

MINDFULNESS TO REDUCE SUFFERING

MINDFULNESS OVERVIEW

Mindfulness is the art of training the mind to stay focused on the present moment with an attitude of equanimity. It may be practiced *formally* (seated meditation, walking meditation), *informally* (awareness breaks, mindfully engaging in day to day tasks, mindful communication) or in an *intensive* retreat, which is often held in silence.

The IAA Model of Mindfulness: Shapiro & Carlson (2009)

- *Intention* – clear reason for practice
- *Attention* – direct observation of each moment
- *Attitude* – open-hearted compassion

“The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment to moment.” Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003)



“With equanimity, what passes through your mind is held with spaciousness so you stay even-keeled and aren’t thrown off balance. The ancient circuitry of the brain is continually driving you to react one way or another - and equanimity is your circuit breaker.” Rick Hansen (2009)

4 NOBLE TRUTHS

1. The truth of suffering
2. The truth of the cause of suffering
3. The truth that cessation of suffering is possible
4. The truth of the path to peace

4 FOUNDATIONS OF MINDFULNESS

1. Mindfulness of Body
2. Mindfulness of Feelings
3. Mindfulness of Mind
4. Mindfulness of Mental Objects

6 DOORS OF THE SENSES

- Sensation
- Sound
- Sight
- Smell
- Taste
- Thought/Cognition

3 FEELING TONES

- Pleasurable
- Unpleasurable
- Neutral

MINDFULNESS & YOGA INTERVENTIONS FOR GRIEF: PRACTICE/SYMPTOM MATRIX

	Relaxation Response/Focus	Mindfulness Meditation	Compassion & Lovingkindness	Walking Meditation	RAIN	Yoga
Physical	Proven to reduce chronic pain, tension, headaches, PMS, and more	Cultivates awareness of sensations as impermanent, changing; opportunity for conscious relaxation	Can reduce physical tension, headaches; Increases sense of well-being which often manifests as physical pleasure.	Offers alternative experience of “body” by focusing on feet and movement of legs	Space to reflect on reaction and “drop the story” associated with unpleasurable sensations; conscious relaxation	Proven to reduce physical tension and pain. Improves flexibility, balance, muscle tone, cardiac health, protects from injury.
Emotional	Proven to reduce anxiety, mild to moderate depression	Deconstruct “feelings” into thoughts & sensations; Cultivates non-identification with feelings	Classically this is taught to reduce fear	Physical activity and focus on the senses can temper anxiety and increase energy	Offers a manageable system for coping with overwhelming feelings	Improves mood, decreases feelings of anxiety and depression as well as anger and PTSD symptoms.
Cognitive	Improves ability to redirect attention away from thoughts to mantra/breath	Creates more “space” between thoughts for direct experience; Cultivates non-identification with thoughts	Can shift negative thoughts and ruminations about self and others.	Infuses mind with new awareness of sensory experience, interrupting habitual thoughts	Directs attention away from the content (thoughts) to physical experience of feeling	Improves concentration and focus, increases mental clarity and sense of presence.
Behavior	Proven to reduce acting out behavior in children. Decreases insomnia	Slows down reactivity; Improves self-regulation	Decreases hostile attitude and behavior, including internal ruminations and external actions	Encourages a new way of “being” in the world or with nature; Is often a new undertaking;	Transforms difficult emotions which can dissolve habitual behaviors and patterns	Sensory regulation combined with emotional regulation fosters impulse control.
Social	Eases anxiety which can decrease social anxiety	Improves self-referential processing and decreases social anxiety	Directly impacts a sense of social connection; Cultivates positive attitude by focusing on shared desire to be happy; Decreases blame/judgement	Cultivates sense of community when practiced in groups; Sense of belonging when practiced in public	Attends to root of suffering which can impede interpersonal relationships	Yoga is often practiced in groups, widening social circles. Can foster a sense of connectedness with self and others.
Spiritual	Mantra may help deepen sense of spiritual connection	Increases “Daily Spiritual Experiences”	Cultivates connection to all sentient beings – something greater than oneself	Cultivates connection to the natural cycle of life, flora, fauna, and other sentient beings	Cultivates connection to one’s own inner wisdom and truth	Sense of increased consciousness and awareness may promote spiritual growth.

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MEDITATION TOOLS

RELAXATION RESPONSE

Cultivates Focus. First Aid for Overwhelming Physical Sensations, Anxiety & Ruminating Thoughts.

The relaxation response is the physiologic opposite of fight-or-flight. Although it is not a mindfulness-based technique, it does help prepare clients for mindfulness meditation by cultivating conscious relaxation and focus. It is a skillful choice when present movement awareness causes more suffering or is inaccessible, and is usually my first offering when working with clients experiencing acute grief. Yoga, meditation, tai chi, and other practices can also evoke the relaxation response.

BENSON-HENRY PROTOCOL FOR THE RELAXATION RESPONSE (BENSON, 2010)

Phase One: Activate The Relaxation Response (Repeat daily. When Phase One is mastered, add Phase Two: Visualization)

1. Choose a Focus Word, Personal Mantra, or Repetitive Activity. This could be a calming word, phrase, short prayer, your breath, or repetitive motion such as walking, yoga, knitting or gardening.
2. Sit in a comfortable position in a quiet place where you won't be disturbed.
3. Close your eyes or gaze softly at a focal point.
4. Scan your body from your feet to your head, or vice versa, progressively relaxing all of your muscles.
5. Breathe slow and naturally. Each time you exhale, silently repeat or picture your focus word or phrase. Alternately, just focus on your exhale or the repetition of movement.
6. Assume a "passive disregard for everyday thoughts." If you get distracted or thoughts intrude simply think "oh well," and return back to your chosen object of focus.
7. Practice this for 12 to 15 minutes.

Phase Two: Visualization (Optional) - After practicing The Relaxation Response, spend an additional 8 to 10 minutes imagining a peaceful scene in which you are completely healthy, relaxed, and stress-free. If you are undergoing medical treatment, such as chemotherapy, it is important that you picture yourself outside the medical facility.

COUNTING OR LABELING BREATH

Focus is often taught as the first step in mindfulness training, and can serve as an alternative to the relaxation response technique outlined above. As you focus on your breath, simply label it with the following words, as though giving your breath a mental "subtitle."

- In, Out, In, Out
- Rising, Falling, Rising, Falling
- Counting (1, 2, 1, 2 or up to 10 and back down again)

RAIN

Cultivates Clarity. Helps Manage Difficult & Overwhelming Feelings.

“Working with emotions during our meditation sessions sharpens our ability to recognize a feeling just as it begins, not fifteen consequential actions later. We can then go on to develop a more balanced relationship with it - neither letting it overwhelm us so that we lash out rashly, nor ignoring it because we’re afraid or ashamed of it.” *Sharon Salzberg (2003)*

“The steps give us somewhere to turn in a painful moment, and as we call on them more regularly, they strengthen our capacity to come home to our deepest truth.” *Tara Brach (2013)*.

When a difficult emotion arises on or off the cushion, RAIN creates space for us to decondition our habitual response, and choose to respond mindfully rather than react mindlessly.

- **RECOGNIZE** - Acknowledge what you are feeling. “What is happening inside me right now?”
- **ALLOWING** (Also called Acceptance) - Allow the experience unfold with a sense of calm abiding, rather than turn away or over-identify with your experience. (Tara Brach recommends noting “I consent” or “yes” or “this too”).
- **INVESTIGATE** - Unhook yourself from the object or story, so you can witness the emotion with kindness, and from an unbiased perspective. Mindfulness of body is a great technique here, as is asking yourself “what am I believing to be true?”
- **NON-IDENTIFICATION** - Recognize you are not this emotion or experience; it is just a temporary event arising. Watch it with an attitude of natural presence

5 MENTAL HINDRANCES

These are the classic roadblocks not only to present moment awareness, but to liberation itself.

- Sensual Desire or Greed
- Ill-will & Aversion
- Sloth & Torpor
- Restlessness, Anxiety & Worry
- Skeptical Doubt

The RAIN technique is an appropriate remedy for the 5 hindrances, and in many cases lovingkindness will work well too. Below are a few classical “remedies” for each hindrance.

Sensual Desire: If the object is a person, focus on unattractive parts of the body, imagine the person as a corpse, or the temporary nature of flesh. If a craving arises, meditate on the consequences of indulgence. Explore delayed gratification as an alternative to harmful instantaneous pleasure.

Greed: Reflect on the temporary nature of pleasure.

Ill-will: Lovingkindness meditations.

Aversion, Fear: When you want things to be other than they are, narrow your focus (count your breaths, relaxation response) broaden your focus (sounds outside and in the room), or use the RAIN technique. Lovingkindness is also a remedy for fear.

Sloth (physical): Sit up straighter, focus more on your breath. Open your eyes, allow light to enter, stand up, go for a walk, do yoga. Explore why you are sleepy - nutrition, better sleep, etc. and tend to the root cause.

Torpor (mental):

Restlessness, anxiety, worry: Focus using by counting breath, practice loving-kindness meditation, smile, or shift your focus to sound. Walking meditation can also be a good remedy.

Skeptical doubt: Reflect on the questions you have and find a way to answer them, either with a teacher or through research; put it aside and continue to practice.

COMPASSION & LOVINGKINDNESS MEDITATION

Cultivates Compassion. An antidote for feeling disconnected from self and others, social strain, fears, general suffering, & spiritual seeking.

“In Asian languages, the word for ‘mind’ and the word for ‘heart’ are same. So if you’re not hearing mindfulness in some deep way as heartfulness, you’re not really understanding it. Compassion and kindness towards oneself are intrinsically woven into it. You could think of mindfulness as wise and affectionate attention.” -Jon Kabat-Zinn (*Time*, 2012)

The formal practice of lovingkindness meditation – also known as *metta* – involves sending a short verse in “six directions” as you visualize a particular being: (1) yourself, (2) a spiritual leader or teacher, (3) a friend or family member, (4) a neutral person, (5) a difficult person, and (6) all sentient beings. You can craft your own verse, similar to the one below:

May you be happy, as I wish to be happy.

May you know peace, as I wish to know peace.

May you be free from suffering, as I wish to be free from suffering.

The informal practice of lovingkindness meditation can be as simple as looking someone in the eye during conversation and silently wishing them “may you be happy.”

This practice is not about forcing yourself to feel a particular way, or condoning harmful behavior by another. Rather, it cultivates the awareness that we are all in the same boat – all beings have the desire to be happy and free from suffering. You also witness your own habitual reactions to other beings.

VERY IMPORTANT! Do not choose your worst enemy for the “difficult” person – start with someone who is a little challenging. If you find your having a hard time sending this person well wishes, you can either send the well wishes to yourself, or choose a less challenging person.

ABOUT HEATHER STANG

Heather Stang is the author of *Mindfulness & Grief: With Guided Meditations To Calm Your Mind & Restore Your Spirit* and the host of the *Mindfulness & Grief Podcast*. She is best known for using present moment awareness to relieve suffering, cope with and eventually reengage with life after loss. Her focus on teaching others to use mindfulness-based techniques to reduce stress, cope with grief, and cultivate personal growth is inspired by her own journey of love, loss and posttraumatic growth.



Heather discovered yoga and mindfulness while she was the CEO of a web development company and diagnosed with a stress-related illness. These contemplative practices inspired Heather to live a life in service to others, and she became a suicide/crisis hotline call specialist in honor of her uncle who died by suicide when she was a child.

Heather relied on her mindfulness training to maintain a calm and compassionate attitude both on the job and at home after difficult shifts. Additionally, Heather volunteered as a trainer and call specialist on the New Orleans hotline just weeks after Hurricane Katrina devastated the region, and was a research assistant for a NIMH funded National Suicide Prevention Lifeline Research Project. This experience inspired her to pursue a Masters in Thanatology (Death, Dying & Bereavement Expert) from Hood College, which she earned in 2010.

Struck by the parallels between mindfulness, yoga, and contemporary theories of grief, which focuses on the individual's direct experience of loss and the benefits of meaning making and posttraumatic growth, Heather developed a "Yoga for Grief" course: an 8 week program uniting yoga, meditation, journaling, expressive arts and death education. Today, that course is captured in her book, *Mindfulness & Grief*, and is offered by yoga, meditation, and grief professionals in North America in a variety of venues.

Heather sits on the Advisory Board of the highly regarded military family survivor organization *Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS)*, and is the Engagement & Networking Committee Chair for the *Association of Death Education & Counseling*. She also presents professional training and bereavement support through organizations including the *National Fallen Firefighter's Foundation*, *National Hospice & Palliative Care Organization*, *LiveOnNY Organ Donation Network*, and the *Maryland Library Association*.

In addition to her book [Mindfulness & Grief](#), Heather contributed three chapters to the bestselling volume [Techniques of Grief Therapy: Assessment & Intervention](#) (Neimeyer, 2015), including *Yoga for Grief*, *Compassion & Lovingkindness Meditation*, and *Relaxation Response*.

Heather lives in Western Maryland with her husband, and is the founder of the [Frederick Meditation Center](#) where she is a Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapist and mindfulness meditation instructor, and she also facilitates her 8 week Mindfulness & Grief group online. Contact Heather for speaking engagements and appearances by calling 240-397-8080 or email heatherstangma@gmail.com.

RESOURCES

FREE GUIDED MEDITATIONS BY HEATHER STANG

Public: Insight Timer App for Android & iPhone (Search for Heather Stang under Guided)
 soundcloud.com/heatherstang
 mindfulnessandgrief.com/guided-meditations

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