

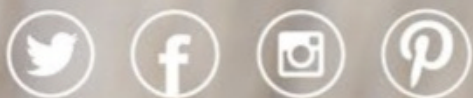
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The **SELF-COMPASSION** issue

mindful

**TARA
BRACH**

on loving your
imperfect self

*Connect
deeply with
your heart*

How to create
what you desire

*Breathe
away stress*

3 easy steps to
relieve anxiety

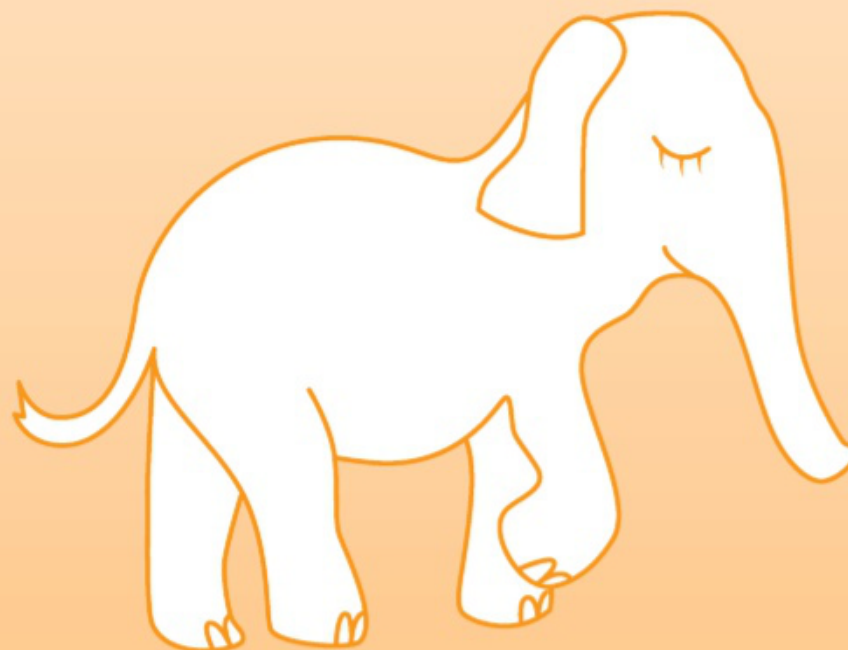
Tara Brach ►

Renowned mindfulness teacher
and best-selling author, on her
new book *Radical Compassion*

FEBRUARY 2020
mindful.org

As you may have heard, compassion literally means, “to suffer together.” But that’s only part of the story: a fuller definition might be, “to suffer together with the desire to do something about it.”

so what does it mean to bring **COMPASSION** **INTO THE** **WORKPLACE?**



Bringing compassion into the workplace doesn't mean we **have** to suffer together—but it does mean keeping in mind that we're all in this together.

And even if we don't always see things the same way, the willingness to embrace a variety of viewpoints is one action anyone can take, which will make us all stronger in the face of challenges.

Identifying strength in difference is why Mind the Moment has always offered a wide range of mindfulness tools, to meet the many needs and learning styles of any organization's workforce.

That's why we've recently developed workshops that use those same tools of mindfulness to better understand and appreciate cultural and creative differences, for leaders and team-members alike.

And that's why we've even been helping clinicians explore how the practices of mindfulness can complement and optimize traditional patient treatment options—while making themselves more resilient in the process.



We're in the business of helping every organization express its most deeply held values.

Let's get into this together, shall we?

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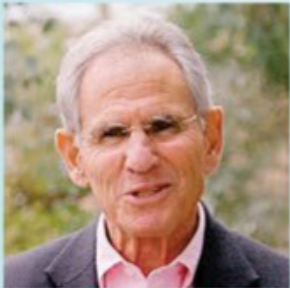
Whether you're just discovering mindfulness or have been practicing for years, you'll learn new ways to improve your life, your relationships, your community & the world

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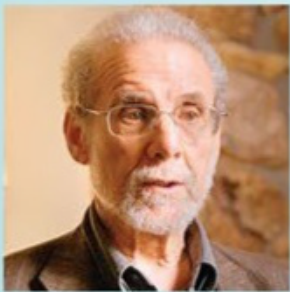
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mindful

february

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Leading with Love

The Holistic Life Foundation is helping 4,500 children a week with meditation and yoga. This is their story.

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Tara Brach on Radical Compassion



The **SELF-COMPASSION** issue

Practicing self-compassion puts us in honest, direct contact with our own vulnerability. When we actively offer care to ourselves, we begin shaping a world of kindness and caring.

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Point of View

By Barry Boyce

“Rigid attachment to who you believe yourself to be and the stories you tell about yourself are limiting and are the root cause of many of our problems.”

PATRICIA ROCKMAN


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What is calling you this year?

As an old year ends and a new one begins, I like to find a few quiet moments for a simple practice that helps recognize this transition and honor all that has happened and all that awaits. I'd love to invite you to join me.

You might want to have a tissue or a journal handy. I find this practice brings so many emotions to the surface, making me teary and grateful and excited to be alive all at once.



Remembering 2019 when Lilly, our rascally goat, darted indoors and onto a bookcase.

Sit comfortably, relax your body, and close your eyes. Slowly, gently, breathe in through your nose, imagining that you are breathing in all of 2019 and what transpired for you, holding the whole year in your lungs for a couple of seconds. Survey your memories as they come in on your breath, catching glimpses of the year's high and low moments. Allow yourself to feel the good, bad, disappointing, marvelous, wondrous, thanking everything that life brought to you this year and let it go with a deep, long

exhale. Let it all go. Experience these tides of breath a few times, in and out, and then rest, sensing the air coming in through your nostrils, and flowing out. Letting your breath flow naturally, effortlessly. Next, I invite you to imagine a field of snow, freshly fallen all around you, pure, expectant. Allow your heart to swell and your ears to attune: What is calling to you this year? Where does your heart long to go? Feel and sense deeply and when you are ready, let your eyes flutter open: Welcome to a new beginning.

And welcome too to the love, hope, and laughter in this issue. Mindfulness icon Tara Brach teaches us how to find true self-compassion in the face of our restless anxieties. Ali, Atman, and Andrés of the Holistic Life Foundation bring us hope in the power of mindfulness to transform lives and communities. And Barry, *Mindful's* beloved and Falstaffian founding editor, brings us laughter by sharing that none of us, alas, is the center of the universe.

Wishing you a new year filled with deep breaths, wonderful beginnings, love, hope, and laughter.



On the cover

Tara Brach takes *Mindful* on a deep exploration into the healing power of self-compassion with an interview in her home, an excerpt from her new book *Radical Compassion*, and the practice of RAIN.

Anne Alexander is a longtime meditator, yogi, and editor. She is the author of two *New York Times* best sellers and has had a hand in shaping magazines, books, apps, and websites for Rodale, National Geographic, and more.

Anne

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Getting to Know Your Inner Critic

We all doubt and disparage ourselves—sometimes it’s hard to even notice we’re doing it. How does the inner critic show up in your life? Here’s what *Mindful* readers had to say.

How do you tend to respond to your inner critic?

“I **RECOGNIZE** what is going on and **WHY**—am I tired, hungry, sad, angry?”

“I **WAIT** for it to pass.”

“I have a **SHORT RANT**, then look at what’s happening more holistically.”

“I **STOP COMPARING** myself with others, and allow myself to forgive me.”

“I **WRITE DOWN** what the inner critic says and respond to myself with the truth as I see it. It usually works well when I do it in the moment.”

“With compassion. I pretend the inner critic is a dear friend who has lost her way, and I try to respond as I would to someone I cared about.”

“I **FOCUS** on the good things I have done, and the things I did right.”

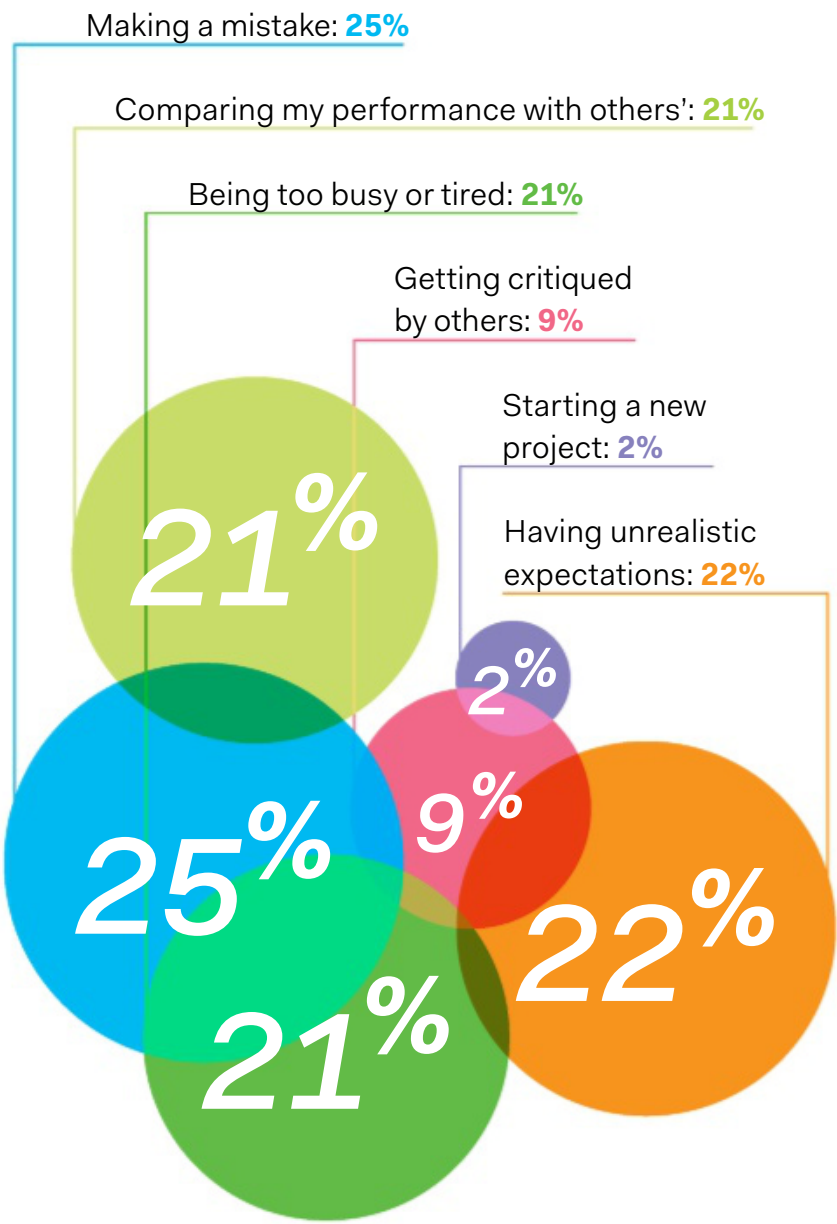
“With a meditation practice, I am **LISTENING** more.”

“I go to my art room and **START PAINTING**, drawing, or doing mixed media.”

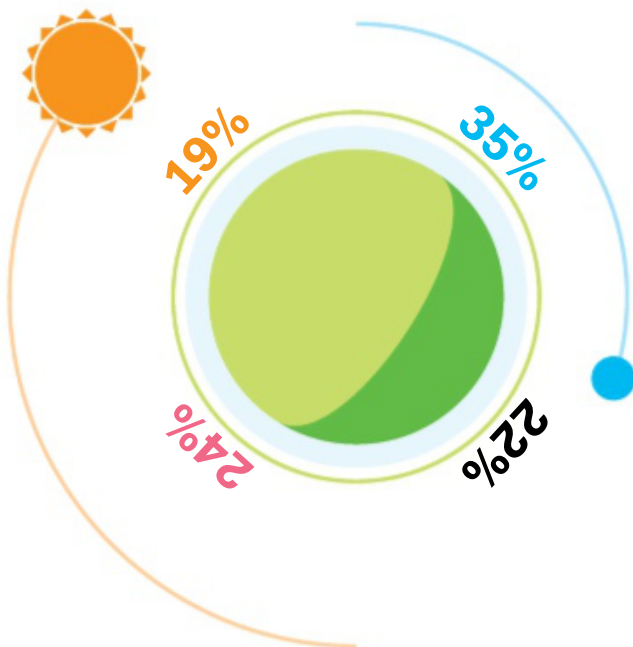
“I **MEDITATE** and connect with people I know will hear me out with nonjudgment. I move on and show up in the world.”

“I try to **REMEMBER** all of the people who love me and care for me, despite feeling a little heavy.”

What activates your inner critic the most?



At what time is your inner critic most active?



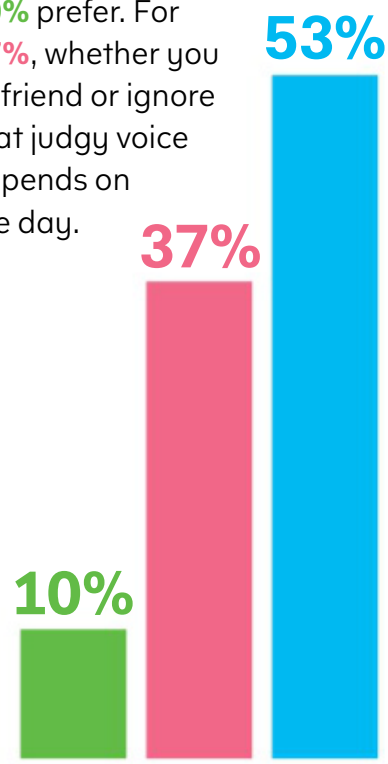
- Morning: 19%
- Afternoon: 24%
- Evening: 35%
- The middle of the night: 22%

Who has been your best teacher for meeting your inner critic?

- “My therapist and mindfulness teacher.”
- “Tara Brach and Brené Brown.”
- “My 13-year-old son.”
- “A coworker.”
- “My faith.”
- “Friends who shared their experience. I realized, ‘I can do that.’”
- “Silence.”

Is it better to ignore your inner critic, or to befriend it?

What a friendly response! **53%** said you'd rather befriend your inner critic, while ignoring it is the approach that **10%** prefer. For **37%**, whether you befriend or ignore that judgy voice depends on the day.



How do you recognize the “voice” of your inner critic?

Some say that their inner critic delivers a specific **TONE OF VOICE**: It's **LOUD, HARSH, CONDESCENDING**, and **RELENTLESS**. For others, the inner critic's presence is clear from the **EMOTIONS** it

brings—it can make us feel **DEPRESSED, ANXIOUS, ANGRY**, even **INCAPABLE** of meeting challenges. Still others know that voice from identifying closely with it: **“IT SOUNDS LIKE MY OWN VOICE.”**

Next Question...

What personal values do you express through your daily actions?

Send an email to yourwords@mindful.org and let us know your answer to this question. Your response could appear on these pages.

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Did you know Mindful is a nonprofit? We are dedicated to inspiring and guiding anyone who wants to explore mindfulness to enjoy better health, more caring relationships, and a more compassionate society.

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ADVERTISING INQUIRIES

Advertising Director
Chelsea Arsenault
Toll Free: 888-203-8076, ext 207
chelsea@mindful.org

Advertising Account Representative
Chris Gooding
Toll Free: 888-203-8076, ext 10
chris@mindful.org

Editorial & Central Business Office
5765 May Street,
Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3K 1R6 Canada
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Mindful is published by the Foundation for a Mindful Society. The Foundation's mission is to support mindfulness champions to increase health, well-being, kindness, and compassion in society.

Chief Executive Officer
Bryan Welch

228 Park Avenue S #91043
New York, NY
10003-1502 USA

Executive Director
James Gimian

**Mindfulness in Education
Program Manager**
Chris McKenna

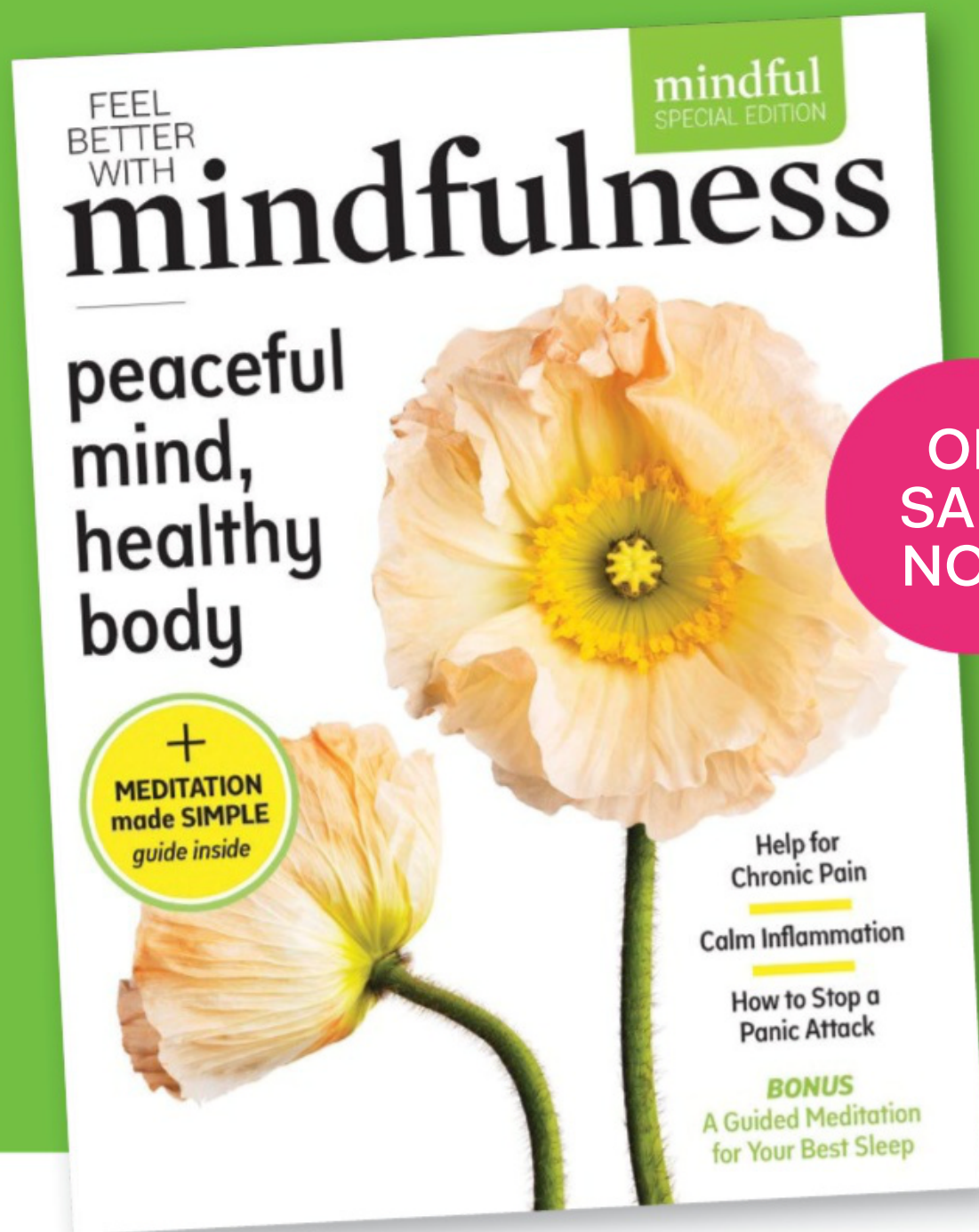


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Surf therapy helps participants ride life's sometimes rough waves.

world, including in the United States, Australia, and the UK, surf therapy aims to foster resilience, confidence, and a sense of community. At Salt Water Therapy in California, each surf lesson is followed by a guided meditation to help participants strengthen both body and mind. Although it's not a substitute for medical care, some early studies have found surfing can boost your mood after just one session.

HELPING TEENS LOVE THEMSELVES

In summer 2020, iBme (Inward Bound Mindfulness Education) will host two Teens of Color Retreats. jylani ma'at brown, a meditation teacher and activist, wanted to give youth facing marginalization

TOP OF *mind*

Keep up with the latest in the world of mindfulness.

EMOTIONAL LABOR

If you're caring and emotionally tuned in, you may adapt better to the evolving demands of the job market, a study finds. Researchers from the University of Maryland and National Taiwan University found that between 2006 and 2016,

day-to-day tasks for US workers trended from "analytical and think-

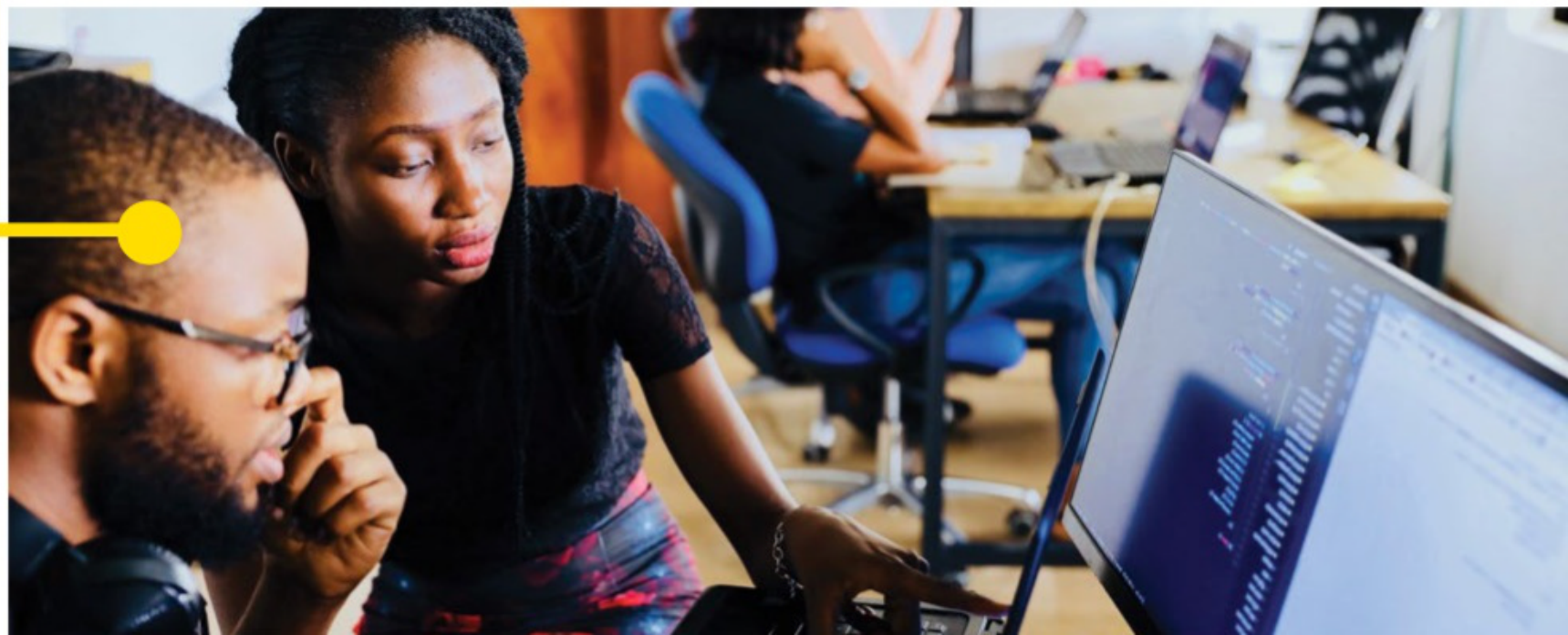
ing"—increasingly handled by artificial intelligence—towards "interpersonal and empathetic": Think a financial analyst who's reassuring clients through stock-market dips, says lead author

Roland Rust. In the shift to a "feeling economy," says Rust, emotional intelligence will gain respect.

WAVE BETTER

Surf therapy has emerged as a

recent alternative to traditional therapies for a number of groups, including children with autism, survivors of cancer, and veterans and emergency workers with PTSD. Hosted by organizations around the



a chance to be in nature, cultivate friendship, and absorb mindful skills in a safe environment. The inaugural retreat was in Big Bear City, CA, in August 2019; it allowed the teens “to go somewhere where they can be themselves...a time to feel into inner freedom,” brown says. iBme is holding two Teens of Color retreats in 2020: July 1-6 in Badger, CA, and August 4-9 in Madison, VA.

WHEN BREAK-ING UP IS HARD TO DO

A tub of ice cream has long been regarded as the best way to mend a broken heart, but those looking for a more holistic approach can now attend a break-up retreat. These events, which are popping up from Nevada to New York to British Columbia, aim to help participants find closure by participating in digital detoxes, relationship coaching, and meditation sessions in order to reconnect with the body and quiet negative thoughts.



KIND SCHOOL

Researchers at the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison developed a 12-week Kindness Curriculum for pre-kindergarten children. Initial studies suggest it benefits the kids’ learning and social skills—plus, as study authors Lisa Flook and Laura Pinger write, teaching kindness encourages

“widespread transformation” that “doesn’t require big policy changes.” The curriculum is free for educators to use. In related news: A \$20 million grant from the Bedari Foundation to the University of California–Los Angeles will establish a Kindness Institute at UCLA, for interdisciplinary research on “actions, thoughts, feelings,

and social institutions” that promote being kind.

PICTURE THIS?

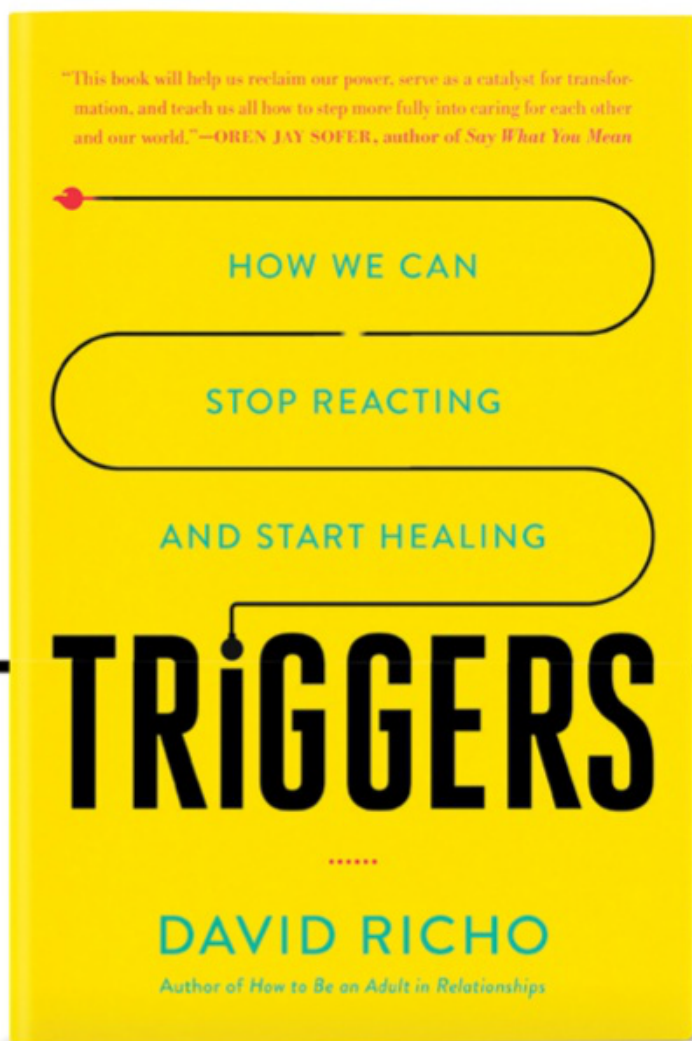
Too many of us know that sinking feeling when we realize an Instagram photo we thought was awesome gets only a handful of likes. With a twinge of disappointment, even embarrassment, we might wonder, *Was that even Instagram*

“Break-up retreats offer closure through digital detox and meditation.”

worthy? There’s growing public concern about how social media can damage our mental health and self-esteem through constant cravings for likes. In an effort to “depressurize” the platform, Instagram added a new feature that makes a user’s number of likes invisible to other users (and to the user themselves, unless they click to see it). It was

first trialed in several other countries before this latest expansion to US-based Instagrammers. Sharing and communication are meant to be the point of the app, say execs, not competing to win likes. Via Twitter, another Like-based platform, many approve: “Instagram will be content focused, rather than fostering what addicts us.”





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Research News

by B. GRACE BULLOCK

Research gathered from University of Utah, Rutgers University, Claremont McKenna College, and others.



EASING PAIN AND CRAVINGS

A new study from the University of Utah and Rutgers University finds that people who crave opioids and are in chronic pain may benefit from adding mindfulness to a traditional methadone treatment (MMT) program. Thirty adults with opioid use disorder and acute or chronic pain undergoing MMT were assigned to either a Mindfulness-Oriented Recovery Enhancement (MORE) group, or a treatment-as-usual control group. The MORE

participants learned mindfulness, thought-reappraisal, and savoring skills, in two-hour weekly group sessions, in addition to receiving four hours of individual/group therapy per week. The control group received six hours weekly of individual/group therapy, and no mindfulness education. All participants used a smart-phone app to rate their stress, pain intensity, mood, and opioid cravings. **At the end of eight weeks, MORE group members said their cravings were 56% less intense** than the treatment-as-usual group, and they had 129% more control over their cravings. They also felt more positive and had less pain and stress. This suggests

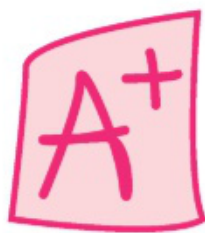
that a mindfulness intervention like MORE, when combined with MMT, may improve the effectiveness of addictions treatment for people coping with pain and opioid abuse.

COMPASSION MEDITATION FOR STUDENTS OF COLOR

Students of color often feel stress stemming from racial discrimination, and may experience depression, anxiety, and difficulties keeping up with their studies. Researchers at Claremont McKenna College conducted a pilot study to see if a peer-led intervention that included compassion meditation might help. The eight-week intervention used elements of cognitive-behavioral

therapy, psycho-education on the impacts of anger and compassion, and mindful practices, such as compassion meditation and deep breathing. It was taught by two Asian-American undergraduate students, trained and supervised by a licensed clinical psychologist. Ten Asian undergraduate students reporting high levels of race-related stress attended the program. Before and after the study, students took surveys about their levels of stress, depression, anxiety, self-compassion, post-traumatic stress and general distress, and ability to cope with discrimination. **After eight weeks, the students reported notable decreases in distress, depression, anxiety, and trauma-related symptoms such as disturbing memories, physical reactions, and difficulty concentrating.** While further research with a larger number of students is

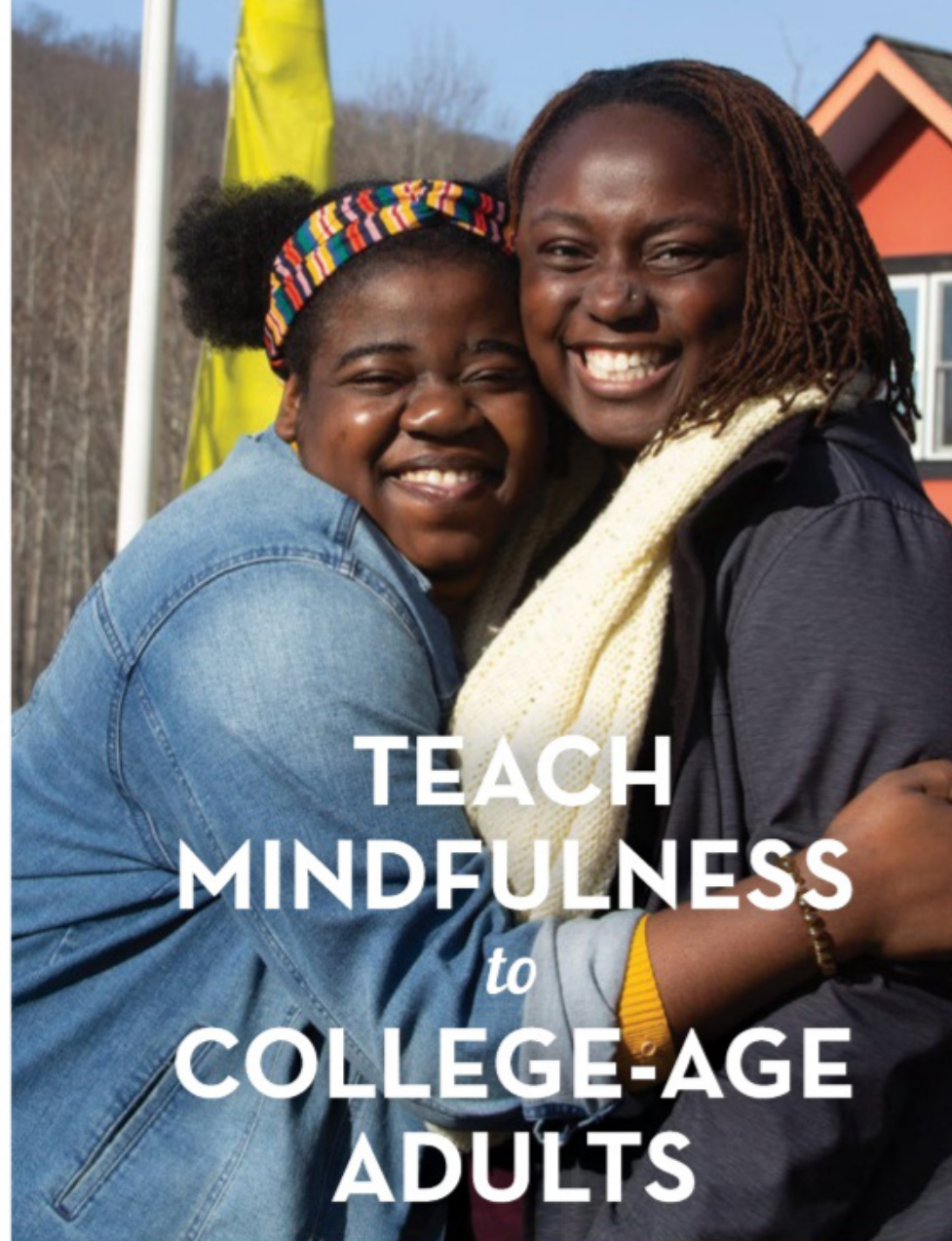
needed, this study suggests that peer-led compassion-focused programs may fill an important gap for students who face race-related stress.



MINDFUL IN MIDDLE SCHOOL?

Mindfulness education has become a mainstay at many schools. In a 2019 study published in *Mind, Brain, and Education*, researchers gave a mindfulness questionnaire to over 2,300 fifth- to eighth-grade students at charter schools in Boston who had not received mindfulness instruction. They then correlated the students' mindfulness ratings with their academic records. **Higher mindfulness scores were linked to a higher grade point average, greater achievements**

in standardized tests of math and literacy, and better academic performance overall from year to year. More mindfulness was also tied to better school attendance, fewer suspensions, and enhanced academic performance. Because students weren't given mindfulness instruction, this study does not show that learning mindfulness at school improves student achievement or reduces behavior problems. However, a prior study examining the effects of an adaptation of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) for 300 middle-school students in inner-city Baltimore found that students given mindfulness instruction reported fewer psychological symptoms and less stress. Future research is needed to see if these effects persist over time and are linked to other aspects of child development and academic success.



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– Sue Shibley, *Apprentice Coach*

top of mind

mindful FAQ



Q I've been going through a hard time after my divorce, and I thought that meditation would help. But when I try, the quiet and stillness just makes me feel so alone and sad that I have to stop. What am I doing wrong?

A You're not doing anything wrong. When we turn inward as we do when meditating, it is not uncommon for many states to arise, both challenging and joyful. This is in part dependent upon what is going on for us in any given moment. When we experience any loss, such as divorce, we grieve. Grief has its own trajectory and often comes in waves. It also comes with attendant emotions, such as sadness and loneliness. Meditation can help us turn toward this and can assist us in moving through it as we experience these normal but difficult emotions. We can build self-efficacy and learn to safely endure distress while at the same time treating ourselves kindly and compassionately. It is also important to note that it can be helpful to turn slowly and in small ways toward our challenges. For example,

you might begin by meditating for just five minutes and gradually build up to longer practices. Also, remember when we decrease external stimulation (as we do with meditation), this can make clearer what is present for us in any given moment and it's not always pleasant.

However, sometimes meditating is not the right thing to do. Sometimes the more skillful act of self-care is to get support from others, socialize, do something nice for yourself, and intentionally move away from these emotions when they get to be too much. And then, move toward them a little bit, getting acquainted with them, perhaps even hosting them for a little while, like a guest, before turning on Netflix.

If you want to use meditation to get to know your experience, do it bit by bit, first sticking a toe in for a few minutes and, if you are able, get curious and hold gently what comes up. But don't add thoughts of "What am I doing wrong?" when sadness comes up. Sadness is part of being human, and our tendency to berate ourselves for it only makes things worse.

Patricia Rockman, MD, is the Senior Director of Education and Clinical Services at the Centre for Mindfulness Studies, Toronto, and an associate professor at the University of Toronto.

ILLUSTRATION BY VECTEEZY

CRAZE OR CRAZY

Here at *Mindful*, we believe practicing mindfulness can be as simple and unadorned as bringing attention to the breath, and returning to the breath when attention wanders. You don't need much more than the intention to practice—and maybe a good teacher.

That said, there is an ever-growing range of offerings on the market that incorporate mindfulness in some way, from apps, to focus-objects, to experiences. Will they make you any more mindful, at the end of the day?

Send your thoughts to yourwords@mindful.org.



Nailed it?

To allow you to relax more deeply during your visit, some salons offer guided meditations you can zone out to, complete with earbuds, while getting your mani-pedi done.

Worry Stone 2.0

Meet The Thinking Egg: basically a man-made pebble, either stone, metal, or wood. Available online for \$16, its mere presence is supposed to remind you to be mindful. Less extravagant than the rest, but then again, it doesn't do anything.



Wine not

Wine lovers, get grounded in your senses—it elevates the tasting experience. So says the new, Champagne Henriot-trademarked practice of “medi-tasting,” which weds sommelier savvy with mindful sipping.

Insta-glam

At the Miraval resorts in Austin, TX, and Tucson, AZ, guests try extravagant diversions to evade their phone cravings. You can, for example, paint a live horse (...yes), or do “floating meditation” in a silk hammock, while being serenaded with crystal bowls.

THERE'S AN APP FOR THAT

KEEP A JOURNAL

Those who struggle to keep a journal can now use the Jour app to start writing daily. Users choose a check-in time to set a reminder for each day, and are then led through a number of prompts asking how they feel in the moment, what their goals are for tomorrow, and what they've done to take care of themselves. The app also offers a number of custom journals, including one for travel and one for dreams.

SAVE THE DAY

The GoodSAM app is the new way of asking, “Is there a doctor in the room?” Medical professionals and those trained in CPR and First-Aid can register as emergency responders on the app. By partnering with local ambulance services, GoodSAM is able to send an alert to those registered when a medical emergency occurs in their neighborhood, so that they can attend to a patient in the crucial moments before the ambulance arrives.



MEDITATE LIKE A LAWYER

Stressed-out lawyers can now check out Legally Mindful for guided meditations tailored specifically to their needs. Created by an attorney, the practices are designed to be an introduction to mindfulness that can be used in day-to-day situations, such as when preparing for a presentation. As Elle Woods would say, “What, like it's hard?”

PEOPLE TO WATCH

Justin Michael Williams

AUTHOR AND MUSICIAN

Justin Michael Williams had been teaching meditation for years, but often felt as though his practices weren't reaching the people who needed them the most. After the 2016 presidential election, he was determined to change that.

"That's when I really said hold on, how do I bring this practice that has helped me to a community that is not getting it?" he recalls.

Hoping to reach a more diverse group than those

who usually attended the retreats and tours he'd taught at, Williams began to host free meditation sessions in LA, which drew LGBTQ+ people and people of color.

"All the questions were different, and the reasons for meditating were different," he says. "That's when I knew I had a book."

His book, *Stay Woke: A Meditation Guide for the Rest of Us*, is available in February 2020. It tackles struggles not typically found

in meditation books, including overcoming homophobia, reckoning with personal trauma, and dealing with the stress poverty brings.

"Mindfulness is about awareness, and awareness right now in this world is calling us to take action," he says. "The book is a call to action to do what we can... for the causes we believe in."

As he plans a book tour and works on a new music album, Williams says meditation is an integral part of his busy lifestyle.

"It's like the glue that holds my whole life together," he says. "When I get busier, I try my best to meditate more, because it just anchors me down."

ACTS OF *kindness*



When firefighters

in Slave Lake, Alberta, ordered 18 pizzas, they inadvertently cooked up kindness that spread. A quick search for their local pizzeria, Alimo's, connected them to a similarly named San Antonio shop. "It likely took them some time to figure out where Slave Lake was," fire chief Alex Pavcec told CBC News. He paid the bill anyway, and the pizzas were delivered to firefighters in San Antonio instead. Meanwhile the Slave Lake Alimo's was inspired to start Random Acts of Pizza, making surprise deliveries to schools, care homes, and more.

Donations poured in, and Alimo's matched them all. "My day has just been going out and making people happy, and it all started with this one honest mistake," owner Moe Mouallem said.



Janelle Boston

had always wanted to climb Mount Tyson in Queensland, Australia. A childhood hike was rained out, and then a diagnosis of Multiple Sclerosis in her twenties put the goal out of reach—until people in her community found out. A welder built a special chair for 55-year-old Boston, and 40 local athletes took turns

carrying Boston in her chair up the mountain and back—a round trip of more than five hours.



A visually

impaired man asked the almost-800,000 members of a Facebook group called Dogsporting to describe their canine companions. He wanted to know "how soft the dog is"—with bonus points for "dogs full of kisses and snuggles." The internet came through, with more than a thousand responses in four days, including this description of Mocha: "It feels like you're touching a cloud when you pet him."

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MINDFUL OR MINDLESS?

Our take on who's paying attention and who's not

by AMBER TUCKER



“Mindfulness for Dogs”? It’s a thing—a canine behaviorist in Cambridge, New Zealand, “trains” owners and rescue dogs to help humans notice how moods and reactions affect dogs, and to help dogs grow past behavior issues.

Do you take your tea with milk, sugar, or...plastic? Silky teabags, often made from nylon, can leach “billions of nanoparticles” of plastics into your steeping tea, said researchers from Montreal’s McGill University. Any effects of ingestion are still unknown.



Taking effect in July 2022, a California law will bar middle and high schools from starting before 8:00 a.m., giving teens time for needed Zzzs. At many US schools, instituting a later start time has improved students’ mental health, attendance rates, and wakefulness in class.



From Alaska’s Katmai National Park comes “Fat Bear Week”: An annual public education campaign about how bears prepare for hibernation. It includes a “fattest bear champion” vote and a reminder: “Fat bears only exist because of clean water and healthy ecosystems.”



An avid runner (maybe TOO avid), Kade Lovell in St. Cloud, Minnesota, took a wrong turn on the race-track. He’d set out to run the 5K. The nine-year-old and his parents were shocked to learn Kade not only ran the 10K by mistake, but won it, against grown-up competitors.



Before her plane left the tarmac, a passenger on Xiamen Airlines in China felt the plane was “too stuffy”—so she opened the emergency hatch to cool off, though others warned her not to. It got her arrested, and caused further flight delays. ●



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MINDFUL ABOUT MILK

by KELLE WALSH

Drink wisely with plant-based alternatives to dairy that are good for you, and good for the planet.

Going dairy-free—for health or other reasons—used to require drastically altering your diet. Now, thanks to the explosion of the plant-based “milk” market, it’s never been easier. Coffee, frozen desserts, creamed soups, you name it: If a food or beverage calls for dairy, there’s now a reasonable substitute. While the FDA’s currently weighing whether these products should be allowed to call themselves “milk” (the EU doesn’t allow it), the plant-based beverage boom follows growing interest in alternatives to dairy.

A staggering 65% of the human population have trouble digesting lactose (a sugar present in cow’s milk), according to the National Institutes of Health. The highest rates of lactose intolerance occur among those of East Asian descent, but it’s also common in those of West African, Arab, Jewish, Greek, and Italian descent. Only about 5% of people of Northern European descent are lactose intolerant—some genetic experts believe this is due to a long history of dependence on milk as an important food source.

Aside from the health concerns, many people steer clear of dairy due to environmental concerns about the impacts of industrial animal farming. Conventional animal agriculture has an outsized carbon footprint, puts a massive strain on local water supplies, and in some places, leads to the loss of important wetlands and forest.

THE HEALTHIEST MILK?

Plant-based beverages aren’t necessarily a nutritional “swap” for dairy milk. While there have been conflicting studies about the health impacts of dairy, most nutritionists still recommend it as an excellent source of dietary calcium, a mineral essential for bone health, and also for other functions, including blood clotting, heartbeat regulation, and nerve function. As a whole food, cow’s milk also provides fat, complex carbohydrates, and protein, among other nutrients.

Plant-based milks are usually lower in calories and saturated fat, and nearly all are cholesterol-free, unlike dairy. But, with the exception of soy, pea, and hemp milks, most contain little to no protein. And while the idea of a beverage made from nuts or grains sounds healthy, most of the nutrients found in the plant are stripped out during processing and have to be added back in.

Nondairy beverages often contain a slew of additives that don’t add nutritional value, including thickeners and artificial coloring. Plus, the amount of sugar added to some nondairy beverages can rival that of soft drinks.

Ultimately the choice to use plant-based alternatives to milk, in part or in full, is a personal one based on a variety of factors. Being a mindful consumer means knowing your options.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelle Walsh is a former senior editor for *Mindful* and lives in Colorado.

DO YOUR BODY GOOD

No matter which kind of plant-based milk alternative you try, here are some good guidelines to keep in mind.

- Choose certified organic products.
- Choose products without added sweeteners (or minimal amounts), flavorings, oil, or carrageenan.
- Choose products that disclose the amount of plant source in the beverage.



CHOOSE THE RIGHT PLANT-BASED BEVERAGE FOR YOU

OAT

PROS

High in fiber and protein, mild flavor, not a land- or water-intensive crop

CONS

Unless organic, can contain trace herbicides and fungicides



RICE

PROS

Safe for people with allergies, neutral flavor

CONS

Little nutritional value, high arsenic levels, water-intensive crop with high methane emissions



SOY

PROS

Closest to dairy, with a healthy fat and cholesterol profile

CONS

Common allergen, has hormone-disrupting properties, often made with GMO soy



HEMP

PROS

Complete protein, healthy fat profile, low-impact crop with a high CO₂ absorption rate

CONS

May contain thickeners and sugar



FLAX

PROS

High in fiber, earthy flavor

CONS

May be heavily sweetened



COCONUT

PROS

High in healthy fat, abundant crop

CONS

Strong taste, high carbon footprint*



ALMOND

PROS

Sweet taste, low in calories, good in smoothies

CONS

Common allergen, water-intensive crop, high carbon footprint*



*compared to other dairy-free options

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CREATE WHAT *you desire*

Focus your inner attention on a goal that connects deeply with your heart.



If you want to be successful at anything, whether it's being a more relaxed parent, quitting smoking, or running a marathon, setting an intention—and then concentrat-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Elaine Smookler is a registered psychotherapist with a 20-year mindfulness practice. She is a senior faculty member at the Centre for Mindfulness Studies in Toronto.

ing on it mindfully—will give you the focus to help turn your dream into reality.

Intentions help you stay oriented toward your goal when strong emotions, exhaustion, boredom, or hunger threaten to throw you off course. Intentions connect deeply to your true heart's desire, to what really matters to you, and use that rudder to set your course forward.

An intention isn't a wish or a fantasy. It isn't a proclamation of who or how you think you should be. It comes from truly listening to what's important for you to feel most alive and, well, yourself.

Not an intention: I want to lose 25 pounds and fit into my old jeans.

Intention: I am listening deeply to my body's desire to be healthy and active,

and my heart's desire to feel vibrant and whole.

Here's where mindfulness plays an essential role. When we take the time to tune into ourselves, to learn our inner landscape, it's easier to discern our truth from fantasy. It's like when you investigate a sudden craving. Is it that your body needs chips *right this minute* to function, or

are you looking for a distraction (a crunchy, salty, flavor-bomb of one) while you nervously await word from your publisher about your manuscript?

Perhaps what you really want is to have fulfilling, creative, intellectually stimulating work, own a home you love, where friends and family will come to visit and where you have a place to garden, or learn to manage your stress better, and feel more grounded and happy.

From this place of deep knowing, you can craft a plan to achieve what you've identified. And when you veer off track—you're tempted by the mind-numbing job because you're scared no one else will hire you; you contemplate spending all your savings on a trip to Paris; or find yourself (again) stress-eating at 9 p.m.—you have something real and true to anchor you.

SAYING YES TO COMMITMENT

Change isn't easy. But it's often exactly what's needed. Knowing what really matters to us, and setting an intention that helps create the circumstances for that desire to flourish, also makes it far easier to commit to changing behavior or habits that keep us from our goal.

After mindfully reflecting on my experience with my stepdaughter, I realized that my deepest desire was to have a warmer relationship with her. I set the intention to be loving and warm toward her, as I am with other people I care deeply

for. On a recent visit, when I felt myself becoming cranky and brittle, I recalled my intention. In an instant, I saw the extraneous stuff that wasn't contributing to greater love or warmth but instead lessening my resolve to keep my intention. I recommitted to what I really wanted, not to the random thoughts and feelings that were triggered by, say, my low blood sugar or my petulance. And because it mattered—this is how I want to live—that commitment felt invigorating, and was easy. The rest of the day went beautifully.

Two things here speak to the power of intention: When you know what's important to you, and you intend to honor that, your intention is an alarm that goes off when you forget what really matters. Then you can choose to chart a different way forward.



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for easing
our own
suffering

SAYING NO TO RESOLUTIONS

You may want to lose weight, get your real estate license, or be a better listener—but if you don't know why you want this, you will quickly lose motivation and fall back into your old habits. However, discomfort and resistance are no longer

insurmountable obstacles when we know what we really want and recommit to it again and again.

I've never been able to diet. But I have managed to control my diabetes by setting the intention to stay alive through changing the way I eat. I tell people, "I'm not on a diet. I just don't want to die-yet." Once I focused on my intention of staying alive, eating healthfully was a breeze.

Intention can also, simply, help you align your values with the way you live your life, in ways big and small. Without it, life can feel a bit like a pinball machine, slinging you about, miserable, confused, never satisfied with what you have because you don't know what you really want. In this way, intention becomes less about making wishes come true; it's really about honoring who you are. ●



Menopause OVER EASY

For veteran health writer Sara Altshul, going through midlife change felt like a major cringe-fest—but as she found out, it doesn't have to be.



I'm wired to make people laugh. Business meetings, family parties, social gatherings—letting jokes fly is how I lighten the mood and diffuse my tension.

But something weird began happening when I

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sara Altshul is an award-winning journalist who has covered natural and alternative healing for over 20 years. Her articles have appeared in magazines including *Prevention*, *AARP*, *Arthritis Today*, and *Health*. She is the author of *Kitchen Cabinet Cures*.

hit my late 40s that nearly broke my funny bone. As soon as I made with the witticisms, my face, neck, and chest would turn beet red. I'd perspire so intensely it was like I'd taken a shower. In public. Instead of laughs, now I was getting totally mortifying sympathy stares.

I had no explanation for this super-uncomfortable phenomenon, but the dots quickly connected once I noticed other weird sensations. Unusual periods.

Restless sleep. Roller-coaster moods. I hadn't recognized the infamous midlife transition: menopause. Turns out, these sweaty, red-faced, in-public episodes were my body's way of manifesting hot flashes.

THE SEASON OF MENOPAUSE

Officially, menopause occurs when menstruation stops and the ovaries stop

producing eggs—but it doesn't happen overnight (unless you've lost your ovaries and uterus to surgery or disease). Although we've historically thought of menopause as a women's issue, anyone who has ovaries—including transgender men and nonbinary people—can experience menopause.

As the ovaries slowly stop responding to the hormones estrogen and progesterone, physical changes and challenges set in over the

course of months or even years. That's when symptoms like irregular periods, hot flashes, night sweats, and sleeping problems may develop—all of which can precede, by several years, the actual end of menstruation. And for 40% or so of women around age 45-65, hot flashes and night sweats have a negative impact on their work, leisure life, mood, concentration, sleep, and even sex life, according to a 2011 study. Many, like me, also experience social embarrassment and anxiety.

Though menopause isn't a medical condition requiring treatment, symptoms of "the change" can be difficult to navigate without some sort of intervention. When hormone therapy (HT) came on the scene in the 1940s, it was embraced by doctors and their patients for its ability to ameliorate menopause's most annoying symptoms like hot flashes, vaginal dryness, overactive bladder, and bone loss. But in 2002, a major women's health study suggested that taking HT could raise the risk for breast cancer, heart disease, strokes, and blood clots. This left women who chose not to use HT, or whose doctors advised against it, without a viable drug to control the symptoms. Enter mindfulness as a side-effect-free option.

THE SCIENCE OF HOT FLASHES

If it seems odd that my hot flashes were only triggered by joking around in public, it turns out that "clinical experience and research

show that every woman's menopausal experience is unique," says Richa Sood, MD, associate professor of medicine at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN. Her research suggests that, with the benefit of a mindfulness practice, maybe my amateur stand-ups wouldn't have been so discombobulating.

Sood and her team at the Mayo Clinic's Menopause and Women's Sexual Health Clinic studied mindfulness and the role it could play in easing menopausal symptoms. They focused on the fact that chronic stress can intensify the symptoms you're already experiencing.

Unchecked stress, Sood explains, triggers a flood of neurochemicals, including norepinephrine, which is a part of the fight-or-flight response in our body. In turn, this can influence the hypothalamus, a tiny cone-shaped region of our brain that is involved in the regulation of our body

The higher your stress levels, the greater the potential benefit of mindfulness for easing menopausal symptoms, according to research.

temperature. Norepinephrine is thought to narrow the thermo-neutral zone, or safe-temperature zone, in the hypothalamus. With higher stress chemicals leading to a narrower safety zone, says Sood, your body perceives overheating at a lower threshold, and in response, your blood vessels expand to radiate the "excess" heat out. Hello, hot flash.

STRESS, MINDFULNESS, AND MENOPAUSE

Menopause intertwines biological elements—such as these dramatic changes in neurochemicals—and psychological elements like sadness, irritability, or, as I found, out-of-the-blue bashfulness. Stress and anxiety not only intensify the symptoms of menopause, Sood notes in her study—they can also mess with your performance at work, your relationships, and even lead you to feel less happy than you used to be.

"Studies using strategies like Cognitive Behavior Therapy and hypnosis (which both target the emotional response to menopause symptoms) show some benefit for managing the symptoms," Sood told me. So, her theory was that mindfulness, which also helps us regulate our emotional responses, could ease menopausal symptoms *and* overall stress.

Sood and her team enrolled over 1,700 women between the ages of 40 and 65 who had never →



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been trained in mindfulness and had them fill out detailed questionnaires. The questionnaires assessed the participants' level of menopause symptoms and their stress levels. Using a symptom scoring scale, a lower number (0–2) was assigned to milder menopausal symptoms, and a higher number (3–5) to more severe ones. The researchers also used a questionnaire called the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale to assess how mindfully receptive and aware participants tended to be in their day-to-day lives.

The study revealed that participants who had higher levels of mindfulness had lower stress levels and milder hot flashes, night sweats, and other symptoms. “Mindfulness appears to be a promising tool for alleviating menopausal symptoms and stress,” Sood summarizes, noting that higher mindfulness scores were also associated with lower

symptom scores for irritability, depression, and anxiety.

The study also indicated that the higher a woman's stress levels, the greater the potential benefit of mindfulness for easing her menopausal symptoms. “Mindfulness has the effect of engaging the parasympathetic nervous system, which is opposite to the sympathetic ‘fight-or-flight’ system,” explains Sood. “This shift can help decrease the severity of hot flashes by widening the thermo-neutral zone.”

TURNING TOWARD YOUR SYMPTOMS

Mindfulness has these biological effects that can ease menopause, Dr. Sood told me. But it also works on psychological aspects of menopause by reducing anxiety and worry in the moment. A 2011 paper by James F. Carmody, PhD,



PHOTOGRAPH BY AUDREY SHTECINJO / STOCKSY

professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, investigated how this works.

Among Carmody's areas of expertise is how mindfulness reshapes our habitual ways of attending to the world that result in everyday anxiety and unease: "Those unrecognized patterns run so much of our lives, keeping us anxious and limiting connection with those around us," he says. For the 2011 study, his team decided to study mindfulness as potential relief for hot flashes, night sweats, and other menopausal symptoms.

Carmody and his UMass team enrolled 110 women in various stages of menopause who were experiencing more than five moderate-to-severe hot flashes (including night sweats) in a day. The women were randomly assigned to two groups. One group took a weekly two-and-a-half hour

Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course for eight weeks, and the other group didn't attend classes or learn about mindfulness.

Following the course, the women reported that they felt less stressed and more able to navigate their hot flashes and night sweats with ease. And three months after the MBSR course ended, they still reported feeling only "slightly" to "moderately" impacted by their symptoms. What's more, they reported an outstanding improvement in their sleep, says Carmody.

Carmody's research pinpointed the role our attention plays in mitigating menopausal symptoms: "One of the things mindfulness does is help you redirect your thoughts and focus on something neutral, like your breathing." As a result, he says, your perceived level of stress goes down—and, with any luck, so will your hot flashes.

While there isn't yet a precise recommendation for how much you should practice mindfulness to see results during menopause, Sood says that what's important is to integrate moments of mindful awareness wherever you can in your day, so that it becomes as much a part of your reality as any symptoms you're living with.

"Ultimately," says Dr. Sood, "with the practices of training attention and reducing negative judgments, neuroplasticity starts happening, leading to adaptive and healthy ways of thinking and interpreting events." ●



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Why You Can't Avoid the Long Con

In a world of “alternative facts” and “fake news,” science writer Sharon Begley explores the science of how our minds determine if something is true.

The email seems to offer a solution to a problem you weren't sure you had but that you'd heard of: Spy Wiper has found a long list of malware, spyware, and other threats on your computer, but if you call the toll-free phone number, a technician—who has kindly asked for remote access to your computer—

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharon Begley is senior science writer with STAT, a national health and medicine publication. She is also author of *Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain* and *Can't Just Stop: An Investigation of Compulsions*.

will walk you through the steps needed to disinfect your machine.

You might think you're too smart to be swindled by this or other scams. But not everyone is so fortunate. Microsoft estimates that this and similar tech scams (which in fact either upload malware to your computer, charge hundreds of dollars to remove nonexistent or planted bugs, or exploit the access you've provided to steal your identity or financial information) net their perpetrators \$1.5 billion a year. Facebook “love scams,” in which criminals posing as US service members prey on the credulous and soft-hearted and get people to wire money so they can fly

back to the US, netted \$362 million in 2018. Some victims—well-educated, productive members of their communities—have lost tens of thousands of dollars to this fraud.

How the mind processes information has long been a focus of cognitive psychology, but now researchers are pursuing a specific puzzle: After that processing, how does the mind assess whether the information is true? What makes some people more gullible than others? And how can we navigate a “post-truth” world, where political and even health and science debates are framed not by anything so quaint as shared facts but by emotions and tribalism? →



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What to Do When Facts Aren't Facts Anymore

“Figuring this out is especially important now,” said psychologist Christian Unkelbach of Germany’s University of Cologne. People are less trusting of “traditional cues to truth [such as] a newspaper or textbook or encyclopedia.” Scientists, historians, and others who were once trusted to tell us fact from fiction “need to understand how people come to believe information.” Or, as Unkelbach and colleagues argued in a 2019 paper, “In a world of ‘alternative facts’ and ‘fake news,’ it is paramount to understand the psychological processes by which people come to believe information.”

I’ll go out on a limb here and say objective facts exist. Something happened or it didn’t. Something exists or it doesn’t. This tree *is* the tallest in the forest, this caller *is* a friend in trouble, the Nazis *did* have death camps, the climate *is* warming due to human activity, green plants *do* turn sunlight into energy via photosynthesis.

Let’s get one uncomfortable reality out of the way. It’s easy for educated readers to believe gullibility is a problem for other people, whereas they themselves dispassionately evaluate claims by seeking out objective information, deploying their reasoning skills, and thereby separating fact from fiction. The problem with that belief is that the world has become too complex for anyone to know everything through firsthand observation and accumulated knowledge. We must therefore rely on experts. If you have a view on the safety of childhood vaccines, or the size of Donald Trump’s inaugural crowd, let me politely suggest that at least part of that view is (unless you are a developmental neuroscientist or were at the Capitol steps on January 20, 2017, and are a really good crowd counter) based on whom you have decided to trust.

That’s what I mean by tribalism: We identify some people as “like us”

(for reasons we will have to leave to a future column). We observe that people like us believe X and not Y. When we have no personal expertise on something, we default to the tribe’s position. We sometimes, however, skip the overt tribal step and believe an assertion because it fits with our other beliefs.

If that seems like an artifact of prehistoric days, and surely one the brain would have overcome by 2020, think again. All of the psychological foibles that contribute to gullibility have roots in the brain’s evolutionary past.

Beyond tribalism and concordance with existing beliefs, our judgment of the truth of assertions reflects what psychologists call the *repetition-induced effect*. Simply put, the more often we hear an assertion, other things being equal, the more likely we are to believe it. That reflects a basic mental mechanism, namely, the effect of recognition and familiarity.



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It's Scientifically Proven: Repetition Makes Lies Sound True

In a typical lab experiment on the power of repetition, participants hear or read statements whose truth they can't judge by personal expertise or by defaulting to what their ideological tribe believes, such as "the thigh bone is the human body's longest." They evaluate the truth of the statements by whatever criteria they like, including guessing. Days or even months later, they judge the truth of another set of statements, some from the previous list and some novel ones.

In study after study, people evaluate repeated information as truer than novel statements, and truer than they did the first time they heard it. The rate of judging statements like that about the thigh bone "true" on first exposure is a little less than half; on second exposure it is close to 70%, Unkelbach said.

It's a powerful effect: Research participants judge repeated statements from sources they were warned are *not* honest as *more true* than novel statements from sources whose credibility was not characterized.

The power of repetition as a proxy for truth has been recognized for decades; philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein ridiculed it, calling it equivalent to buying "several copies of the morning paper to ensure that the content is true." But only now are psychologists figuring out the reasons.

One is recognition or familiarity. The human brain evolved to treat information it can easily process as truer than information it struggles to understand; the latter has become a red flag for, "this might not be so." In fact, when people read "*The thigh bone is the longest bone in the human body*" in Apple Chancery font, they judge it as less true than "The thigh bone is the longest bone in the human body" in good ol' Times Roman. This "fluency effect" partly explains why statements we have heard before are judged as

truer: Because the brain has a memory of them, Unkelbach said, they are more easily processed.

In simpler times, that mechanism served the brain well. "Repetition and its psychological consequences—familiarity, recognition, fluency—are valid cues to truth," Unkelbach said. And it seems to be so fundamental an aspect of brain function that people differ very little in their vulnerability to the repetition effect, at least when a statement has no ideological component or tribal association; not even higher intelligence weakens the repetition effect. Unfortunately, those with an ideological agenda exploit this effect, Unkelbach said, with "strategically repeated" claims, especially on social media.

How Emotions Influence What We Believe to Be True

Beyond repeated exposure, our emotional state also influences our credulity. If believing an assertion meets an emotional need (in the Facebook love scam, to feel wanted and useful; in tech scams, to feel safe; with deep fakes, to have our opinions confirmed), we are more likely to do so.

In fact, argues psychologist Joseph Forgas of Australia's University of New South Wales, credulity is humans' default cognitive setting. This is our "baseline strategy," as he calls it, because learning from others has been adaptive throughout human history: We cannot learn everything we need through firsthand experience, so learning from others has been what Forgas calls "a major source of our evolutionary success."

In study after study, people evaluate repeated information as truer than novel statements, and truer than they did the first time they heard it.

Overriding that default position, as well as the various needs we have to believe, starts with what the emotional brain tells the cognitive brain. The latter interprets positive mood as signaling safety but takes negative mood as a sign that something is amiss. Anger energizes us, for instance. Sadness "often functions as a mild alarm signal," Forgas says.

Fear puts the mind on high alert. All three negative emotions trigger more focused attention, which "produces more cautious [and] attentive" information processing, he says. As a result, the brain pays closer attention to the quality of arguments, a foundation of critical thinking and, if warranted, skepticism.

In his experiments, participants read nonsense statements like "syn-tagm is the antonym of paradigm" and "good health imparts reality to subtle creativity." Those made to feel a little sad, by watching a heart-breaking video or recalling a past personal tragedy, judged the statements as less true than did cheerful people. In practical terms, he doesn't advocate manipulating your emotional state this way before, say, watching political advertisements, in hopes of being less gullible. But other steps can. Monitoring your mood and recognizing that full-on positive affect seems to make us more gullible, asking if believing a claim meets an emotional need (to, say, feel like a kind, generous person), recognizing whether accepting an assertion confirms a cognitive bias: Any and all can reduce gullibility. The mind may be evolutionarily wired for gullibility, but recognizing that is the crucial first step to rising above our cave-dweller brains. ●



rooted IN compassion

*Psychologist and longtime meditation teacher **Tara Brach** talks about the transformative power of what she calls “radical compassion.”*

BY VICTORIA DAWSON





To find Tara Brach on a summer Saturday morning is to follow a path that seems to naturally

ease one into a state of mindfulness. From the multi-lane Capital Beltway that girds Washington, DC, one exits with relief onto a two-lane, tree-lined byway where streetlights are few and commercial strips nil. Eventually, the road narrows to a single lane, announced by a row of mailboxes and shrouded heavily with trees. Stillness and quiet prevail. Soon, a steep driveway delivers the visitor into a sunny glade with a modest, window-rich house. With the ringing of a doorbell and the barking of a dog, Tara Brach, meditation teacher and author, appears.

Brach, who worked as a clinical psychologist for 16 years, is the author of three books: *Radical Acceptance*, *True Refuge*, and the just-released *Radical Compassion*. Her podcasted talks and meditations often originate in her well-attended Wednesday night meditation and class, held in Bethesda, MD, and in the half-dozen retreats that she offers annually. She and fellow teacher Jack Kornfield are cofounders of the Awareness Training Institute (ATI), which offers online courses on mindfulness and compassion, as well as the Mindfulness Meditation Teacher Certification Program. Brach is also the senior teacher and founder of Insight Meditation Community of Washington, DC. She has taught classes to staffers in the US Senate, and, beginning in February 2020, she will offer teachings in the House of Representatives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Victoria Dawson is a freelance writer based in Washington, DC. She regularly contributes to *Mindful*.



Let's start with coming home—from travel, from the city, from other excursions—to this property where you live and work, nestled in the woods.

The closer I get to home, the more trees I see, and my nervous system starts to calm down. I'm privileged: My home is a sanctuary that allows me to call on what feels deepest and most true.

And you live near the Great Falls section of the Potomac River—an area of stunning natural beauty.

I begin each day by going to the river with my dog, kd. It's a short walk from my house to a park, where I follow a trail, with ups and downs, for about three miles, through the woods, along a stream, to the river, which is strewn with



PHOTOGRAPH BY JONATHAN FOUST

beautiful rocks—you can actually see the bones of the earth in the river. Being physical and in nature takes me out of the habitual circling of my thoughts. A lot of the material for my talks—pieces, stories, illustrations—comes as I’m walking along the river.

Do you have a formal meditation practice that incorporates that setting?

Depending on the weather, I’ll meditate by the river for half an hour or when I return home. The meditation itself involves coming into stillness, a kind of collecting and quieting. And then it becomes a practice of being—letting whatever arises be, just as it is. There’s always a current of sensing into loving awareness, whether through prayer or self-compassion

or offering loving-kindness to others.

You mention self-compassion, which brings us to the topic at hand: your new book, Radical Compassion. As your third book, where does it fit in the arc of your work?

My motivation in writing my first book, *Radical Acceptance*, was a →

Early in the morning, Tara takes time to “come into stillness” through spending time outside. She walks along the nearby Potomac River—a source of inspiration for her teaching—and afterwards will meditate on the back deck of her home in Great Falls, Virginia. Her dog, kd, is a faithful companion, both in strolling by the river and in seated meditation.



The **SELF-COMPASSION** issue

revelation that I'd been living in this trance of unworthiness—living in a constricted world with a preponderance of stories about a self who was failing or deficient or flawed, and all the fear and shame that went with that. I began to see how mindfulness and compassion could wake me up out of that story.

In a similar way, when I wrote *True Refuge*, I had been struggling with illness—a connective tissue disorder—and a downward spiral, with no sense I would recover and have my life back. So, my trance then was the narrowed identity of “sick person,” and filled with anxiety and grief about loss. The inquiry was how to use mindfulness and compassion when we hit these big life difficulties that catapult us into a reactive trance.

On the worst days of your illness, what was life like for you?

When I hit real lows, my joints were inflamed, and between pain and exhaustion, the most I could do was walk slowly around my house. When this went on for a stretch of days, I'd get depressed—grim and irritable. My meditation practice became very challenging and deep. Over and over, I had to face the raw vulnerability of loss, fear, and grief. And, with that, my heart became more compassionate. I increasingly found a refuge in loving presence, which felt more

With Virginia Bluebell flowers in their late-summer bloom, Tara hikes along the shores of the Potomac at Riverbend Park. Her connection with nature reaches back to childhood, as she describes in recalling a family camping trip: “I was sitting on a rocky ledge, looking out and feeling awe, feeling at one with nature... This was way before I knew the word ‘meditation.’”

the truth of who I was than an identity of “sick person.” This awakening gave rise to writing *True Refuge*, and in a daily way, helped me become more intelligent about coping.

And you're better?

Much, much better. The key has been to listen and become more truly embodied—qigong helped. I had to learn how not to injure myself and how to build back enough muscle strength to help stabilize my joints. I'm hiking and swimming now, and I'm grateful for every day that I can enjoy moving on this earth.

Do you find that healing and self-compassion inter-relate in some way?

A palliative caregiver describes the greatest regret expressed by the dying: I didn't live true to myself. To “live true” we need to awaken self-compassion and love ourselves into healing. And we need to attune to others with an active caring, and include all beings in our heart.



Why is self-compassion so essential?

Compassion arises when we experience suffering, and to experience suffering directly we need to be in touch with vulnerability in our body, where the suffering registers. Then the natural response is tenderness. Self-compassion then allows us to feel compassionate toward others: If we have not been with our own vulnerability, we can-

not resonate with another person's vulnerability.

How can compassion be “radical”?

What I call “radical compassion” is a mature, fully evolved expression of compassion, grounded in an embodied, mindful presence. There's a movement to help, and it's all-inclusive. That is, it's not feeling compassion for one person but then being completely

PHOTOGRAPH BY JONATHAN FOUST

shut off, for example, from a politician whose policies or ideology I disapprove of. Radical compassion is an all-embracing tenderness.

There's a teaching that's very relevant to me: Somebody goes in the woods and sees a little dog and they go over to pet the dog and the dog lunges at them with its fangs bared. Instead of feeling friendly, the person pulls away into anger. But then the person sees that the dog's leg is caught in a

"To heal the separations, we need to be with each other, talk with each other, and get to know each other."

TARA BRACH

trap. As soon as they see it, everything shifts. It's like, oh, you poor thing. Now, they don't get close again because the dog still could bite them, but their heart is relating differently.

Did the desire to write about compassion also spring from a sense of distress about the troubled times we live in?

Most of us would say the world is increasingly

divided, hostile toward those who are different or who think differently from us. There is a rampant sense of "unreal other"—of not experiencing the other as a real being. If someone is an "unreal other" then we can violate them.

We can sustain the sense of "unreal other" only as long as others are at a distance, but as soon as we bring an intentional, meditative lens to them, bring them close into →



our psyches, we sense their vulnerability. To heal the separations, we need to be with each other, talk with each other, and get to know each other.

How does this play out in your daily life?

I habitually get stuck in a sense of needing to do more, checking things off the list, being anxious about the next presentation or the next class. As I'm speeding around, I'm cut off from my body and my heart. I'm more inclined toward silly mistakes, my memory is not as good, I'm less sensitive to the world. I lose contact with my deepest nature. When that happens, I notice it and bring "light" RAIN (see page 48) to it: I recog-

"The more you
glimpse who you
are beyond the
story, the more
you trust it."

TARA BRACH

nize and allow that, OK, this is my speedy, anxious, doing self, trying to accomplish more, trying to control reality. I investigate, feeling the vulnerability underneath: that vague sense that I'm going to fail. If I can touch that, put my hand on my heart, and tell myself it's OK, then a profound shift into compassionate presence occurs. I can re-enter the activity without the clench of anxiety, opened to a larger sense of who I am.

When you look back, what aspects of your childhood strike you as foundational to your life's work?

I had a fortunate balance of blessings and sufferings. In that sense, I lucked out. My parents were loving

and they paid attention to me. I didn't experience trauma, and I had a pretty decent sense of belonging. My father was both a hard-driving person and a dedicated do-gooder. I received the message of "Always be more, do more" and "Be better," so I had all the suffering of "never enough." My mother was an alcoholic, so I inherited addictive tendencies and shame about that.

My parents also had a strong ethic of serving that led me to pay attention to other people and what was going on with them. Somehow, I felt I was part of something bigger and valued serving into that.

And my parents loved nature. They sensed the mystery and loved the



Left: Peace fills the sunlit hall during a meditation workshop Tara led in Bethesda, Maryland. This page, clockwise from top: Tara and her husband, photographer Jonathan Foust, visiting the Swiss Alps in 2017; savoring a beach day with her granddaughter, Mia Brach; pausing from her busy days to recharge by the Potomac River.



PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF TARA BRACH AND BY JONATHAN FOUST

beauty of the earth. I remember a family camping trip in the Blue Ridge Mountains when, early one morning, I was sitting on a rocky ledge, looking out and feeling awe, feeling at one with nature and knowing that this mattered. This was way before I knew the word “meditation.”

Now, you’re in your mid-60s and newly a grandmother. What do those six decades add up to, for you?

A lot of grace. The arc has been one of increasing trust in awareness and in love—knowing these are more the truth of who I am, who we are, than any personality. And that trust brings more ease with and compassion for the condi-

tioning that plays through these bodies and minds of ours. The realization brings freedom and peace and joy.

Can you think of an example of how that realization plays out for you?

Some years ago, I had a falling out with another teacher, who was also a friend. It was a painful breakup—mistrust, hurt, misunderstanding, and enough reactivity that we were unable to reconcile. On the ego level, each of us felt wronged. We were both committed to mindfulness, and this rift felt like a real failure. My inner practice became one of not buying into my judgments, either about him or about myself—

not believing the judgments about who was right or wrong, good or bad. I was able to keep an awareness of his vulnerability and my vulnerability and, ultimately, our goodness. That wasn’t easy. The more I could keep from buying in to the frame of right and wrong, the more freedom I found to see a deeper truth. This truth included that it’s possible to make peace when things don’t work out the way we think they should. Stuff always happens, and that frame of right and wrong freezes us, prevents us from learning and growing. So, holding a larger frame and understanding that it’s OK that we did not reconcile, allowed me over time to hold him with benevolence.

You sound just as prone to the pitfalls of humanity as the rest of us!

I encounter the same old challenges of judging myself and getting anxious about things and so on. I used to get stuck in a grim or hurting or reactive place for days; now it’s minutes or an hour before I realize what’s going on. The grip is not as great. I don’t believe my thoughts and when I’m stuck, there’s a natural turning toward presence and compassion. I’ve practiced a lot—many rounds. It’s sometimes called “many glimpses”: The more you glimpse who you are beyond the story, the more you trust it. ●



**AUDIO
RAIN Practice**

Meditate along with Tara Brach as she guides you through this powerful practice for working with difficult emotions with compassion and presence.

[mindful.org/
Tara-Brach-
rain](https://mindful.org/Tara-Brach-rain)





let your love *rain down on* you

*In her new book, Radical Compassion,
Tara Brach helps break a trail through the dense
forest of anxiety with the practice of RAIN.*

We all get lost in the dense forest of our lives, entangled in incessant worry and planning, in judgments of others, and in our busy striving to meet demands and solve problems. When we're caught in that thicket, it's easy to lose sight of what matters most. We forget how much we long to be kind and openhearted. We forget our ties to this sacred earth and to all living beings. And in a deep way, we forget who we are.

My dense forest hums with a background mantra: *There's not enough time*. I know I'm not alone; many of us speed through the day, anxiously crossing tasks off the list. This often comes hand in hand with feeling beleaguered, annoyed at interruptions, and worried about what's around the corner.

My anxiety escalates when I'm preparing for an upcoming teaching event. I remember an afternoon some years ago when I was in last-minute mode. I was madly searching through my very disorganized electronic files, trying to find material for a talk I'd be giving that evening on loving-kindness. Much like the files, my mind was stirred up and muddy. At one point, my 83-year-old mother, who had come to live with my husband, Jonathan, and me, popped into my office. She started to tell me about an article she liked from *The New Yorker*. But seeing me glued to the computer screen (and probably frowning), she quietly placed the magazine on my desk and left. As I turned to watch her retreat, something in me just stopped. She often came by for a casual chat, and now I was struck by the reality that →

she wouldn't always be around for these companionable moments. And then I was struck again: Here I was, ignoring my mom and mentally scurrying around to compose a talk on love!

This wasn't the first time I was jarred by forgetting what mattered. During that first year my mom lived with us, I repeatedly felt squeezed by the additional demands on my time. Often when we had dinner together, I'd be looking for the break in the conversation when I could excuse myself and get back to work. Or we'd be on errands or going to one of her doctor's appointments, and rather than enjoying her company, I'd be fixated on how quickly we could get everything done. Our time together often felt obligatory: She was lonely and I was the main person around. While she didn't guilt-trip me—she was grateful for whatever time I offered—I felt guilty. And then when I'd slow down some, I also felt deep sadness.

That afternoon in my office, I decided to take a time-out and call on RAIN to help me deal with my anxiety about being prepared. I left my desk, went to a comfortable chair, and took a few moments to settle myself before beginning.

The first step was simply to *Recognize (R)* what was going on inside me—the circling of anxious thoughts and guilty feelings.

The second step was to *Allow (A)* what was happening by breathing and letting be. Even though I didn't like what I was feeling, my intention was *not* to fix or change anything and, just as important, *not* to judge myself for feeling anxious or guilty.

Allowing made it possible to collect and deepen my attention before starting the third step: to *Investigate (I)* what felt most difficult. Now, with interest, I directed my attention to the feelings of anxiety in my body—physical tightness, pulling and pressure around my heart. I asked the anxious part of me what it was believing, and the answer was deeply familiar: It believed I was going to fail. If I didn't have every teaching and story fleshed out in advance, I'd do a bad job and let people down. But that same anxiety made me unavailable to my mother, so I was also failing someone I loved dearly. As I became conscious of these pulls of guilt and fear, I continued to investigate, contacting that torn, anxious part of myself. I asked, "What do you most need right now?" I could immediately

sense that it needed care and reassurance that I was not going to fail in any real way. It needed to trust that the teachings would flow through me, and to trust the love that flows between my mother and me.

I'd arrived at the fourth step of RAIN, *Nurture (N)*, and I sent a gentle message inward, directly to that anxious part: "It's okay, sweetheart. You'll be all right; we've been through this so many times before...trying to come through on all fronts." I could feel a warm, comforting energy spreading through my body. Then there was a distinct shift: My heart softened a bit, my shoulders relaxed, and my mind felt more clear and open.

I sat still for another minute or two and let myself rest in this clearing, rather than quickly jumping back into work.

My pause for RAIN took only a few minutes, but it made a big difference. When I returned to my desk, I was no longer caught inside the story line that something bad was around the corner. Now that I wasn't tight with anxiety, my thoughts and notes began to flow, and I remembered a story that was perfect for the talk. Pausing for RAIN had enabled me to reengage with the clarity and openheartedness that I hoped to talk about that evening. And later that afternoon, my mom and I took a short, sweet walk in the woods, arms linked.

Since then, I've done a brief version of RAIN with anxiety countless times. My anxiety hasn't gone away, but something fundamental has changed. The anxiety doesn't take over. I don't get lost in the dense forest of trance. Instead, when I pause and then shift my attention from my story about getting things done to my actual experience in my body and heart, there's a spontaneous shift to increased presence and kindness. Often I'll keep working, but sometimes I decide to change gears, to step outside and play with my pup, make some tea, or water the plants. There's more choice.

Four years after moving in with Jonathan and me, my mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. One afternoon about three weeks before her death, I sat by her bedside reading from a book of short stories we both love. She fell asleep as I was reading, and I sat there watching her resting easily. After some minutes, she woke up and mumbled, "Oh, I thought you'd be gone;



When I pause and then shift my attention from my story about getting things done to my actual experience in my body and heart, there's a spontaneous shift to kindness.

you have so much to do." I leaned over, kissed her cheek, and continued to sit with her. She fell back to sleep, a slight smile on her lips.

I did have a lot to do. I always have a lot to do. I flashed on being too busy to pause and talk about that *New Yorker* article, and all those times I'd rushed through our shared dinners, felt dutiful about spending time together and guilty when I saw her walking outside alone. But my practice of RAIN had changed something. In our final years together, I was able to pause and really be there. I was there for making our supersized salads, for walking our dogs by the river, for watching the news, for chatting long after we'd finished a meal.

Twenty minutes later, my mother woke up again and whispered, "You're still here." I took

her hand and she soon drifted off. I began crying silently, and something in her was attuned because she squeezed my hand. Oh, I'd miss her terribly. But my tears were also tears of gratitude for all the moments we lived together. And for the clearings that made this possible. On the day of her death, I was filled with immense sorrow and love, but no regrets. ●

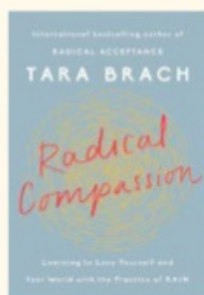


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tara Brach, PhD, is an internationally known teacher of mindfulness, meditation, and emotional healing. She is the author of *Radical Acceptance* and *True Refuge*, as well as the senior teacher and founder of Insight Meditation Community of Washington. She lives in Great Falls, Virginia, with her husband and dog.

RAIN, Step by Step

Sitting quietly, close your eyes and take a few full breaths. Bring to mind a current situation in which you feel stuck, one that elicits a difficult reaction, such as anger or fear, shame or hopelessness. It may be a conflict with a family member, a chronic sickness, a failure at work, the pain of an addiction, a conversation you now regret. Take some moments to enter the experience—visualizing the scene or situation, remembering the words spoken, sensing the most distressing moments.



From *RADICAL COMPASSION*
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R Recognize What Is Happening

As you reflect on the situation, ask yourself, “What is happening inside me right now?” What sensations are you most aware of? What emotions? Is your mind filled with churning thoughts? Take a moment to become aware of whatever is predominant, or the overall emotional tone of the situation.

A Allow Life to Be Just as It Is

Send a message to your heart to “let be” this entire experience. Find in yourself the willingness to pause and accept that in these moments, “what is...is.” You can experiment with mentally whispering words like “yes,” “I consent,” or “let be.”

You might find yourself saying yes to a huge inner “no,” to a body and mind painfully contracted in resistance. You might be saying yes to the part of you that is saying, “I hate this!” That’s a natural part of the process. At this point in RAIN, you are simply noticing what is true and intending not to judge, push away, or control anything you find.

How RAIN Began

Insight meditation teacher Michele McDonald introduced the RAIN practice about 20 years ago, as a way to expand the common view that mindfulness is simply a synonym for paying attention. In identifying the qualities of attention that make up a complete moment of mindfulness, McDonald, who is cofounder of Vipassana Hawaii, coined the acronym RAIN for *Recognition* of what is going on; *Acceptance* of the experience, just as it is; *Interest* in what is happening; and *Non-Identification* to depersonalize the experience. Over the years, Tara Brach modified and popularized RAIN, shifting the “N” step to *Nurture* and suggesting non-identification as a product of her revised four steps.

—Victoria Dawson

I Investigate with a Gentle, Curious Attention

Bring an interested and kind attention to your experience. Some of the following questions may be helpful. Feel free to experiment with them, varying the sequence and content.

What is the worst part of this; what most wants my attention?

What is the most difficult/painful thing I am believing?

What emotions does this bring up (fear, anger, grief)?

Where are my feelings about this strongest in my body?

When I assume the facial expression and body posture that best reflect these feelings and emotions, what do I notice?

Are these feelings familiar, something I've experienced earlier in my life?

If the most vulnerable, hurting part of me could communicate, what would it express (words, feelings, images)?

How does this part want me to be with it?

What does this part most need (from me or from some larger source of love and wisdom)?

A final note: Many students initially see “Investigate” as an invitation to fire up their cognitive skills—analyzing the situation or themselves, identifying the many possible roots of their suffering. While mental exploration may enhance our understanding, opening to our embodied experience is the gateway to healing and freedom. *Instead of thinking about what's going on, keep bringing your attention to your body, directly contacting the felt sense and sensations of your most vulnerable place.* Once you are fully present, listen for what this place truly needs to begin healing.

N Nurture with Loving Presence

As you sense what is needed, what is your natural response? Calling on the most wise and compassionate part of your being, you might offer yourself a loving message or send a tender embrace inward. You might gently place your hand on your heart. You might visualize a young part of you surrounded in soft, luminous light. You might imagine someone you trust—a parent or pet, a teacher or spiritual figure—holding you with love. Feel free to experiment with ways of befriending your inner life—whether through words or touch, images or energy. Discover what best allows you to feel nurturing, what best allows the part of you that is most vulnerable to feel loved, seen, and/or safe. Spend as much time as you need, offering care inwardly and letting it be received.



POEM

She Tells Her Love While Half Asleep

She tells her love while half asleep,
In the dark hours,
With half-words whispered low:
As Earth turns in her winter sleep
And puts out grass and flowers
Despite the snow,
Despite the falling snow.

ROBERT GRAVES

*Atman Smith, Ali Smith, and
Andrés González, founders of
the Holistic Life Foundation,
outside the building that houses
their office, just east of Druid
Hill Park in Baltimore.*



LEADING WITH LOVE

Two brothers who grew up on the streets of West Baltimore recruited a college friend to come back with them to solve their hometown's toughest challenges. This is the story of the Holistic Life Foundation and how they are helping 4,500 children a week with meditation and yoga.

BY BOB HUBER
PHOTOGRAPHS BY JARED SOARES

One afternoon in May, sitting on the floor in a small, private room at Fort Worthington Elementary/Middle School in Baltimore's Clifton-Berea—one of the poorest urban neighborhoods in America—Kamaya, ten years old, in fifth grade, and Jahlil, ten, also in fifth grade, are talking about something new. It's the role of mindfulness in their lives.

Kamaya's father is in prison ("I don't have my dad right now—he'll be home next year") and her mother has her own house; Kamaya lives with her grandmother. A natural chatterbox, Kamaya quickly mentions uncles and cousins and a great-grandmother, a big extended family. She says she got mad just last night, because she wanted to play with her friends, and her mother, who visits her sometimes, wanted her to go to sleep. But instead of fussing and yelling and waking her grandmother, who wasn't feeling well, Kamaya "took a stress breath," which calmed her down. She didn't wake her grandmother. And then she went to sleep herself.

Jahlil is a different sort of child—so quiet you might worry about what he's thinking or feeling. He lives with his mom, and has a three-year-old sister; a younger brother died in childbirth. Jahlil gets to see his dad, who takes him shopping for clothes and to his favorite sort of movies: "Scary movies." He doesn't like school: "It's boring. My science teacher, I don't know about him. He curses at me. Because my friends, and me, do bad things."

When he curses you, what do you do? I ask Jahlil.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob Huber has written more than 100 magazine features, profiles, satires, book reviews, and personal essays, for *Philadelphia* magazine, as well as *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Details*, and *ESPN The Magazine*, among others.



"I say in my mind, 'He should be fired.' And then I go to the corner and breathe."

Jahlil and Kamaya are using the techniques of clearing their minds, of concentrating on their breath, being taught at Fort Worthington by Holistic Life Foundation, a local nonprofit started by three neighborhood guys almost two decades ago; it uses mindfulness and yoga to help students cope with the stress and difficulty of their lives, which can be extreme.

In Clifton-Berea, children grow up fast and often have to deal with the traumas of poverty, violence, and drug abuse. Last year, the *Baltimore Sun* wrote that the neighborhood embodies the convergence of "all things bad," starting with a life expectancy four years less than the city's average, the lowest in the state. "Students hear gunshots during the night and come in crying," Principal Monique Debi says; in the past two weeks, there have been six shootings and four

HOLISTIC LIFE FOUNDATION'S GO-TO PROGRAM, MINDFUL MOMENT, IS DESIGNED TO HELP STUDENTS STOP AND FIND CALM AND CONTROL WHEN A CONFLICT THREATENS TO OVERCOME THEM EMOTIONALLY.



murders in the immediate vicinity. “I took that *Sun* article and showed it to my staff: ‘What are we going to do to change things for our babies?’”

The answer is to get creative, to find new tools for students.

HLF is all about empowering children—even young children. Mindful Moment is the go-to program. It’s designed to help students stop, to find calm and control when a conflict threatens to overcome them emotionally.

Jahlil recently went into a bedroom at home when his uncle flew into a rage and started cursing him because his video game had been

interrupted. “I went downstairs and took a breath,” Jahlil says. “And then I just go back to my room, and he come and say he’s sorry, and started being nice to me.”

So maybe you were able to teach your uncle something?

“Uh huh,” Jahlil says, quietly, seemingly unimpressed. “That’s what happened.”

The challenge is huge and, as HLF sees it, so are the possibilities, for what their program might do. When I take a tour with the three founders of HLF through the West Baltimore neighborhood where two of them →

Thousands of children every week are touched by the yoga and mindfulness work of the staff of the Holistic Life Foundation, many of whom were students themselves in these very classrooms in some of the toughest parts of the city—here at Fort Worthington Elementary/Middle School in the Clifton-Berea neighborhood. The harshness of the streets in these impoverished neighborhoods belies an underlying strength in the community. HLF works to draw out that inner strength and resilience by helping students awaken the connection between their bodies and their minds.



“WHAT WE LEARNED FROM OUR PARENTS ABOUT YOGA AND MEDITATION IN THOSE EARLY DAYS ON SMALLWOOD REMAINED IMPRINTED ON OUR MINDS, AND SOMEDAY WE WOULD RETURN TO IT.”

Holistic Life Foundation
Cofounder, Ali Smith

grew up, I see heroin addicts sway and lean on various corners: “The kids in our program, that might be their mom there, nodding outside that liquor store,” says Atman Smith, one of the founders. “And until they find their inner light and inner peace and realize they can rise above any condition, they might not have the means for appreciating their worth.”

This is, you might say, the ultimate attempt at a solution from within: Some neighborhood guys who went off to college nearly 25 years ago but came back, to solve the challenges for their city’s children by helping them forge the mental tools to cope.

HLF is pursuing the power of self-possession, one child at a time—they now touch some 4,500 children a week in Baltimore, with Johns Hopkins and Penn State having studied the effects of its programs—and it does make one wonder what the possibilities are, and something else, as well: Just who are these guys?

Hippies of the Hood

Baltimore neighborhoods are filled with cheek-by-jowl rowhomes and back alleys, places of intimacy and,

often, trouble. Ali and Atman Smith, two of the three founders and guiding lights of HLF, grew up on North Smallwood Street, in West Baltimore. It’s a place they still know well, as they take me back to give a tour.

“You ain’t sent me your information,” Atman, who seems in equal measures sweet and straightforward, calls out of Ali’s SUV to Todd, a guy on the sidewalk in his late teens.

“Look at how big he’s gotten, goodness gracious,” Andrés González says. Andrés grew up 15 miles south of Baltimore and met Ali and Atman at the University of Maryland; he came to Smallwood to live with Ali after college in ’01, with Atman moving to a house down the street in ’02, until all three moved to different sections of the city a few years ago.

“He’s doing a thing on music,” Atman says to Andrés. “I recommend you’ll all be friends on Instagram.”

“I got a little mini studio at the crib,” Andrés, a hip-hop enthusiast, calls out to Todd. “If you want to come through and lay some stuff, I got you for sure, man. That would be awesome.”

“Be safe out here, Todd,” Atman tells him, and then we move on, heading south.

A JOURNEY FROM INSIDE TO OUT

Atman Smith, at far left; his brother, Ali Smith, in the middle; and Andrés González, to Ali's right, spent many nights in college talking about how to change the world and bring about peace. Their classroom studies—ecology, biology, history, anthropology, you name it—led them to deep

questions about how to lead a life of value. They consulted stacks of books that presented alternative ways of seeing the world. They questioned, debated, and probed. They shared insights and inspiration drawn from their studies inside and outside the classroom. At graduation,

the pull of Ali's old neighborhood brought him to his boyhood home, where Andrés decided to join him. By now, they had concluded that the road to peace—inner and outer—would not be found by intellect alone. They began to practice yoga diligently, a discipline Ali and Atman had learned as kids from their father. Atman soon joined them. They retreated within, practicing many hours a day under a teacher's guidance, even though each of them had been outgoing their whole life.

Atman's name had rung out in basketball circles around Baltimore. Ali excelled at lacrosse and football. Andrés was a natural performer, in theater and music. When the time came to emerge from their deep retreat, it was children they were asked to help. Using yoga, meditation, sports, music, and more, they helped kids connect with their bodies, with nature, with each other, with family, with society. They have never stopped teaching—and learning, and leading. —Barry Boyce

They point out touchstones: Where Atman's godmother worked in a doctor's office next to a church, a missing house that's become a park, Everyone's Place bookstore. There's famous Pennsylvania Avenue, where Black musicians and singers—Dizzy Gillespie, Billie Holiday, and James Brown, among many others—would come to perform, though nobody's headlining there any longer.

When we hit West North Avenue, Andrés points out, “The riots over Freddie Gray [the city erupted after Gray died in police custody in 2015], they came down this road. This corner store got hit, they burned a liquor store and a beauty shop.”

“None of the Black businesses were touched,” Ali says.

I ask Ali if the neighborhood is worse off than when he and Atman were kids, in the '80s. “You can look around and see, most of the houses are boarded up and dilapidated,” Ali says in his direct style, making the obvious even more obvious. “There were more homeowners when we were here. A lot of homeowners moved away, a transient rental population took over.”

The feeling, midday on a hot afternoon, is not one of danger so much

as abandonment, as if something came storming in and a place was left behind. That something is an egregious, on-going lack of opportunity. It's a place in slow motion.

Atman was the last of the three to move out of the neighborhood, to Charles Village, in 2017, and by then heroin dealers were hanging out on his front stoop on Smallwood. If he asked politely, they would cross the street and sell from there.

HLF's founders don't shy away from any of their old haunt's troubles, but it's a mistake to miss how, back in the '80s when they were kids, this was their world too, a story that Ali tells:

“The family across the alley from us was just as much family as my mom and dad and brother. Their mom, Bo, was my mom's best friend. She was the old medicine lady of the neighborhood, a doula before doulas were a thing.

“It was warm and connected, like one big household with the street as our shared living room. Raising children, listening to ballgames, wrestling on the front porch, running through the streets... It was all done together in the open. That was normal West Baltimore neighborhood life.”

Also normal, from the time Ali and Atman were small boys, was yoga.

Their father Smitty, a high-school basketball coach, was a practitioner—well, maybe it wasn't so normal, since Atman nicknamed them “hood hippies”—and Smitty had his boys on the mats striking poses before school. They attended Friends School of Baltimore in upper middle-class Roland Park—this was their mother Cassie's idea, to get them a better education and broaden their horizons by rubbing shoulders with all different sorts of kids. (Ali sends his two young sons to Friends School of Baltimore now.)

“Although we were eating vegetarian and practicing yoga and meditation,” Ali remembers, “we also just had a regular life like everyone else. There was a Black-owned corner store where we would be sent on errands and buy penny candy. We spent a lot of time there, including whenever there was a blackout, because he had a generator. We watched movies there on his satellite TV, since there wasn't any cable in the neighborhood, and it was also just a lot of fun to watch movies in a big group. What we learned from our parents about yoga and meditation in those early days on Smallwood remained imprinted on our minds, and someday we would return to it.” →

“WE ALWAYS COME BACK TO BALTIMORE, TO THE HOOD, TO THE PEOPLE WE LOVE. IF YOU CAN’T DO THE WORK AT HOME, THE WORK IS NOT WORTH DOING.”

Ali Smith

Ali, Atman, and their new friend Andrés would become inseparable at the University of Maryland, and came back to Baltimore together two decades ago. They wanted to create a business that would change the world. They had no idea what that might be.

Smitty gave them use of the house on Smallwood, rent-free. They began working seriously with Uncle Will (he wasn’t actually their uncle, but their father’s original yoga teacher and best friend) going to a park pre-dawn at nearby Lake Montebello to meditate. Smitty grew impatient. “At times,” he says, “I would call, and it got to the point where they didn’t want to answer the phone, because I would tell them, You say you’re doing this, you say you’re doing that. You’re not doing a thing. Show me something.”

They were doing something: working hard on themselves, though it was hard to measure. Something had shifted, though.

“I think it was people asking us,” Ali says, “about our calm and peace and happiness. They’d say, ‘You have no business being happy if you’re broke and living around Smallwood Street. Something ain’t right.’”

“That’s when we realized something Uncle Will taught us. We couldn’t just sit on the practice—we had to teach it to others.” But...how?

Cassie was working at nearby Windsor Hills Elementary School (she was a longtime social-services →



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Schoolchildren often spend their days in classrooms battling restlessness, tiredness, and distraction. The physicality of yoga combined with the settling effect of small doses of mindfulness bring them unexpected refreshment. You might think the children would find yoga just too weird for them. In fact, they take to it pretty readily, and seem to enjoy the break from spending time processing information and navigating the social pressures that school can bring.

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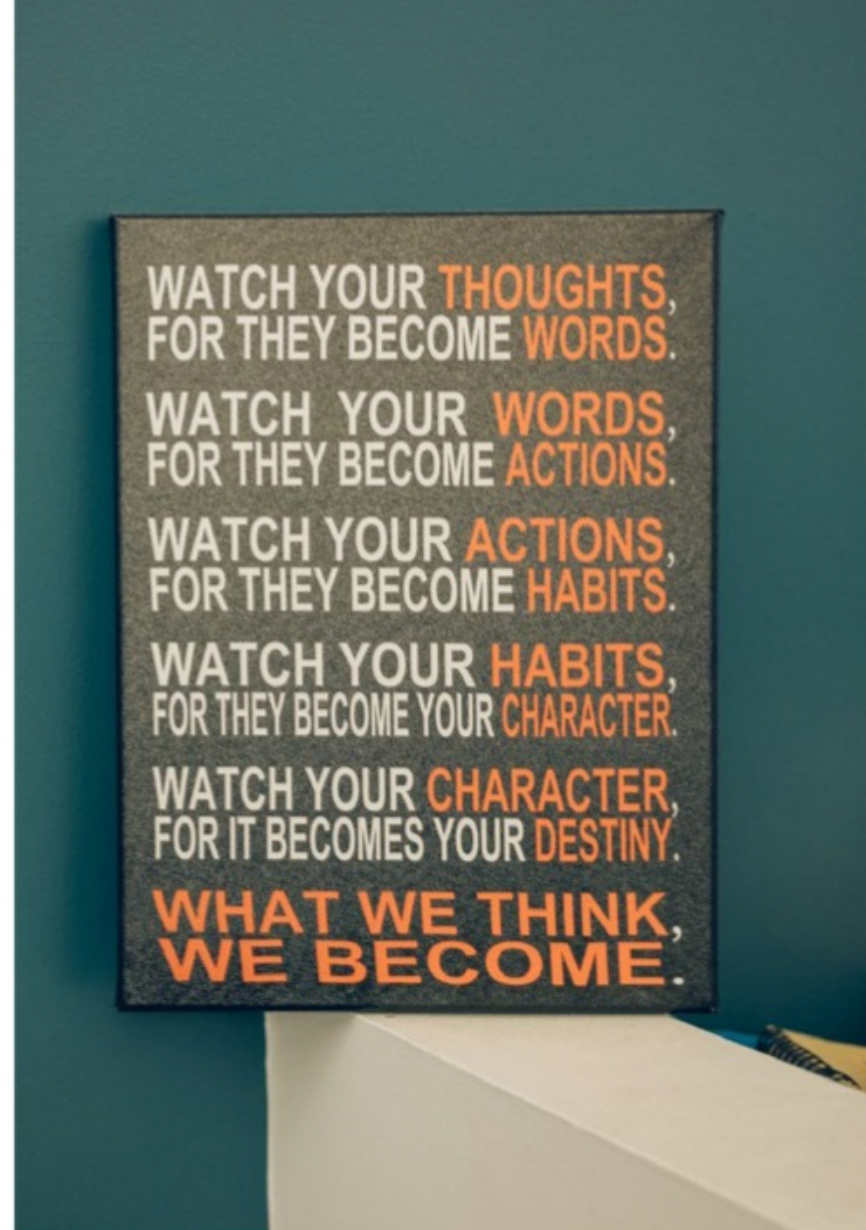
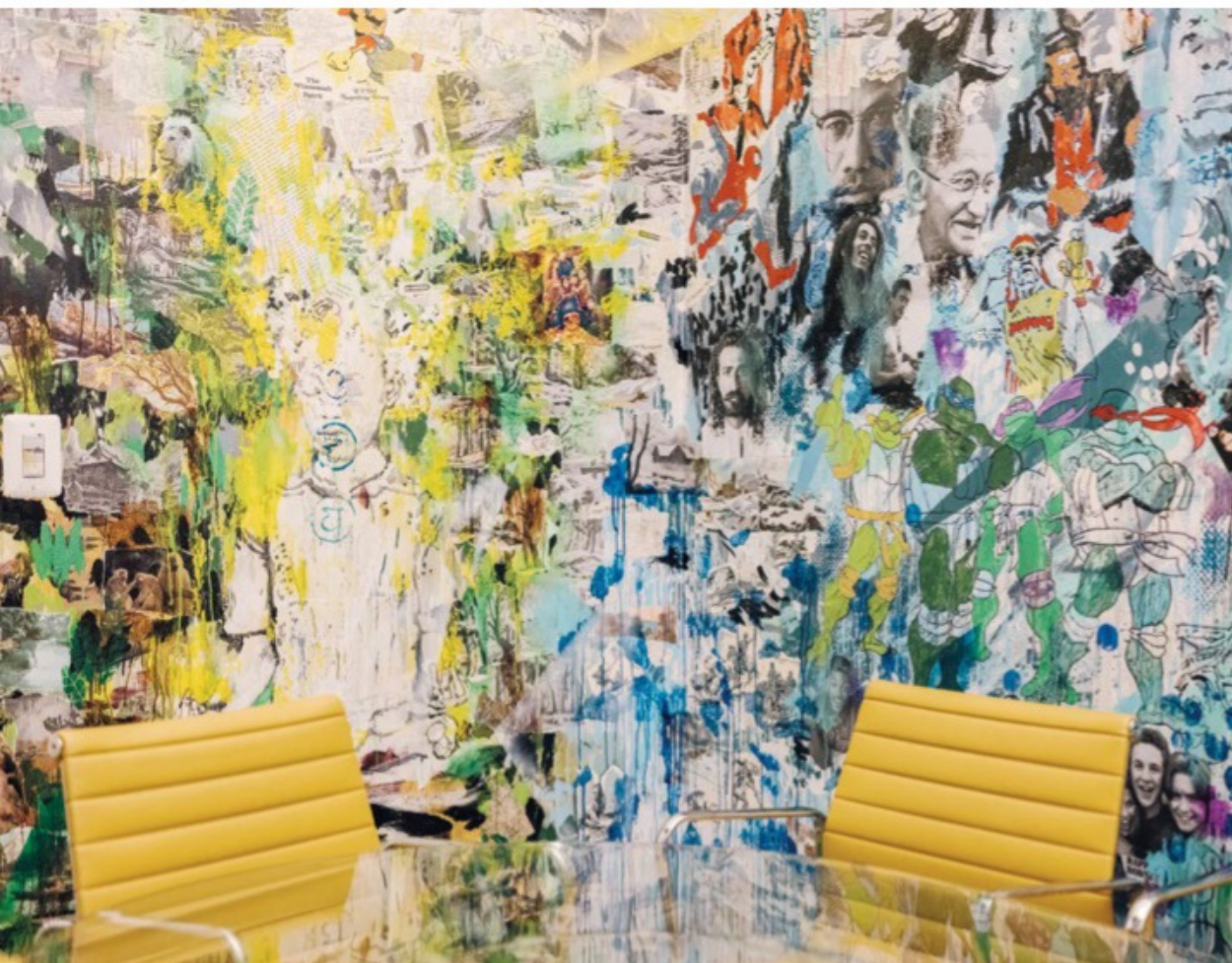


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worker at various schools) and an idea popped up: Why not coach football to some of the more difficult kids? The boys thought about it over a weekend, and a different idea emerged: Not coaching, but an after-school yoga program, a leap of faith in the power of the path they were going down. That was the beginning.

Ali, Atman, and Andrés had never worked with children, or run a program. They didn't know enough to have the kids fill out permission slips. It sounds almost scary now: The principal gave them 20 of the worst-behaving kids, space in the school basement, and carte blanche to figure out what to do with them. "They were happy to get free after-school care," Andrés remembers, laughing. "As long as none of them were missing any arms when we returned them."

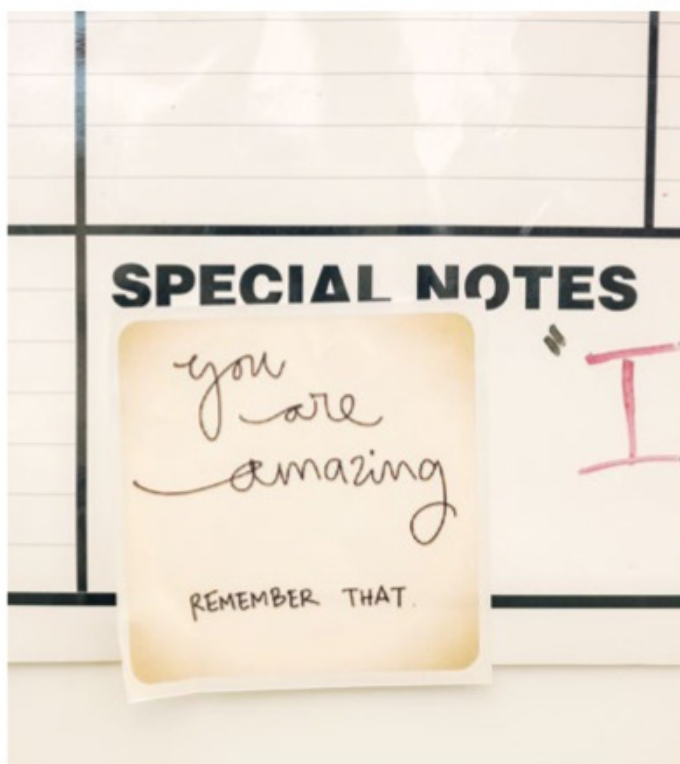
Initially, they drew the students in by promising time spent outside, or in the gym, or field trips, and then started introducing yoga. The results were quick: "We would go from picking up half of them from detention," Ali says, "to picking up a quarter from detention, to none of them. We started



by breaking up several fights a day, to not any fights, to parents and the principal and teachers saying, 'We don't know what you all are doing, but keep doing it, because it's working.'"

Out of those first 20 kids, back in 2001, all are doing well now, Ali says. "None of them are locked up—they're all working, or have kids, or they're doing something productive with their lives."

Yoga and mindfulness are powerful tools, they believe. But part of their effect was, certainly, their way of being. Andrés tells a story: Early on, he and Atman had to shut down the after-school program for a few days to segue off for their own training—the children didn't see them for almost a week. When Andrés and Atman returned, the kids already knew why they'd been gone: *You've been locked*



On facing page, at top left: the wall of the conference room in HLF's offices displays the joy and playfulness the founders bring with them wherever they go—as well as a rich depiction of many influences on their work, from comic book superheroes to religious and political icons to ordinary people. It's vitally important to Ali, Atman, and Andrés that the childlike wonder that brought them to their mission remains in the lifeblood of the much larger organization they're now running.

The poster, on facing page, top right, also in the HLF offices, is a strong statement of the founders' understanding that what manifests on the outside is born on the inside. They help their students take a journey within.

The hands on the classroom wall with messages from students about love can be astounding and touching in the little stories they tell: at left, "I'm happy when I see other people happy. Always spread love because love has 'No Boundaries.'"; in the middle, "I love my Dad and..."; on the right, "I took my time and observed a situation before I reacted and found out a kid actually just needed some love from someone."

Ramon Brown, at upper right—the HLF teacher described in this story—took part in one of the first school programs HLF conducted, in the early 2000s. The practice became a guiding force in his life. Now he is giving back.



up! The kids were sure of it. *Andrés and Atman have been in jail.*

Which wasn't true, but that was the only explanation these children had, for two reasons: They knew that Andrés and Atman would abandon them only if something dire had happened, and the only dire thing they could come up with, in the world they were trying to grow up in, was what they'd seen happen to trusted adults again and again: *You must have been locked up.*

Ali and Atman and Andrés kept showing up. And now they knew they were on to something.

Growing Beyond Baltimore

Today, HLF's core programs include yoga and mindfulness classes at 16 Baltimore city public schools, and another 20 in schools across the county; the foundation works with some 4,500 students a week and has 38 employees, with a yearly budget of \$2.1 million.

At this point, HLF's track record and level of knowledge and experi-

ence in the field of meditation/mindfulness/yoga for urban youth is among the strongest in the nation. HLF staff are frequent presenters at national and international conferences and workshops, and HLF teachers have presented programs for people at all ages and stages all over the United States and Canada, in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

Which is not to say the organization went from zero to 60 just like that. Over the years, funding has been a major problem, to the point where they wondered if they'd have to leave Baltimore; for the better part of a decade, Ali and Atman and Andrés didn't pay themselves, surviving on odd jobs and the continuing largesse of Cassie and Smitty. Andrés laughs about their organizational naiveté. But once they finally gave in, to the idea of specific roles—Andrés is now marketing director—so that all three of them weren't responding to the same emails, HLF's footprint got bigger fast.

Still, the challenges are fundamental: Back at Fort Worthington Elementary, I watch a girl, perhaps ten, slam out →

THE STRESS BREATH

BY ANDRÉS GONZÁLEZ

The kids who go through the Holistic Life Foundation Program tell me this breathing exercise stays with them throughout their lives.

The stress breath is great for any kind of stress or anxiety: test anxiety, performance anxiety, any type of anxiety at all. It's also a good exercise for heating up your body. Here in Baltimore, some kids may not have heaters at home or proper jackets, so this is good for warming them up. With this breath, you can pull in a lot of energy and store it in your body.

Use an everyday object as a signal to do the stress breath. I use my keys. When I drive to work in the morning and take my car keys out of my ignition, that's my cue to do the stress breath. I'll do 12 right before I go into the office so I can leave home at home and focus on work. And then when I drive home, I park my car, take my keys out of the ignition, and that's my cue—I do 12 more before I go into my house. That allows me to leave everything at work at work so I can be a hundred percent with my family when I get home. It's like hitting the reset button with your brain.

The 3 Basic Elements of the Stress Breath

1 FOG THE MIRROR

The most important thing about this breath is that it's audible. Take your hand and hold it up in front of your mouth and act like it's a mirror that you're fogging up. So, you're exhaling with a *haaaaaaaa* sound as if you're fogging a mirror.

2 MAKE IT AUDIBLE

Now, do the same thing, but only have your mouth open for two seconds and then close your mouth while still pushing out the same way—but now push out through your nose. Practice making that same sound as you inhale, so the sound comes from the back of your throat (almost like a Darth Vader breath).

3 HOLD AND LOCK

The HLF twist on the stress breath happens during the pause between the inhale and exhale. When you inhale, hold your breath, and then lower your chin to your chest. Hold there for a count of five and then lift your head as you exhale. Let's put it all together...

The Stress Breath Exercise

1

Inhale nice and deep, using the “fog the mirror” technique, so the sound is vibrating at the back of your throat.

2

Hold your breath and your bring your chin down to your chest.

3

Count back from five.

4

Exhale (audibly through your nose) while you bring your head up.

That's one cycle. Do twelve in a row, if you can, during the day and then again at nighttime.

Why the Stress Breath Works

The reason the breath has to be audible is because the vibrations from the sound signal the vagus nerve—that connection between the mind and the body—triggering a shift in your autonomic nervous system from the sympathetic (stress response) to parasympathetic (restorative response). So, if you just walk around breathing audibly, you're basically doing the stress breath.

How to make the practice trauma-informed:

Something to remember if you're deciding to practice this with others is to not have a silent space during the hold. That's why we count. This is the trauma-informed way of doing the practice. You always count down (you never count up—because you don't know when that's going to end). And you don't want to keep that empty space during the hold, because that's where the trauma can pop up. You're almost inviting the space for the stuff to pop up. We're always doing trauma-informed when we do this with our kids.

of a classroom, yelling, upset, seeking destruction (she is gradually calmed down); during a classroom mindful exercise at City Springs, another elementary/middle school, HLF staffer Jazmine Blackwell is confronted by an on-edge seventh grader who joins her in front of the class and won't be quiet as Blackwell tries to take the class in the other direction through controlled breath. (Blackwell later says that part of her challenge is remaining mindful herself, that she's guiding an entire class, not just one disrupter.) The reminders are constant, in fact: It's not that these children are behavior problems. They are at high emotional risk.

Principal Monique Debi remembers a training session for 15 principals, just before she got the promotion to run Fort Worthington two years ago, where an HLF instructor led them through a mindful moment. She was captivated: "How do I get this for my school?" Two years ago, out of 444 students, there were 180 suspensions at Fort Worthington; this year, that number is seven. No one attributes the dramatic turnaround completely to HLF practices, but as Debi talks about her goal of building community within her school, of staff and students treating each other in a loving way, one goal in particular for students seems right up the HLF alley: "To teach them how to take care of themselves."

Vance Benton is in his eighth year at Patterson High School in the city's Bayview neighborhood; Patterson has nearly 1,100 students, and Benton says it's the most diverse high school in the state, with 40 percent of his students born outside the country. "And they are poor," he says. "Some of them live in extreme poverty." HLF has run its program in Patterson since 2013; Benton is a strong believer in it, and he does not mince words: "If you can control a person's thinking, you don't have to worry about his actions. So that's what this is all about, to control their thinking."

Johns Hopkins has wrapped up studying the effect of HLF initiatives,

but Benton cites perhaps the most crucial help HLF can offer through a hypothetical example of two young men confronting each other on the city's streets: "If you are challenged, and you decide to take a deep breath, and your deep breath has you pause and consider and now gives you the decision, man, it ain't worth it—then you leave. No data in the world will show that two lives were just saved—the life that would have been taken, and the life that took the life."

HLF's goal now is to create a self-perpetuating model: Ali says they're currently setting up satellite programs in South Florida and upstate New York; two senior staffers from Baltimore will live in these places for a year, serve as teachers and mentors, hire a program director, and then mindfulness will be off and running in a new place, the way to make what started with 20 kids two decades ago sustainable anywhere.

Still, the heart and soul of their work will remain in one place. "I'm

certain that teaching, and coming to understand it in our bones is why, even though we have been all over the world and wined and dined and treated like royalty at times," Ali says, "we always come back to Baltimore, to the hood, to the people we love. If you can't do the work at home, the work is not worth doing."

One child at a time: Long ago, Ramon Brown (above) was a troubled fifth grader in the North Smallwood neighborhood; his father had been in prison, and then murdered, and he was an extremely angry boy. Holistic Life Foundation started working with him. Now Ramon is an HLF staffer at Fort Worthington, a teacher and mentor to ten-year-old Kamaya, Jahlil, and other vulnerable children. And sometimes he thinks back to a conversation he had with Andrés González long ago: "He said, 'You'll always be you, no matter what. No one can change you but yourself.' He made me think a lot about that." ●



*Ramon Brown,
HLF instructor at
Fort Worthington
Elementary/Middle.*



going deeper

How I discovered that I wasn't the center of the universe

(and neither are you)

While getting “centered” feels like a relief to those of us who are scatterbrained meditators, it can also serve as a natural starting point to explore the art of “de-centering” and tap an elusive state of being “centerless.” Here, Founding Editor **Barry Boyce** takes us on a mindful tour of these mental vantage points.

“I need to get centered.”

We’ve all heard these words hundreds of times. Perhaps we’ve said something like this hundreds of times. It’s also something that, in a cynical mood, people like to make fun of: the airy-fairy mindfulness-spouting person who is so “in touch with themselves” that they’re out of touch with everyone and everything around them. You know, “Excuse me, what did you say? I was finding my center.”

When we talk about getting centered, though, what do we really mean? Is there any value to it? And is “getting centered” the be-all, end-all when it comes to mindfulness and meditation?

Centering on Getting Centered

In the context of mindfulness—the innate human ability to be aware of where we are and what’s happening inside and out—“centering” connotes the opposite of being scattered, distracted, unfocused, carried away by the next thought when we would like to be attending to what is at hand. It’s a good thing.

And we have lots of practices—such as mindfulness of breathing—that can address the need to come into focus.

In bodily terms, *centered* conveys a feeling of being in balance. If we are in a yoga pose or aikido stance, for example, we are aware of our midline and our core and our extremities in

relation to our center of gravity—in a holistic way, not necessarily by going through a checklist to figure out where everything is and how it’s all hanging together.

The same goes for a simple meditation posture. We are not perched on our chair or cushion, nor are we hanging back off the edge or tilting to the side. We’re settled in the middle, like a rider adroitly positioned in the saddle. A good seat confers a feeling of being connected to the ground, letting gravity do its work, while our inner gyroscope holds our place in relation to what’s going on around us.

The psychological dimension of being centered can include lots of things that have to do with how we’re fitting in not just spatially, but in terms of time and relationships. What sociologists call *ontological security* comes into play, for example, when what we’re talking about is being centered in our lives. “Ontological,” from Greek *ontos*, meaning “being,” gives an indication of what this kind of security is about. We want to feel that,

in a sense, we are where we belong. If you don’t know what you’re doing or why you’re doing it, you’ll be insecure, off-center. This aspect of centering, then, incorporates meaning, purpose, direction, ordering—even values. It’s why human beings take vows, swear oaths, and have professional codes of conduct. In the midst of chaos, confusion, and conflict, we have our bearings, including our sense of what’s right and wrong, wholesome and unwholesome, what we’re good at and what we’re not.

Mindfulness practice can indeed help with this kind of centering just as much as it helps us with centering in our body and our immediate surroundings. When we are unsettled, our body and mind tend to give us messages, but those messages are easy to ignore or suppress. Mindfulness practice, as it blossoms into a more comprehensive awareness, can help us to listen more carefully to those messages that are telling us that something is off, that we’ve lost track of what we’re trying to do. Good mindfulness practice can let us know that it’s time to take out the road map and figure out where we are and where we’re going—and whether we need to consider a course correction.


Welcoming Equanimity

Another aspect of finding a good center has to do with our tendency to gravitate to extremes. If something good happens, it’s GRRRRRRREAT (like Tony the Tiger in the cereal commercial). Conversely, when something bad happens, it’s the WORST. We are drawn to extremes, perhaps because there’s energy available there. If we perceive something in the worst possible terms, our body and mind’s alarm system goes off and adrenaline and rapid cognition take over.

Likewise, if we treat something good as automatically superlative—as good as it could be—we tap into →

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Barry Boyce—Founding Editor of *Mindful* and mindful.org—has been learning to meditate since 1972. He’s not done yet.

A low-angle photograph of a person walking a tightrope against a bright blue sky with scattered white clouds. The person is wearing a light-colored t-shirt, light blue jeans, a blue bucket hat, and patterned leggings. They are holding a large, open, reddish-brown umbrella in their right hand. Their left hand is raised, palm facing forward, in a balancing gesture. The tightrope is a thin, dark line stretching across the frame. The top of the image shows the green leaves of a tree. The overall mood is one of calm and balance.

*The more
equanimity we
can cultivate, the
more ease and
confidence we can
offer to ourselves
and others.*

It's Not About Me

A Meditation for De-centering Your Self

By Patricia Rockman and Evan Collins

It is easy for us to take our “selves” too seriously, getting stuck in self-importance that either emphasizes how bad we think we are or how great. A main principle underlying all mindfulness teachings is that rigid attachment to who you believe yourself to be and the stories you tell about yourself are limiting and are the root cause of many of our problems. Taking a step back from a fixed view of self, also called de-centering, can help us to get less caught up in believing our ideas about who we think we and others are. We can start to see these as a constructed view, rather than the truth. The message really is, “Don’t believe everything you think.” In this way, we have more options for dealing with whatever life brings.

Take a moment and settle yourself, closing your eyes and bringing the sensations of breathing, wherever they are most prevalent for you, into the foreground.

After a few minutes, bring to mind a recent time when you were angry with or felt hurt by someone (thinking of something not too highly charged). Who was with you? What happened? What did you think?

Notice the immediate thoughts that pop into your head. Check in and see if they are personalized—*He or she did that to me*, or *How could they do that?* Check now and see if there are blaming or labeling thoughts—*What a...* or *It’s all his or her fault!*

Now check in with how this is all showing up in the body. Is there bracing or tightness? What’s here? Explore this for a few moments and then bring attention back to the physical sensations of breathing.

m

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Lastly, bring attention to the entire body around the breath,

widening and opening attention for a few minutes. And then, contemplating about this situation and person, bring to mind what else might have been going on with that person? See how many possibilities you can come up with. What might they have been feeling or experiencing? How much of what happened actually had anything to do with you?

Now opening your eyes, write down all the possibilities that came to mind.

What do you feel now? What emotions? And what do you feel in the body?

Practice this exercise every time you feel irritated, hurt, or annoyed for the next few weeks and see what you discover. How many of your reactions really need to be taken up as “me” and how many can you let go of and see that fellow human being as just like you?

Patricia Rockman, MD, is a family physician with a focused practice in mental health. She is Senior Director of Education and Clinical Services at the Centre for Mindfulness Studies, Toronto, and associate professor at the University of Toronto, Department of Family Medicine, cross appointed to Psychiatry. **Evan Collins** is a senior MBCT/MBSR teacher, trainer, writer, mindfulness researcher and psychiatrist, living in Toronto. Rockman and Collins, together with Susan L. Woods, wrote *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy: Embodied Presence and Inquiry in Practice* (New Harbinger, 2019).

our capacity for excitement, and even ecstasy. We love that buzz. These extremes have their place and their value, of course, but when we go there too often, we can deplete our energy. Our nervous system may begin to wonder whether we’re the boy who cried wolf.

Equanimity—not going too high or too low in response to circumstances—is a deep kind of center that preserves our energy and well-being. The more equanimity we can cultivate, the more ease and confidence we can offer to ourselves and others. It’s not an indifferent center, a cocoon of safety and uncaring we nestle into. It’s a powerful center, from which we can act with resolve, for the very reason that we have *not* been thrown off balance. Or if we have, like a horse coming out of a stumble, we recover easily and even gracefully. All martial arts are based on this kind of calm yet dynamic center as a source of power.

In a similar vein, Judson Brewer, meditation researcher and teacher, now with Brown University, talks about calibrating our contracting and expanding, to notice when we are pulling back and closing in, and when we are more expansive. Equanimity, Brewer posits, comes when in response to circumstances, rather than contracting (which he associates with resisting and recoiling from), we expand. We’re curious, we let in. Rather than saying “I want *this* or I don’t want *this*,” we say simply, “What *is* this?” (Brewer’s research suggests that there are correlates in our brains for this contracting and expanding activity, which makes it measurable.)

Overdoing it and underdoing it are other extremes that seem to plague many of us. For years, I was on a cycle I came to call “crank and crash.” I learned a lot about this tendency, and where centering fits in, when a friend of mine with a back injury consulted an occupational therapist. The therapist worked with him first on cooking and housework—key “activities of daily living,” as they’re called in the business. The therapist pointed

out that it’s very common if we’re in pain to tough it out and blow past that pain or to shut down completely. Either extreme, in fact, is not so good for healing or for our state of mind. (Or for our ontological security for that matter: We might start to feel worthless, that we can’t even do the simplest things, dammit!)

We need to “calibrate to the middle” rather than bouncing between over- and underdoing. As a human resources counselor put it, we need to “pulse” just as our heart does, meaning we need to live more rhythmically, hewing more consistently to the midline. For example, if I do a given activity more slowly or in smaller doses, I may be able to do it longer. If I remember to take breaks to refresh, I can accomplish more over the long run. It also helps to know when a bridge too far is a bridge too far. This kind of centering of our exertion becomes extremely important as we age, when it’s all too easy to ignore, rail at, or feel guilty about a decline in capability. If we’re calibrating to a center that existed when we were 25 and we’re 65, something is bound to give.

De-centering, or Less Center

The statement I opened with—“I need to get centered”—makes a lot of sense, then, when we consider all the ways we have a center: a physical, psychological, spatial, social, and temporal homeground. It gives us a sense that we know where we are in time and space and in relation to other people. And when we find that center, we find power, and even peace.

Alas, though, good things can bring problems.

For one thing, centering can suggest to meditators that there is a very specific place we’re supposed to strive to get to. On top of that, centering becomes problematic for us when it gets tied up with identity, particularly fixed identity. And that’s why full-fledged mindfulness →

When we have sufficiently centered ourselves, in body and mind, we have the room to de-center, which can bring with it an almost childlike sense of wonder and curiosity.

practice not only involves centering but *de-centering*.

De-centering? If you're asked to introduce yourself, you will say your name and maybe something about your work and family, where you live. If someone probes further, you may talk about where you grew up, what you're passionate about. If it's someone trying to get to know you in a deeper way and you're up for that, probing even further may lead to sharing more frank and intimate details of how you've been hurt or what you struggle with, your opinions, biases, peeves, and so on.

All these elements taken together are aspects of what we usually call our "identity," and in and of themselves, they are useful constructs that we use to understand who we are—and they are not problematic. If you can't say where you live or what your name is, you may have a serious cognitive impairment. Where identity becomes problematic is when we cling to it tightly as a fixed and unchanging anchor. We all do this. We centralize to a fault, filtering every experience back through central headquarters to decide whether it's good, bad, or neutral for our team: Team Me.

This habit of verifying everything according to how it relates to Team Me creates all sorts of distortions and problems, largely because we are not in fact the center of the universe.

And it gets worse.

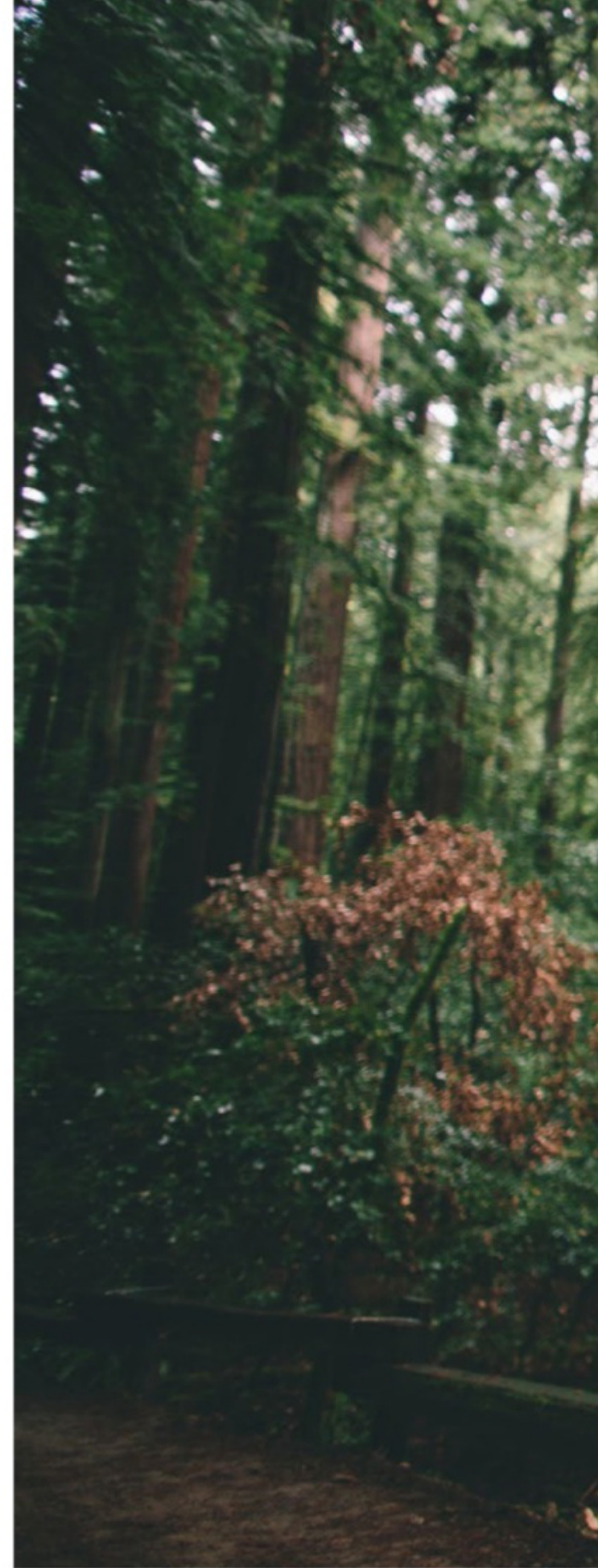
We have problems not only of *me*, but we have problems of *mine*. We can be pretty possessive, we humans. We stake out territory and start to furnish it according to our tastes, and the tastes of our chosen clan. And whoever doesn't fit in that territory doesn't belong. It's like a gated community with lots of covenants. These kinds of people and this kind of behavior is OK; these kinds are not. When a leader in an organization develops a fiefdom, woe betide the brave soul who tries to make change.

In short, ego-centricity is a bit of a problem.

That's why people who teach Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy and who research it, like Patricia Rockman and Evan Collins (who coauthored, along with Susan Wood, the book *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy: Embodied Presence and Inquiry in Practice*), emphasize de-centering.

As Rockman and Collins—who provide a de-centering practice on page 68—say, "Rigid attachment to who you believe yourself to be and the stories you tell about yourself are limiting and are the root cause of many of our problems." They also point out that identity is extremely "subjective and influenced by who we socialize with, our cultures, values, and experiences." Researchers now use psychological scales to measure the "skill" of de-centering.

Identity is something dangerous to center on, for the simple reason that it is constructed from so many bits and pieces and influences and is a flimsy and constantly moving target. Rockman and Collins assert, "Identity in itself is not necessarily bad but rather gripping it too tightly and using it to think 'different' means better or worse" creates big problems. It becomes the source of so much toxic comparing. Better, then, to loosen our grip on this centralizing tendency. A light touch is what's called for.





PHOTOGRAPH BY BRYAN RUPP / STOCKSY

Expanding Beyond the Center

I asked Zindel Segal, one of the founders of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, about de-centering, since he has done research on how development of this skill is helpful in counteracting the overly self-referential habits of people suffering with depression. When we're caught up in depression we are, among other things, coloring the world through a heavily me-tinted lens. We're not per-

ceiving what is actually happening.

Segal indicates that the term de-centering traces back to the pioneering developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, who talked about it as an important developmental stage (also known as "decentration") when a child can begin to see things in the world from multiple perspectives. As a psychological trait for adults, de-centering takes this developmental skill to its greatest extent, to perceive ourselves and our world in a "multi-perspectival" way.

A related quality or skill is "meta-cognition," the ability to be aware of our thought process. With meta-cognition, or meta-awareness, we see thought in motion, allowing it to move us through life while simultaneously recognizing that it may not be presenting a fully accurate picture of reality that we should cling to at all costs.

Jamie Bristow, director of the United Kingdom's Mindfulness Initiative, has addressed concerns that de-centering and meta-cognition promote a kind of dissociative →

*We can stand to be a little eccentric, off-center.
Trusting that our fundamental center is taken
care of, we can leap and dance and let that little
bit of weird we all possess shine.*

state where you are out of touch with who you are—a vague, unsettled state of mind where thoughts and feelings are perceived, in Bristow’s words, as “disconnected, impersonal events.” In response to the fear that mindfulness is promoting such a state of mind, he has written that we “already have some degree of meta-cognition, and psychologists think that its emergence in children represents important stages in development. Through mindfulness training, we shift from considering ‘thoughts as facts’ to viewing them as ‘mental events’ that may or may not represent the truth of a situation. Our felt experience of these objects can still be deeply personal, linked by an understanding of causality, personal history and responsibility. Now [with mindfulness] there’s just a healthy dose of skepticism about their inherent validity...”

In terms of an ongoing mindfulness practice, when we have sufficiently centered ourselves, in body and mind, we have the room to de-center, to be less concerned about centralizing all the data we’re taking in, which can bring with it an almost childlike sense of wonder and curiosity. That’s why “getting centered” at a certain point can become a counterproductive motivation. Because we don’t want to end up trapped in a me- and mine-centric universe. As freeing as we imagine it might be to be boss dog, it’s actually very stuffy and very stuck.

In fact, we can even stand to be a little *eccentric*, off-center. Trusting that our fundamental center is taken care of, we can leap and dance and

let that little bit of weird we all possess shine. We dance as if no one is watching, because we’re judging ourselves less, and less concerned about responding to the literal and imagined judgments of others.

Judson Brewer, borrowing from the groundbreaking work of psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, has written about how loosening the need for securing our ego results in flow, a free-floating sense of ease. Athletes talk about being in the zone, musicians lose themselves in the flow, all of us have moments when we just don’t seem to matter and yet we are fully engaged. We don’t need to fuss about centering. We have faith that it’s there without needing to be checked up on like a misbehaving child.

Centerless

We could well stop there, but it’s worth taking our exploration of center just a tad farther. The experience of flow free from ego-fixation can be so free, and freeing, at times that we may get glimpses of a kind of psychological space that is completely open, referred to in some meditation literature as centerless.

What could that possibly mean?

If we consider the totality of our experience, what we see, hear, taste, smell, think, and feel, it is ordered to a certain degree, but it is also chaotic, and contains a lot of uncertainty. We don’t really know what will happen next. Respecting that ultimate reality, the loosest form of meditation is utterly without focus or intent. It’s a

bit like being “spaced out” without losing touch with the ground.

In 2015, four meditation researchers, Antoine Lutz, Amishi Jha, John Dunne, and Clifford Saran published a paper in the *American Psychologist* that laid out a framework describing the spectrum of meditation practices from the most focused and centralized to the most open and uncentralized.

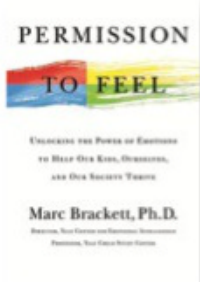
At the most subtle and nuanced end of the scale, they describe a kind of “practice” that is almost a nonpractice, that involves little to no effort and yet has a great deal of clarity. If de-centering involves less concern with our center, at this stage we have no concern with a center: Wherever you go, there you are. Meditation teachers often discuss this kind of experience as coming upon us accidentally, simply popping up out of nowhere. It’s also said to be difficult to maintain, since it is so formless and aimless, and impossible to pinpoint in words—the ultimate “you had to be there” kind of experience.

Well, there’s not much to say about something that’s said to be impossible to describe, but I will say this much. I have faith that we all have sudden glimpses of a kind of experience that takes us utterly out of our me-centric concerns. Maybe it’s the smile of a baby, the first glimpse of sunrise, a moment of falling in love, the juiciness of a homegrown tomato. Whatever it is, it leaves us with a little residue of feeling, a desire to get more of that. And then, it’s gone. Poof. And perhaps we think, maybe I should practice some mindfulness and see if I could hang out here longer. ●



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read...listen...stream



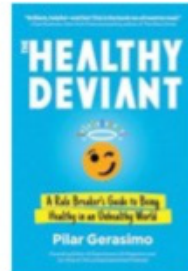
PERMISSION TO FEEL

Unlocking the Power of Emotions to Help Our Kids, Ourselves, and Our Society Thrive

Marc Brackett • Celadon Books

Brackett—founding director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence—came to this work with a mission born from his own experience of bullying and sexual assault, which he discusses poignantly in *Permission to Feel*. Before we learn his story, however, Brackett paints a vivid picture of why emotions matter so much for public health and education. Incidents of bullying and harassment in US K-12 schools doubled each year between 2015 and 2017; 46% of teachers report *high daily stress*; from 2016-2017, one in three students across 196 US colleges reported diagnosed mental health conditions; a quarter of US children between 13 and 18 suffer from anxiety disorders; and by 2030, mental health problems could cost the global economy up to \$16 trillion. When our children learn unhealthy responses to emotion, tangible results ripple through families, schools, communities, and society. That's the diagnosis.

Brackett's prescription—as researched, taught, and advocated for at the Yale center—begins with a very simple question: How are you feeling? If the response is avoidance or lying, if no one is interested in our genuine answer, we're almost certain to suffer, and that suffering will spread. Instead, Brackett recommends the RULER method: Recognizing emotions in oneself and others; Understanding the causes and consequences; Labeling emotions precisely; Expressing emotions, taking context and culture into consideration; and Regulating effectively. The book expands on this method and how it's used for both adults and children. (In schools, RULER works with the adults before taking it to students.) *Permission to Feel* is an inspiring book with a timely message, not only for each of us, but for the organizations and institutions that model how we are supposed to carry ourselves.



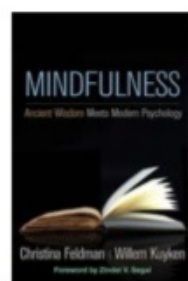
THE HEALTHY DEVIANT

A Rule-Breaker's Guide to Being Healthy in an Unhealthy World

Pilar Gerasimo • North Atlantic Books

"You have to make all kinds of inconvenient and unpopular choices. You have to become a sort of renegade freak—or at least be willing to think and act like one some of the time." So advises Pilar Gerasimo, founding editor of *Experience Life* magazine. After nearly two decades studying and writing about human health, Gerasimo has developed

a truly healthy skepticism toward the trendy extremes, like weight-loss diets and punishing exercise, as well as the toxic combination of junk food, busy-ness, and endless stress. She affirms that despite this "Unhealthy Default Reality," we *can* all improve our well-being—and tuning into our own bodies is the most important step.



MINDFULNESS

Ancient Wisdom Meets Modern Psychology

Christina Feldman and Willem Kuyken • Guilford

In this book, two UK mindfulness experts—Feldman (a leading teacher in the Insight Meditation Community) and Kuyken (director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre)—try to create bridges between Buddhist psychological understanding and contemporary science and psychology. It's a highly detailed exploration of the many elements of mindfulness, both the human capability and the practice,

that demonstrates that while much of what is taught as mindfulness these days developed within Buddhism, it is not religious in nature and does not require Buddhism to yield benefit. The book provides an extremely rich resource for those who teach mindfulness or want to learn more about it in depth, including many practices, helpful illustrations, and scientific discussions and references.

PODCAST reviews



MINDFUL MEN TALK

Episode: Steve—Anxiety & Beyond

Taking an interest in your own emotional wellness is, for many men, greatly discouraged by societal expectations to be tough, invulnerable, self-sufficient. “We don’t let people know we may be searching,” explains Steve, who’s a mindfulness coach in Surrey, UK. Topics like stress, grief, sexuality,

and overcoming stigma are the lens through which he and James approach *Mindful Men Talk*. “The fact you are taking notice” and addressing a mental health struggle, says Steve, isn’t a weakness: “It shows great strength.” Their podcast aims to expand the space for men to be open about their mental health.



TO THE BEST OF OUR KNOWLEDGE

Episode: How to Be an Ethical Traveler

This episode, a collab with *AFAR* magazine, offers a variety of thoughtful suggestions for your next trip—from purchasing carbon offsets to creating your own “traveler’s code of ethics.” Editor Dave Eggers reflects that such a code can focus on learning from your new surroundings, “tossing out everything you think you know and being a completely open book.” A mindful approach

can also inform how we choose to carry material privilege in poorer regions. Professor Anu Taranath notes that we transform feelings of discomfort or guilt when we reflect: “What does it mean for me to lead an intentional life, knowing that I have more? How do I want to use what I have? Giving or not giving... isn’t a quick, transactional thing, but part of a larger ethos of how we live.”



THE HAPPINESS LAB WITH DR. LAURIE SANTOS

Episode: Make 'Em Laugh

Does the “chameleon effect” have something to do with vanishing into one’s surroundings? Well, sort of: It’s the fact that we unconsciously mimic the physical posture, mannerisms, even the moods, of those around us. As Dr. Laurie details, there are lots of ways

this gets exploited—from TV’s canned laughter, to the manipulative algorithms of our Facebook feeds. But you can create a positive mood spiral instead by noting how a situation affects you (*Ah, I have Twitter-argument jitters*) and regulating your emotions.



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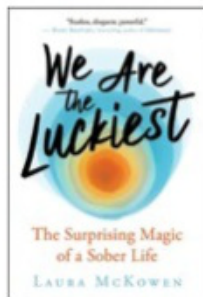


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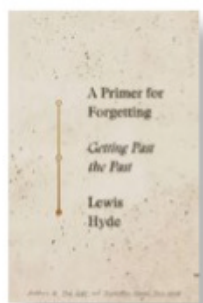
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actually happening for you
all the time...and it's possible
you can trust where they're
leading you.



WE ARE THE LUCKIEST
The Surprising Magic of a Sober Life
Laura McKowen • New World Library

Early on in her recovery from alcoholism, Laura McKowen reached a powerful conclusion: Building her sober life didn't mean cutting herself off from life's freedom and joy. Rather, it was an invitation to be present with everything she'd been running from. To get close to the pain (debt, work, being unwillingly single, feeling isolated), as well as delight (self-expression, fulfilling relationships, seeing her daughter thrive). Healing

means first accepting these things as they are, an ongoing process McKowen records in this timely, defiant, and beautifully written memoir. Sobriety becomes possible "not because I was committed to forever, but because I finally realized the future was built on a bunch of nows, and that was it." Imbued with emotional honesty and hope, *We Are the Luckiest* urges a gentle curiosity and self-compassion for even our darkest places.



A PRIMER FOR FORGETTING
Getting Past the Past
Lewis Hyde • Farrar, Straus, and Giroux

Being able to remember things is one of our most highly praised virtues. It's inculcated in us from our earliest years. When someone simply can't remember or we find ourselves forgetting, we're likely to denigrate, to fear deterioration. But in this lovely and strange little book, Hyde sings the praises of forgetfulness. Could there be freedom

in loosening our obsession with remembering? What will we discover when we forget something about ourselves or others we deemed so vital? We may discover something fresh and born anew. Hyde draws on countless snippets of material spanning thousands of years to open our minds to the possible joys of letting memories drift away.



TUNE IN TO mindful

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THREE PLACES TO BEGIN WITH MINDFULNESS

1

A Five-Minute Breathing Meditation
from Diana Winston

Connect with the breath. One of the most basic methods of meditation is to anchor your attention to the breath. Since the breath is always with you, you can practice following its movement anywhere you may find yourself, making it an ideal introduction to meditation. Explore this practice to focus on your breathing in the moment and, over time, reduce the effects of stress and anxiety.

2

A 10-Minute Body Scan Practice
from Tara Healey

Tune in to the body. Our body often takes on the brunt of our stress, whether that be from clenching our jaw in frustration or pushing ourselves too hard at the gym. A body scan practice helps direct your awareness toward the parts of your body that need the most care, so you can discover relaxation and ease. Explore this brief meditation to reconnect with body and mind.

3

A Seven-Minute Practice to Shift Out of Doing Mode
from Zindel Segal

Be in the moment. When we are in "doing mode," we're so busy jumping from one activity to the next that we lose sight of what's happening here and now. In order to get multiple things done at once, we slip into autopilot and miss out on all the smaller details of our day. Try this meditation to transition from doing to being, so that you can deeply appreciate the present moment. ●



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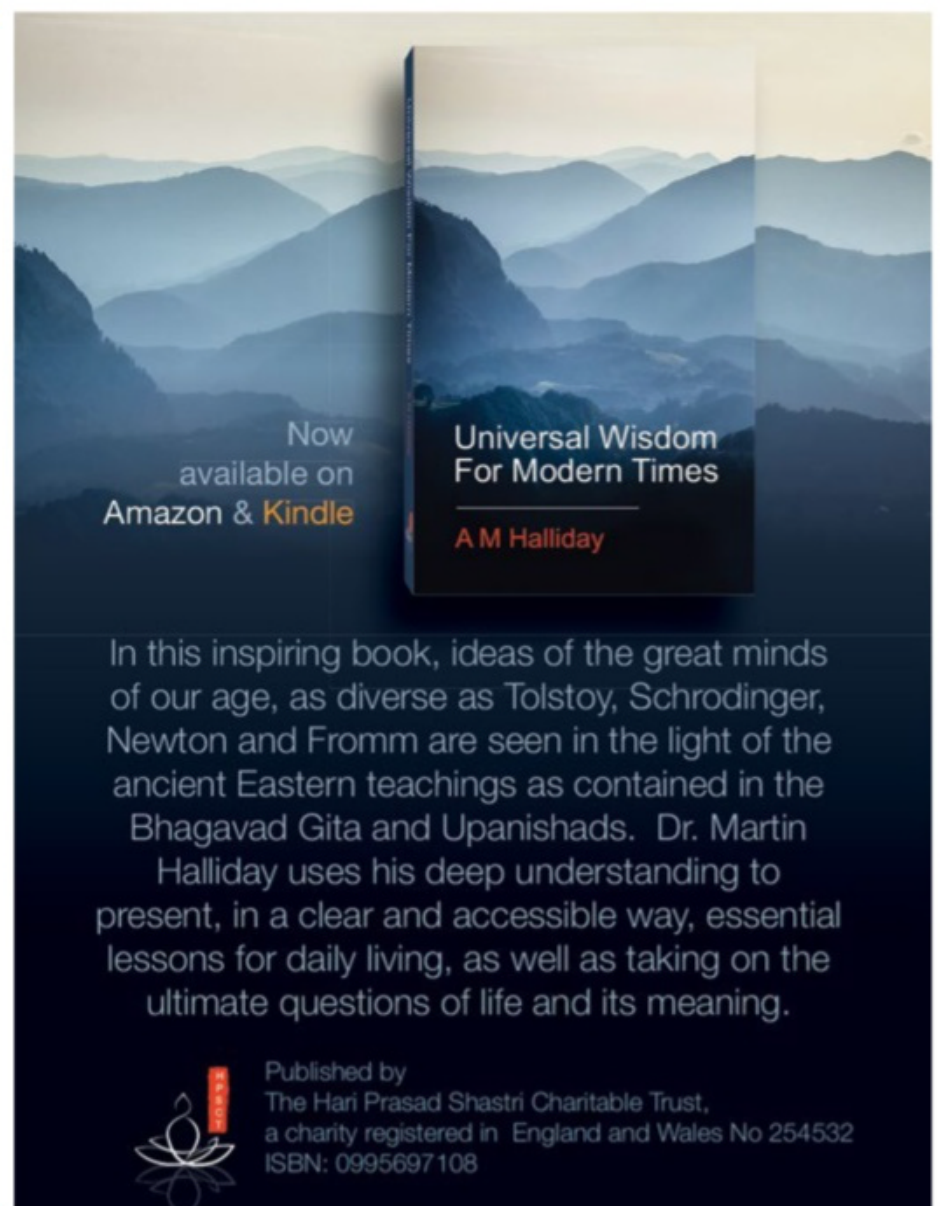
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DON'T TRY THIS ALONE

by BARRY BOYCE, FOUNDING EDITOR

As interest in mindfulness grows, and programs and research projects follow apace, critiques grow too. A common critique we hear is that mindfulness is just a quick fix for reducing stress. It doesn't ask us to look for root

causes of stress. For example, this criticism posits that if your employer is asking you to work overly long hours and meet impossible deadlines, the mindfulness teacher hired by the company will simply tell you, "Oh, it's your fault you're stressed out. Take a few deep breaths, notice what's going on in your mind, let go, and you'll be fine."

But this critique—most strongly heard in Ron Purser's recent book *McMindfulness*—is a classic straw man: It paints a vivid picture of people doing wrong in order to hurl brickbats at them, without saying exactly who's being talked about and when and how they offended. It's not supported by a lot of evidence of the work of *actual mindfulness teachers*.

Yes, there are bad mindfulness teachers, and bad mindfulness apps, and probably there are a growing number of both. So let's continue the work of setting and upholding standards that help you distinguish superficial (and even counterproductive)

"mindfulness" from something that can make a real difference in your life when offered with an appreciation for your unique circumstances.

Fortunately, there are already many good mindfulness teachers and good programs, and the ones we promote at *Mindful* would not encourage anyone

values that are their own—not ones simply supplied to them by their employer. They engage students in discussions that investigate with curiosity the causes of pain: personal pain, shared pain, organizational pain.

In addition, most mindfulness teachers introduce kindness and

Using the steadiness of mind and the lower reactivity that arises from simple mindfulness practice, we develop a rounded picture that can lead to change.

to ignore root causes, to simply accept the status quo and use meditation to "uh, get used to it, buddy."

In fact, in the hands of good mindfulness teachers, mindfulness opens the door to deeper inquiry and insight. Using the steadiness of mind and the lower reactivity that arises from simple mindfulness practice, we investigate. We look at causes, context, conditions. We develop a rounded picture that can lead to change.

For example, a number of mindfulness teachers encourage the use of mindfulness to notice and investigate unconscious bias and to do deep listening. For a long time, mindfulness has been used in service of improving our ability to have difficult conversations, as evidenced by the recent work of Oren Jay Sofer (author of *Say What You Mean*) and Lili Powell at the University of Virginia's Contemplative Sciences Center.

People teaching mindful leadership, such as Janice Marturano, Rich Fernandez, and Jeremy Hunter, ask their students to probe for underlying

compassion practices that emphasize our intimate connection with others, as opposed to focusing purely on ourselves. And teachers like Jud Brewer and Hugh Byrne offer lots of good instruction and advice about changing deep-seated habits. They are not blaming or guiltting us for having our habits, as some critics suggest. They are simply unpacking the process of habit formation and supplying us with tools to make new choices.

In short, authentic mindfulness teachers do not avoid urging students to probe for deeper causes and ills, and they do so in a way that is constructive and creative. They do that because they believe that mindfulness can be a helpful ally in the quest we all have to reduce the deepest forms of stress and harm. It's a we thing, not a me thing. ●

Barry Boyce is the Founding Editor of *Mindful* and *Mindful.org* and author of *The Mindfulness Revolution*. He has been an avid mindfulness practitioner for over 40 years.

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