

Mindful Mondays

TRANSFORMING THE
EVERYDAY TO CLAIM CALM
AND REDUCE STRESS



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Introduction

Let the waters settle and you will see the moon and the stars mirrored in your own being. --Rumi

It is a busy world, between work, home, and society at large. Most of us would do well to invite in more calm. Mindfulness meditation offers us just that; a reset to our central nervous system, the opportunity to evaluate where and how we focus our attention, and the opportunity to shift our awareness.

Before I started meditation practices, I thought meditation offered some elusive, out-of-body experience, a melding with higher consciousness signaled by a sensation of floating off of the floor while surrounded in blue light. Maybe you've had that impression, too. While meditation can be extremely peaceful, spiritual, and other-worldly, it can also be a moment of recognizing that our thoughts are moving quickly, distracting us with mental chatter. That revelation left me wanting. Where's that spiritual communion filling the body with ethereal blue light that I was expecting?

The reality is, mindfulness meditation is the practice of directing one's attention, without judgment, to the present moment. It's that simple... and that complicated. In moments of mindfulness, sometimes the space between thoughts will grow. Sometimes our bodies relax. Sometimes we do feel deeply connected to the world around us. Sometimes, when we use our ability to observe thoughts and feelings, it allows for wisdom to arise. Sometimes our strong emotions offer us a lens into our value system, which we can then use to direct ourselves into aligned action. These moments of insight into our experience provide us the opportunity to claim calm. Perhaps we are even afforded a chance to reduce stress and embrace peacefulness as we learn that accepting our experiences, good, bad, or otherwise, allows us a path forward, while resisting these experiences keeps us stuck.

I love the metaphor of being immersed in water as mindful awareness. Slipping into the stream of present moment awareness and hanging out there for a bit, is akin to a long swim in the ocean, letting the waves pass over you, bobbing along, occasionally getting tossed in the surf. A week-long meditation retreat might feel like a week in the ocean. Sometimes we are only able

to attend a weekend retreat that feels like floating along on a lake. Other times our practice is shorter: an hour, thirty minutes. Then bobbing along a river or a stream comes to mind, or maybe a jump into a favorite swimming hole. While all of these practices are meaningful and strengthen mindfulness skills, I'm personally fascinated by our extremely short journeys into mindfulness: the raindrops. I believe the raindrops are where the true power of mindfulness practice lies.

Tiny but plentiful, raindrops represent all the moments of mindful awareness that occur in the midst of our days. Perhaps an awareness of the intensity of the blue sky. A deep inhale of coffee that brings you immediately into the present moment. The soft silky feel of your dog's ears as you pet them. A single breath that resets the body and allows us to access different choices. Those brief moments, like raindrops, are freely available and brief, but abundant when we bring them into focus.

When you add up those raindrops that we can collect over the span of a day, a week, a year, or a lifetime, we find ourselves swimming in a vast and boundless ocean of present moment experience.

In *Mindful Mondays: Transforming the Everyday to Claim Calm and Decrease Stress*, I share what I think of as "raindrop moments": brief strategies to reconnect to present moment experiences during our everyday life. Some strategies will be faster than others, but I've included suggestions on how to pull from lengthier formal meditation strategies into "on the fly" moments of mindful awareness during your busy week. For people in a traditional Monday through Friday rhythm of work, school, and life, Monday offers a perfect opportunity to hit reset, to learn a new skill, and practice it for a limited time period of the week. Of course, you are welcome to start a strategy on any day of the week, and gather raindrops as you see fit to fill your own tub, pool, lake, and, eventually, ocean of present moment experience.

Jump in, the water's fine!

How to use this book

This book is arranged by sections based on focus of awareness and skills. Mindfulness meditation training typically starts with using our senses, our bodies, and our breath as focuses

of awareness. We'll start there. You, of course, are free to start wherever you like. But even if you are a skilled mindfulness practitioner, I'd recommend you come back and visit the seemingly-simpler practices. Applying them in different ways and in shorter raindrop-sized chunks may open up new awareness for you.

After mindfulness of breath, body, and senses, we'll move into mindfulness of emotions and thoughts. Bringing our attention to thought and feeling is a very different experience for those who have not tried it. I liken it to taking a step back from the experience and observing how thought and emotion play out in our brains and bodies, as if we are observing the experience for the very first time. Next, we'll examine practices that open up our awareness to our values. Finally, we'll look at day to day applications for these skills and strategies.

Each strategy is presented as a short chapter, in a What--Why--How format. The What: a brief explanation of the practice. The Why: the background or purpose for this practice. Whenever possible, I'll explain the psychology and/or physiology behind the practices being suggested. Finally, The How: how you can implement this practice in short and practical ways.

After each chapter, you'll find a planning and reflection tool. You can use this to strategize how to implement these practices in ways that are meaningful and accessible to your life. You might commit to using a specific strategy in a specific way, and you'll be prompted to problem-solve any barriers to implementation. After spending some time practicing this new skill (I suggest a week) you can reflect on how the strategy worked for you and can be utilized moving forward in your life. Mine your experience and new knowledge for "raindrop opportunities": moments to practice mindfulness "on the fly" as you go about your life, reconnecting to your internal and external world and resetting your central nervous system.

Looking for more content than what you'll find within these pages? Head over to my website, www.drkimdwyer.com/books. Click on the link for Mindful Mondays, and you'll find recorded meditations to get you started as well as additional tips and strategies to help you make the most of your journey into mindfulness. You'll also find a printable version of the Reflection and Implementation Tool, especially useful if you are reading on an e-reader.

Section 1: General Mindfulness Strategies

Chapter 1: Defining Mindfulness

In this section, we'll explore general strategies to strengthen mindful awareness. Mindfulness practices help us direct our attention to the present moment without judgment. There are three important concepts in this definition:

1. Practicing mindfulness is about learning to direct our attention. While other forms of meditation may focus on achieving spiritual connection, mindfulness practices focus on noticing the focus of our attention and working to intentionally direct our attention.
2. Practicing mindfulness is about present moment awareness. In formal mindfulness meditation and in "real life" mindfulness practice, we seek to bring our attention to the present moment.
3. Mindfulness practice seeks to remove judgment. While practicing mindfulness, we seek to attend without engaging in evaluation--good, bad, beautiful, ugly, horrible, perfect, etc. Judgment is the mind's commentary on a situation and not the pure sensations of the moment brought to the mind via the senses. This commentary is often preconceived; based on prior experiences, and not necessarily a reflection of our present moment.

These concepts may be very comfortable to you if you've already practiced mindfulness. If not, you may find it helpful to explore why directed attention to the present moment without judgment is a helpful concept, and why our brain and bodies evolved to focus outside of the present moment, and, at times, with judgment.

It is the habit of the mind, and frankly, the job of the mind, to wander. This is a primitive safety strategy deeply coded into our DNA. From a physiological standpoint, survival of the species is our goal. We need to keep ourselves safe from life threatening danger. The mind that is good at managing safety is the mind that constantly scans the environment. That scanning mind then

presents our conscious awareness with tidbits of information to think about. If you're on the savannah with lions and tigers or other predators, constant attention to potential threats is important. Pay attention to these intrusive "lion on the left" tidbits, and you stay safe and alive. Don't pay attention and you may be ambushed and become a lion's lunch. Early humans who didn't pay attention were less likely to live to the age of reproduction. Thus, the DNA of the early humans who had minds that were more prone to scanning and interrupting the conscious mind with safety information was more likely to be passed on to future generations, as the individual's carrying that DNA reached maturity and produced children.

Fast forward six-hundred thousand years, and many humans have moved off of the savannah and into the suburbs and board rooms. We still have threats in our environment, but they are rarely predators. They are more likely to be of the "Hey, if you don't finish those reports by 5pm, your job is on the line" variety. We don't need to be constantly scanning our environment and interrupting our thought processes with "danger!" thoughts. Instead, we would benefit from focused attention without interruption to the task at hand, completing those reports by 5pm. But given that evolution favored the brain that was in constant scanning mode for roughly all but the last 200 years, focused attention is a work in progress for us twenty-first century humans. Mindfulness practices provide us with an opportunity to work on enhancing this skill.

The second part of the mindfulness definition is "to the present moment." Mindfulness practices use the present moment as a source of awareness. This could be the present moment outside of us: information brought into our brain through our five senses. Or it can be the present moment within us: an awareness of our thought processes, of physical sensations within the body, and of our emotions. Why is present moment awareness so important?

Bringing our attention to the present moment allows us to assess how we are doing right now. What's going on in our body? Are we breathing? Is our heart beating? If those two conditions are met, from a biological standpoint we are doing just fine. The highly developed safety centers of our brain, the limbic system and amygdala, to be precise, are very sensitive to both external and internal information about safety.

Try this: allow your mind to focus on an anticipated event or imagined outcome that is somewhat stressful for you. You'll probably notice that your heart rate and respiration (breathing) rate rise. Focusing your mind on this future stressful event sets the "fight or flight" response in motion. However, those events that you are thinking about are future and imagined events, and no amount of cortisol release in the body *right now* will help you fight some future anticipated stressor. And if the stressor is of the "report due by 5pm" variety, the fight or flight response will

not be helpful while you're in the process of completing your report; it may actually impair your ability to stay focused on the task.

Refocusing on the present moment often informs the brain that we are ok. Our heart is beating, and we are breathing. Returning to the present moment allows us the internal calm from which we can make measured decisions and take action to align with our goals. Present moment awareness does not mean we never engage in future oriented planning. It does mean that when we engage in future planning, it is just that: planning. Not worrying. Not half of our brain thinking about the future while the other half tries to be present and watch a movie with our family. Dedicated, focused planning about the future is great. The busy brain that tries to problem solve our futures while we try to enjoy a movie and our loved ones' company, or work on our due-at-5pm reports, is not a helpful brain. Mindfulness practices help us bring attention back to the present moment, so that we are fully engaged with the task at hand.

The last portion of the mindfulness definition is "without judgment." This refers to the ability to be an observer of information. Information could be external, things happening around us we recognize through our senses; or internal, our body's sensations and experiences, our thoughts, and our emotions. When we observe without judgement, we do not overlay preconceived notions, expectations, or prior experience on information. Things that are happening are happening right now, as if for the first time, so that we can fully experience them without the additional layers of filtering and judgment that our brain brings in via past experiences.

As an example, take a situation where you wake up in the middle of the night because you hear a car door slam. At its most basic, this is noise; air waves disturbed and vibrating and brought to your ear where your brain interprets the sound. And being that it is not a "regular" sound for you at night, your brain wakes you up. Assessing the situation in the present moment without judgment, the brain may say, "Oh, car door sound, no problem, go back to sleep." But the judgments laid on by the brain can take you in other directions. For instance, if you layer on, "Oh, those are my neighbors, probably out partying all hours of the night, so inconsiderate. Don't they know that people have jobs to get up for in the morning? Don't they actually work?" You can see how this judgment may not be helpful, may not be based in reality, and likely won't help you return to sleep.

Our brains are very good at fitting new information into old boxes. It's a time saver. If we can overlay an already developed concept onto novel information, we can establish our responses, our thoughts and feelings, to that information more efficiently. This ability is likely one reason that we have thrived as a species; we can think fast and make decisions based on past experience. This is a super important skill while roaming the savannah with possible predators.

We quickly identify a rustle in the tall grass as perhaps belonging to a creature that wants to eat us for lunch. But in our modern world, this ability can quickly get us into trouble as we bring to mind past experience that may not appropriately inform our current experience.

For instance, if you had a situation where a friend whom you trusted later betrayed your confidence, you might go into new friendships somewhat guarded. Your mind is taking the “friendship” concept and overlaying the prior experience of betrayal. As the new friendship develops, the old betrayal narrative is activated, leading to distrust of the new friend. Yet nothing in the new friendship necessarily prompted a need to be distrustful. Our brain layered in a past experience to a similar experience (“friendship”), without evaluating if the current experience does in fact warrant such a reaction. If you then pull back and withhold of yourself in the new relationship as a protective strategy to avoid betrayal, you unintentionally may weaken the closeness of the friendship by not showing up as your full, authentic self. Mindful awareness allows us to peel off the brain’s layers of judgment and experience the new relationship as a brand new experience, unique and happening for the first time.

Now that you have a better understanding of what we mean by mindfulness and why it is a helpful skill, we’ll move into some introductory mindfulness meditation practices.

{This is the end of the preview. We hope you have enjoyed it. Please visit [to order the full book!](#)}