deeply when it feels right; back off when it feels right. Know that just showing up is enough.

There are many losses in life: separation, divorce, unemployment, health-related losses, foreclosures, relocations—the list goes on. Readers experiencing loss other than the death of a loved one will also find the practices suggested in *Mindfulness and Grief* helpful.

ALL SPIRITUALITIES WELCOME

I use Buddhist psychology and the teachings attributed to Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, to illustrate how mindfulness can alleviate suffering. It is important to recognize that you do not need to believe in the Buddha or be a Buddhist to benefit from these practices. Mindfulness does not require faith; it requires only practice. No matter what your spiritual beliefs, you will find something useful in each weekly practice.

MY ASPIRATION FOR YOU

It is my hope that mindfulness will help your body to return to a state of balance while honoring your grief process. I also hope these practices will be a place you can call home for the rest of your life, and to which you will be able to return again and again to grieve, to love, to celebrate, and to heal. The next time your world is uprooted, you will know you have what it takes not only to survive, but also to thrive.

With metta,

Heather Stang, M.A.

WEEK 1
MINDFUL
AWARENESS

HOW TO FIND REFUGE IN THE
PRESENT MOMENT

*When the heart grieves over what it has lost,
The spirit rejoices over what it has left.*

SUFI EPIGRAM

GRIEF AND TRANSFORMATION

Mindfulness and grief contain the seeds of transformation. Grief forces you to change by assigning you unexpected roles, removing the physical, emotional, and material resources you once had, and changing your assumptive world into an unfamiliar landscape. Mindfulness allows you to make the most of this new territory by introducing you to the self you are in the process of becoming through your senses. As you reacquaint yourself with your spirit by slowing down and turning your focus inward, you will hear the whispered wisdom of your true self, which has long been forgotten and can now be remembered.

UNDERSTANDING MINDFULNESS

On the first day of the Teaching Advanced Meditation Techniques program at the Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, Sudhir Jonathan Foust walked into the room and explained the concept of mindfulness based on an original teaching demonstration by Chogyam Trungpa. He drew a V shape on a very large pad of white paper. “What’s this?” he asked. We all agreed it must be a bird, and eagerly shouted out our response. He smiled and paused for a moment.

“Sky, with bird,” he said.

That is what mindfulness is. It is seeing the sky *and* the bird with an equal amount of attention, and no desire to change either one. If we skillfully apply this principle of mindfulness to grief, it means we observe the fullness of our experience: our heartache and love and fear and anger and our gratitude for the friend with the casserole, and whatever else shows up.

It means shifting from an “either/or” point of view to the inclusive state of “and,” or what some teachers describe as a “this, too” state of mind. When you learn to make this gradual shift you will be on your way to freeing yourself from what feels like an endless cycle of suffering, and while pain will still exist, you will come to learn that just like pleasure, suffering too is impermanent.

So, rather than fight against reality, we learn to embrace each moment with mindful acceptance. Acceptance is a loaded word; when used unskillfully it makes us feel unseen, unheard, and demoralized. If you have ever been told to “buck up” or “get over it,” you know how this feels. This kind of acceptance is not only unhelpful, but also makes us feel small.

UNDERSTANDING ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance in the mindful context means that even when the unthinkable happens, we honor our self and our experience with dignity and kindness. Rather than turn our back on our own suffering, we treat ourselves as we would a beloved friend. We take the time to pay attention to the physical sensations, thoughts, and feelings that accompany our pain.

This kind of acceptance means that we choose thoughtfully how to respond, and temper our response with compassion. We know we do not need to numb our pain or run from reality, nor do we need to punish ourselves through blame, guilt, self-loathing, and a sense of unworthiness. We find a middle ground in open awareness, just as the Buddha found peace in the Middle Path.

Before we dive into how you can practice mindfulness yourself, it may be helpful to understand where these practices come from. While mindfulness and meditation certainly existed before the historical Buddha, it is his teachings that brought these techniques to those of us who were not on a dedicated spiritual quest.

THE STORY OF THE BUDDHA

The Buddha was born Prince Siddhartha Gautama, the heir to a small kingdom in the foothills of the Himalayas. A sage predicted that the young prince would grow up to be either a great ruler or a great spiritual teacher. His father, the king, wanted Siddhartha to be a great ruler like himself, and took extreme measures to surround his son with all the luxuries money could buy so that he would not want to leave the palace.

When Siddhartha was of age, he married a beautiful princess, and together they had a son. However, when Siddhartha reached the age of 29, something inside him became restless. For the first time in his very privileged and sheltered life, he left the royal compound. In that fateful first visit to town he witnessed suffering for the first time:

- First he saw an old man
- Then a sick man
- Lastly a corpse.

Surprised, the young prince asked his chariot-driver: “Who becomes afflicted like these people?” The chariot-driver, Channa, replied, “Everyone.”

Siddhartha left the palace a second time, and encountered a wandering ascetic, a spiritual man. The prince asked his chariot-driver: “Who is that?” Channa explained, “That is a man seeking truth and liberation; he has left worldly things behind.”

Prince Siddhartha was so inspired that he left his wife and child in the care of his family and became a wandering ascetic himself. He meditated, practiced yoga, and ate very little for six years. Homeless, sick, and nearly starving to death, Siddhartha realized that a life of renunciation was not getting him anywhere closer to the truth.

At this realization, he accepted a mixture of milk, rice flour, and honey in a golden bowl from a young maiden. This act of self-indulgence angered the five ascetics with whom he was traveling. Untouched by their disdain and recognizing the golden bowl as a sign of impending Buddhahood (as it was well known at the time that all previous Buddhas had eaten from a golden bowl,) Siddhartha sat down under the Tree of Enlightenment, the Bodhi Tree. He vowed not to stop meditating until he reached perfect enlightenment—*Nirvana*.

As dusk fell, the great demon Devaputra Mara appeared and conjured up many visions to distract Siddhartha from his aim. However, none of his tactics worked and, enraged, the demon finally demanded: “Who are you to seek enlightenment? Who will testify that you are worthy of perfect enlightenment?”

Siddhartha reached down with one finger and touched the earth. “The earth is my witness,” he said. The story goes that the world shook with such vigor that Mara and his demon army fled in fear. Able to calm his own internal demons and steady his mind, Siddhartha finally achieved enlightenment and became the Buddha, the “awakened one.”

After his enlightenment, the Buddha could see that all people wanted to be happy, but most did not know the way. He could see that everyone had Buddha Nature inside, but most did not realize it. Overcome with compassion, he decided to share what he had learned with the world, and spent the rest of his life teaching what is known as *dharma*, or truth.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS AND THE END OF SUFFERING

The Buddha's first lesson is known as the Four Noble Truths. It details the causes of suffering and gives instructions for ending suffering.

The First Noble Truth acknowledges that pain, or *dukkha*, exists. We will all be disappointed, experience loss, and be unsatisfied at some point in our lives, no matter how hard we try to avoid it. In short, we will encounter pain just as we encounter pleasure. Pain in this context refers to an inevitable and uncontrollable event, such as the death of a loved one or an illness.

The Second Noble Truth says that suffering exists because of our attachment to cravings, aversions, and a false sense of security. Suffering in this context is our reaction to pain, which is often unskillful. We hold on tightly to sensory pleasures, opinions, rituals, and the belief that everything is permanent, when in reality everything is fluid.

The Third Noble Truth gives us the good news: we can end our suffering and achieve a state of peace in which we will be untouched by the forces of greed, hatred, and delusion; the root causes of suffering.

The Fourth Noble Truth tells us that the way to end our suffering is through the Noble Eightfold Path. This involves living our life with right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. The lesson is that neither self-indulgence nor self-denial will lead to peace, and it is called the Middle Path.

CHARTING YOUR OWN MIDDLE PATH THROUGH GRIEF

Let's look at how the Middle Path and the Four Noble Truths can help you to work through your grief. When a loved one dies, you come face to face with the First Noble Truth: pain exists. You realize how temporary life is and recognize that at any moment everything you "know" to be true can suddenly fall apart. It feels as though there is no ground beneath your feet. Some of us become preoccupied with our loss, while others try to avoid thinking about it altogether by numbing our pain with food, drugs, or alcohol. This is the Second Noble Truth in action: suffering comes from clinging and aversion, or obsession and avoidance.

The Third Noble Truth promises the end of suffering, which gives us hope in the face of great pain. This leads us to the practices offered in the Fourth Noble Truth. It is often said that if you follow just one of the practices suggested in the Noble Eightfold Path, the other seven will naturally show up in your life, so let's begin with right mindfulness.

Even in the absence of grief, the practice of mindfulness may seem daunting. If you have ever picked up a magazine with a meditating model smiling with bliss on a beach, you will know what I mean. However, the truth is that a moment of mindful peace is not as far away as you might think, and just that one moment can imbue your whole being with hope. I see this happen regularly in grief groups, and all it takes is focused attention on your breath and your body.

Mindfulness lets you expand your view by placing you in the middle ground between denying your pain and overindulging in your suffering. From that vantage point you can observe the whole experience with a sense of openness to whatever arises. You stay in contact with the entire scope of your existence, and you experience grief without becoming grief itself.

The first step to practicing mindfulness is to understand that there is no right way to grieve. You may have been told that you will grieve in stages, but contemporary grief research shows that there is no single "right way" to grieve. The fact is that each of us experiences grief in our own way. Your reaction to loss is determined by a combination of factors:

- The nature of your relationship with the person who died
- The way they died
- Your physical health
- Your life circumstances
- Learned coping strategies
- Your age
- Available social and economic support (or lack thereof.)

Most people experience uncomfortable physical sensations, emotions, thoughts, and changed behavior, but no two people are identical. You may find that relationships increase in intimacy or dissolve completely. Religious or spiritual practice will either provide you with comfort or seem inadequate as you try to make sense of the loss. No matter what happens, if you learn to be mindful of your experience you can learn to respond rather than react.

Mindfully relating to your grief means being fully aware of your experience of loss while simultaneously embracing whatever arises in you with compassion and

loving-kindness. This does not mean that you have to be happy despite your loss. It means that instead of fighting a losing battle against something you cannot change, you observe the situation in order to develop wisdom and reduce your suffering.

The Chinese symbol for mindfulness is a combination of the symbols for “now” and “heart.” This sums it up perfectly: mindfulness is the practice of opening your heart to what is happening right now. Openness is compassionate and caring; holding the moment in a tender embrace rather than attacking it with hatred and violence.

I like the notion of “calm abiding.” One of my meditation friends loves the expression “to be with” what is happening. Mindfulness teaches us that we don’t have to fix, label, or judge what arises. In fact, most of the time trying to fix the situation is useless. Instead, we learn how to respond to a situation without reacting; this gives us an amazing amount of freedom, and helps us to get unstuck.

We are born mindful and curious, but as we grow we are influenced by others and by our own experiences. Everything, from how we potty-train to what type of food we like, is labeled “good” or “bad.” We stop noticing things “just as they are,” and instead we begin to make snap judgments on autopilot. In this way we learn to chase after pleasure and push everything else away. We create a story about “how things are supposed to be.” We tell ourselves why we deserve or don’t deserve whatever is happening to us, when so often what is happening isn’t personal at all. Unfortunately, most of us become cut off from our true nature, deny reality, and never feel that we are quite fully alive.

The death of a loved one moves the autopilot switch to “off.” This is a wakeup call—a bell of awareness—an opportunity to intentionally change course. At first you may feel numb. This is normal. It is the body’s graceful way of helping you cope in the early days of loss. Eventually you will realize that you need to reroute, but you may not be sure where to begin; this is where mindfulness can help. If you think of your life as a journey, the present moment is the “You Are Here” marker on the map. No matter how disoriented you feel, your mindfulness practice will help to bring you back to the safe harbor of the present moment using the tools you already have; your breath and your body. You can then make the choice to leave the autopilot switch set to “off,” and instead chart your own course.

HOW TO BEGIN YOUR MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

Mindfulness begins with the assumption that everything is already okay, and that we have just forgotten what “okay” is. Remembering our true nature is especially difficult after a significant loss. Do you feel that everything is okay right now? Probably not. In fact, I wouldn’t be surprised if you are asking yourself, “How can I ever get from here to okay?”

The answer is that we are going to take baby steps. Some days they will be really tiny baby steps, where just walking across the room to sit on your meditation cushion is like climbing Mount Everest barefoot with a monkey on your back. Other days you will surprise yourself with a baby leap as you find peace in the rhythm of your own breath for a few precious moments. Eventually you will wake up one morning and realize that you slept through the night for the first time, or you will eat a meal and find yourself enjoying the taste of the food.

Remember: it does not matter if you were naturally calm and healthy before your loss, or if you were always on the go and never thought twice about relaxation. We are going to start from where you are now, and consider the possibility that one day you will look over your shoulder to where you have come from and discover that the accumulation of baby steps (and baby leaps) has delivered you safely to the other side of the canyon of grief.

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOUR PRACTICE

The first time you reconnect with your body you may feel as though you are meeting a long-lost friend. The reconnection may be bittersweet, but as you learn to pay attention to the present moment you will move beyond the story of who you think you are, and open yourself to *satya*, or truth. Yes, you feel devastated, lost, vulnerable, and confused, but you are still intact. The truth is that you are not destroyed.

This book isn’t going to tell you how to use mindfulness to “get over” your grief. That is because grief-work isn’t about getting over anything. It is about learning how to adapt to your life after loss, and finding a new way to relate to your loved one even though they are no longer physically present. I am not going to tell you how to “fix” yourself, because nothing is actually wrong with you. For now, if you find you are chastising yourself for your thoughts, feelings, and actions, and believing that you should be over this already, remind yourself that you are human, and that your pain is an artifact of love.

TWO TYPES OF MINDFULNESS PRACTICE: FORMAL AND INFORMAL

The main way to practice mindfulness is through meditation, which is typically done seated on a meditation cushion on the floor. A stack of blankets works fine, too, or you can practice in a straight-backed chair.

This is considered formal practice because you dedicate a set amount of time to practice “on purpose.” Formal mindfulness practice is like weight lifting—it builds your “mindfulness muscles” so that when a stressful situation arises in the so-called real world, your mind and body are prepared to return to a state of equilibrium. Just as showing up at the gym regularly to work out increases your fitness over time, sitting on your meditation cushion regularly increases your ability to remain calm during the storm.

Another type of formal practice is walking meditation, where you set aside an amount of time to walk with nowhere to go. This is covered in depth in Week 4.

SPONTANEOUS AWARENESS: INFORMAL MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

The mindfulness skills that we build in formal practice can be taken out into the world through informal practice. This doesn’t mean that you have to plunk your cushion down in the middle of the mall, of course. Informal practice is an internal and spontaneous act, such as silently sending loving-kindness to people on a crowded bus, or paying attention to the sensations of your body while standing in line at a grocery store.

I had one student choose the longest checkout line in order to practice mindfulness of the sensation of patience after a particularly hectic day. “I didn’t really need to be anywhere at any specific time, but I always rush, rush, rush. This time I just watched my breath and my body, and recognized that I was telling myself that I would be in line forever,” she said. “I found that once I stopped the narrative and became mindful of the moment, it was nice just to stand in line. For that moment, that was all I had to do.”

How often do we tell ourselves how busy we are? Every moment is an opportunity to wake up to the truth, no matter where you are or what you are doing. You can practice in the middle of a crowded room and no one will be any the wiser. Try one of these informal mindfulness techniques next time you realize you are rushing around or daydreaming:

- Pay attention to the sensation of your legs while in line at the grocery checkout.
- Smile at a stranger and send them a silent message of loving-kindness.
- Feel the sensation of your scalp while shampooing your hair.
- Pause to notice your breath for two rounds of inhalations and exhalations while at your desk or in traffic.
- Give yourself permission to do one thing at a time mindfully, and let go of the idea of multi-tasking.

PREPARING FOR YOUR PRACTICE

Mindfulness is called a “practice” because it doesn’t have to be perfect. Isn’t that a relief? Just try to do your best with each exercise, and always make modifications that help you to be more present.

Before you begin this week’s practice, you will want to set aside some time to address the basic “housekeeping” tasks that will let you create a foundation for your mindfulness practice. Here are some suggestions:

- **Create your space.** You will need a quiet and safe place where you will not be disturbed. If possible, choose an area of your house that is quiet and clutter-free. Having a dedicated practice space will make it easier for you to show up regularly.
- **Gather things that will support you in your practice:**
 - A straight-backed chair
 - A meditation cushion or firm, folded blankets
 - Two or three extra blankets for warmth and support
 - A timekeeping device: kitchen timers can be handy, and there are a few smartphone apps that serve as meditation timers
 - A journal or writing pad
 - A pen or pencil, plus crayons or colored pencils.
- **Schedule time to practice.** Make time to practice a minimum of 20 minutes each day. This will have a powerful effect on your immune system and emotional well-being. Studies show that after eight weeks of daily 20-minute sessions, the body begins to make lasting changes.
- **Silence phones and electronics.** If you are used to being “plugged in” during your waking hours, experiment with turning your phone off during your practice. If you do choose to use your cell phone as a timekeeper, consider setting it to airplane or “do not disturb” mode.
- **Dress comfortably.** If possible, wear loose, comfortable clothes. I suggest dressing in layers, as your body will probably cool off as it relaxes.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What do I do if I fall asleep?

Grief can make your body very tired. If you fall asleep during a practice, simply allow sleep to happen without judgment. It is probably exactly what your body needs.

What do I do when a thought shows up?

When you get distracted or wander off in thought, simply pick up where you left off and begin again. It is important that you don't beat yourself up for wandering off, but instead know that the point is to be able to catch yourself when you do.

What do I do if my emotions are overwhelming?

Think of your breath as your safe harbor. If you can keep your awareness focused on your breath while simultaneously experiencing emotions, you can walk the Middle Path and observe your emotion without letting it overtake you or running away. Remember to always practice self-compassion, and know that you can open your eyes or end the practice if it becomes too much.

Is something wrong with me if I am not experiencing strong emotions?

You don't have to cry to experience grief. Drs. Kenneth Doka and Terry Martin explain in their book, *Grieving Beyond Gender: Understanding the Ways Men and Women Mourn* (2010,) that there is a continuum of reactions to grief. At one end are the "intuitive grievers," who experience the loss on a deep emotional level and will express grief through tears and sharing the story of their loss. At the other end are "instrumental grievers," who will focus on the cognitive aspects of loss and engage in problem-solving activities, and who may not disclose their feelings. We all lie somewhere along the continuum, and experience grief as a blend of the two styles with a primary tendency toward one or the other.

MINDFULNESS MEDITATION

The most recognized mindfulness practice is seated meditation. We have already discussed the importance of having a dedicated space for your practice; now let's look at how to sit when you meditate, which can be either on the floor or on a chair or bench. There is no right or wrong way to sit as long as your body feels supported and safe.