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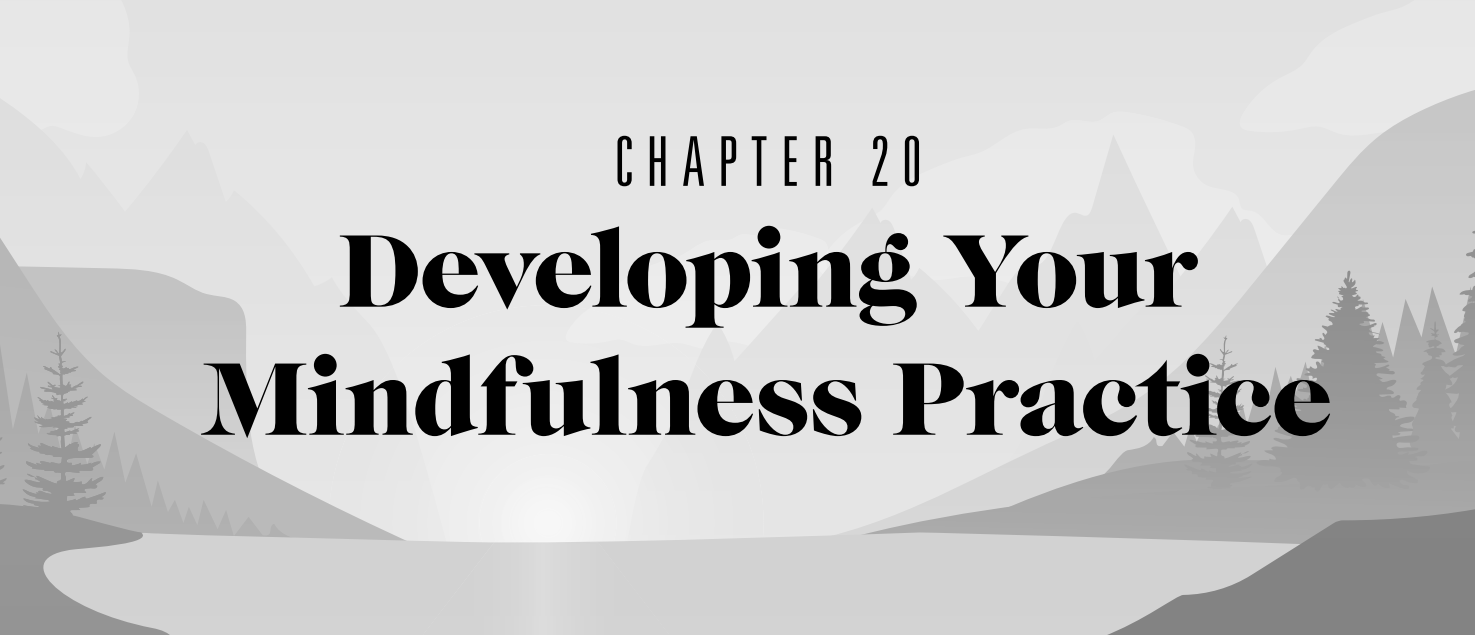
CONSCIOUS CARE GUIDES

Mindfulness

Unwind, de-stress, and focus your mind
for a healthier, happier you

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CHAPTER 20

Developing Your Mindfulness Practice

There are three ways to define *practice*. It means “to do something repeatedly in order to get better at it.” It’s also “a way of behaving or acting that you’ve chosen to make a habit.” Finally, it can mean “work done according to the guidelines of a particular discipline, such as the practice of medicine or law.” All three of these definitions of practice apply to mindfulness.

When you practice mindfulness in order to get better at it, you patiently and diligently repeat your efforts to be receptive and aware in this moment. When you identify mindfulness as something you would like to make a part of your life, you adopt mindfulness techniques and exercises as part of your daily routine. Finally, if you decide you want to dedicate yourself to becoming more and more receptively aware of your life over the long term, you may think of yourself as having a “mindfulness practice.” You can tend and cultivate such a practice in many different ways.

In this chapter, I give you ways to develop your mindfulness practice further, including how to identify things that deepen and strengthen your mindfulness, whatever your current level of commitment. I talk about how to stay motivated through your moment-by-moment efforts of paying attention to your present experience. I explain how to find patience and focus, and how to navigate your way through various kinds of challenges to mindfulness. Finally, you get guidelines for how to develop and strengthen a lasting practice. This includes setting a regular schedule for formal mindfulness sessions, attending classes, and participating in a group.

Challenges to Mindfulness

Most people find the effort to be mindful frustrating at some point. Sometimes they find it seems like an insurmountable task and, no matter how hard they try, they can’t make any headway. If your experience is anything like this, it may feel like mindfulness has simply made you aware

of how often you're *not* paying attention. Despite your intention, you may still arrive somewhere after a commute and realize you don't remember the ride. You may still find yourself acting out habits before you realize it or getting stressed because you can't let go of thoughts about the future. Actually, all these things will probably happen.

The primary reason mindfulness can be difficult is that your mind is used to operating in nonmindful ways. The many reasons people aren't naturally mindful are described in Chapter 2. In addition, you probably weren't raised to be mindful, and even if you were, you probably weren't subjected to the incredible amount of discipline it takes to make children or young adults learn to gain some degree of control of their mental habits. You may have spent many years without making any conscious effort at mindfulness at all—that's 16 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year. That much thinking has created a lot of habits, which you aren't going to change with a few minutes of practice each day.

It's Called "Practice," Not "Perfect"

The great thing is that the benefits of mindfulness aren't limited to people who can keep their minds from wandering. As long as you *make the effort* to keep your mind from wandering, you'll see your life more clearly and learn things. If you practice regularly, you'll find yourself more mindful and less stressed in general—even if your evaluation of your meditation is that it's not very good. If you engage in regular mindfulness practices like the ones in Chapter 19, you'll find yourself more present throughout your day, even if you don't do them as often as you'd like and even if you only manage to be present for a few seconds at a time.

Mindfulness isn't just about increasing the minutes you manage to pay attention to what's going on each day. That's one aspect, but the other aspect is about shifting your whole attitude toward your mind and your life. As you practice mindfulness, you decide your life is worth being present for, and you start looking at the state of your mind as just one aspect of your present experience. You end up paying less attention to it as a reflection of reality and more attention to it as a factor that contributes to your happiness or suffering—a factor over which you have at least some influence. You start noticing the content and function of your mind largely determine the flavor of your experiences, not vice versa. All these things are very significant and beneficial.

The mere intention to be more mindful makes you more aware of everything, including the fact that you might have just come out of a lapse in mindfulness. Your intention provides a context for your experience. If you had no ideas whatsoever about how you wanted your mind to be, how would you know whether you were on the right track? Constant or sustained receptive awareness of the present moment is an ideal—one few people, if any, actually reach. This shouldn't be discouraging because it is completely normal. Are you going to stop practicing something like kindness because you aren't perfectly kind all the time? Of course not.

The Paradox of Effort and Noneffort

The great irony of mindfulness is that it requires effort, but that effort is primarily about giving up your habitual kind of effort. Any moment you're mindful is more due to what you *aren't* doing—ruminating on the past, anticipating the future, worrying, planning, fantasizing, or judging—than to any special mental technique or discipline. In a sense, it takes no effort at all to simply be aware; it just takes effort to let go of your habitual activity and self-concern.

In your moment-by-moment practice, it's good to keep in mind this paradox of effort and noneffort. You have to make an effort to change your habitual way of being, but as soon as you remember to be mindful, all you have to do is relax into noneffort. This is a little like someone asking you to physically relax completely—it can actually be very hard to do, even if you're getting a massage or soaking in a spa. The effort to let go and trust the present moment completely can be a challenge. On the other hand, it may be a relief to know that, ultimately, mindfulness isn't a special skill; it's just letting go.

The Illusion of Thought-Free Bliss

Another challenge to mindfulness is holding some expectation about what it's supposed to feel like. Books and instructions are meant to guide and inspire you, but sometimes they can give you two erroneous impressions: (1) there's a "correct" way to be mindful, and if you succeed at it, you'll experience long periods of unbroken, blissful calm that is free from thoughts and feelings; (2) most people who practice mindfulness have mastered this "correct" way. It's easy to conclude that if sustained mindful bliss eludes you, it's because you don't understand how to practice mindfulness correctly or you lack the ability to do it.

In reality, everyone struggles with mindfulness. Books, guided meditations, and teachers try to give you an idea of what you're working toward, so naturally they describe what's possible. It is indeed possible to be wholeheartedly engaged in the present moment—calm, at ease, and less caught up in your thoughts and feelings. However, even mindfulness teachers aren't sitting on their cushions enjoying continuous and effortless stillness. They're experiencing thoughts, resistance, hindrances, and desires just as you are. If they weren't, they wouldn't be able to guide you in mindfulness practice.

True mindfulness is usually *not* thought-free, and it's rarely blissful. On occasion, you might experience both of these states, and some people experience them more than others, but they're not the goals of mindfulness practice. The goal is to be receptively aware of your present experience—whatever that is. Sometimes that might include a busy mind, worry, sadness, or sleepiness. The key is to give up resistance to what *is*, not to resist it even more because it doesn't fit with your ideas about what "good" mindfulness should be like. Doing that will only get in the way of your efforts!

It isn't helpful to guess what other people's experience of mindfulness or meditation is. You might ask them. Hearing about the challenges others face can be useful. However, you have to forget about anyone else and just concentrate on your own experience, ultimately. If mindfulness makes your life any better at all, just continue your practice without comparing yourself to others.

Staying on Track Long Term

Sometimes, it can be difficult to judge whether your mindfulness practice is on the right track. As described earlier, comparing your experience to others or to an ideal can be problematic. Still, you need some way to know whether you're going about things in a fruitful way or how to deepen your mindfulness. While ideals can simply get in the way, it *is* possible to become more and more mindful and to discover new ways of living you didn't even imagine before. If you have a sense that your mindfulness practice is "good enough," that's fine. But you'll also be unlikely to experience the incredible things deep mindfulness practice has to offer. How do you keep progressing with your practice without getting stuck in judgment or attached to ideals?

Just Look at the Results

Trust your own intuition when it comes to guiding your mindfulness. Look at the results of any particular technique, effort, or approach in your life. Over time you'll learn to notice whether your mind is wandering, or whether it's open and receptive to your present experience. You'll know whether certain practices result in less stress and more equanimity in your life. You'll notice positive results like feeling more patient with people or experiencing a deeper sense of satisfaction with your life.

If you see any of these results, your mindfulness is on the right track. It doesn't matter all that much whether your moment-by-moment experience of mindfulness matches what you hear from others or what you read. It doesn't really matter whether it fits your own ideals or hopes. Your conscious evaluation of your practice might inspire you to try to remember mindfulness more often, seek support for your practice, or explore new techniques. However, this conscious judgment about your practice is a little like judging a book from its cover. It reflects a guess about the important stuff, based on superficial information.

Even the Buddha said "test for yourself." He was very specific about instructions for mindfulness and meditation. He was also adamant about letting your own experience be proof. Don't take my word for it, he would say.

You can trust your own sense of what gets in the way of your mindfulness. You can trust your intuition that a given technique, effort, or approach *isn't* beneficial to your practice. Do certain activities or trains of thought encourage you to succumb to old habits instead of being mindfully aware? Do you need to make mindfulness more of a priority in your life? Does a

certain technique make you more resistant and agitated instead of letting you relax into the present moment? Whatever you think, you're probably right—no one knows better than you. The question is whether you'll acknowledge what you know and act on it in a way that increases and supports your mindfulness.

Always More to See Clearly

You needn't worry about progress in your mindfulness practice as long as you keep asking yourself a question like this: "What do I still not see clearly?" There's always *something* you can see more clearly through mindful awareness. There's always something more to understand and greater intimacy and freedom to experience. Asking yourself a question about what you haven't yet seen or mastered keeps you moving forward, pushing the edges of your practice, and challenging yourself. It also keeps you humble and helps you avoid complacency.

The good thing about continually improving your mindfulness practice this way is that it's not about a goal or an ideal. You aren't setting up a standard and then comparing yourself to it. You aren't commodifying it. It's not that you're still inadequate, yet if you just try hard enough, you'll achieve what you want, and you can stop working. Instead, you're acknowledging there's no end to this process. As long as you sincerely look toward what you haven't yet mastered but would like to, your mindfulness practice will continue to deepen and to develop without any need for evaluation, judgment, or impatience.

Effort and Innovation

Long-term mindfulness practice requires you to keep up diligent effort without being overshadowed by an expectation to reach any particular goals. This isn't to say you won't experience rewards or benefits, but they won't be the kinds of things you can collect and keep. If you don't keep up your effort, you'll lose the benefits—just as you'll lose your fitness if you stop exercising. Even if you complete a mindfulness course, get a credential, or become a teacher, none of these tangible successes help you be mindful. Moment-by-moment lifelong practice is something you just keep doing. After a while, it helps if you stop worrying about progress at all, and just adopt mindfulness as part of your lifestyle. See it as something you would do even if you didn't experience benchmark rewards from it, like being honest or responsible.

Over the long term, it's also important to be creative and innovative in your practice. Think of it like learning to be an artist, and your medium is your body-mind. You can learn techniques others have found useful, look for guidance from other "artists," and study the history of the "art." Ultimately, seek to manifest mastery and beauty in your own life and in your own way. Create your own mindfulness techniques, exercises, and practices. If the proven methods aren't working for you, experiment and find what does. For example, if you find that it helps your mind to settle if you imagine being in your favorite safe place, go ahead and do that. If you find any mental

imagery distracting and it helps to center your awareness in your body, do that. Refer back to the section in this chapter on looking at the results; if something helps you be receptively aware of the present moment, don't worry whether it's correct mindfulness practice. It is.

At the same time, you may find that goals help motivate you. If they do, by all means go ahead and set some for your practice. One of my teachers called this a "positive use of greed." If setting a goal such as letting go of stimulus-independent thinking for longer and longer periods encourages you to practice, then go ahead. Just make sure you stay receptive to all of the results, not just the ones you're looking for. Striving for too specific a goal that is too specific can sometimes make you neglect other important areas of practice.

Strengthening Your Practice

In this section, I suggest various options for strengthening your mindfulness. The ability to be mindful is similar to other disciplines or skills in that the more time and energy you invest in it, the better you'll get at it. On the other hand, there's no minimum amount of practice you should do, below which mindfulness doesn't do you any good. It's completely up to you. You can try to do a task mindfully once a week, or you can live in a residential-practice place where you focus on mindfulness 24/7—or anything in between. You're limited only by your level of interest and commitment, colored by your life circumstances.

Regular Formal Sessions

It's been mentioned several times already in this book, but the value of spending time in some kind of formal mindfulness practice is worth mentioning again. This can be meditation (see Chapter 8). It can mean doing simple tasks where the main point is to be as mindful as you can be for the duration of the activity (see Chapter 4). You can make an effort to be receptively aware all day long (see Chapter 19). However, unless you're a master of mindfulness, you're unlikely to notice how present you're actually being in the midst of activity. Being surrounded by distractions or trying to get something done makes mindfulness more challenging. It's extremely useful to set everything else aside for a little while and focus on simply being present.

The length of formal sessions isn't so important, although the longer the better, generally speaking. This is because we learn more about what is possible by letting go of intruding thoughts. A longer session gives you the all-important practice of seeing moods and distractions arise and then pass without your needing to react to them. It teaches you more about being present through the desire to move or let your mind travel to endless planning and replaying the past. These are invaluable tools, honed with practice, that you can use in daily life.

Regularity is essential. If you have any trouble getting yourself to do formal mindfulness sessions, think of an amount of time to spend in such practice that seems ridiculously easy to you. Five

minutes a day, four days a week? Sitting with a group twice a month? Each person will have a different idea about what sounds easy, but all you have to do is find what sounds doable to you. It doesn't need to be "good," virtuous, or ideal—just a little more than you do right now. Then do this amount of formal practice over a set period of time, such as a week or a month. Don't worry about increasing it. Instead, be as mindful as you can about your experience and the effects on your life. Mindfulness tends to inspire more mindfulness.

If meditation seems like work, it can take some effort to get yourself to practice—especially if you have lots of other demands on your time and energy. If this is the case, even occasionally, instead of thinking of meditation as another task, try to simply sit down and do nothing for a little while. Let go of any agenda at all—except to do *nothing*. Just put your life on pause, and try to relax completely. Don't even seek to control your mind. Do this for 2 to 5 minutes—longer if you like. If you find yourself eager to jump up and get busy again or to reach for some distraction, just think of these few minutes as a well-deserved break.

Take an MBSR Course

The course called mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is highly recommended. With a focus on stress management, this eight-week course has been taken by more than 20,000 people since it was created in 1979. Its benefits have been the subject of many scientific studies (see Chapter 1). It costs money and requires a significant commitment of time, but it will give you a solid grounding in mindfulness practice. Course instructors undergo extensive training and are certified by the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, which is part of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. There are qualified teachers offering the course all over the world; simply search online for a class near you.

The class generally meets weekly for about 2 hours, and there's one additional all-day class (or retreat). New practices are introduced in class. Participants engage in practice together, share experiences, and are able to ask lots of questions. In addition, participants commit to at least 45 minutes a day of formal mindfulness practice consisting of a guided meditation, mindful yoga, or silent meditation. There are usually also readings and some other kinds of exercises to do outside class.

Groups Practicing Mindfulness

Many people find it hard to sustain a mindfulness practice over time, even if they've taken an MBSR course, unless they regularly practice with a group. Humans are social creatures; you may find yourself showing up for a mindfulness session just because other people are showing up. You'll probably find yourself able to meditate longer and stay more still in a group because of what I like to call "positive peer pressure." After all, if everyone else seems to be sitting still, then so can you! Sometimes, the practice of mindfulness seems more accessible or legitimate

because you encounter it in person with other real living people. It can help you face your own challenges if you hear how other people have dealt with theirs, and the guidance of an experienced teacher can be invaluable. Practicing with a group can also make mindfulness fun and challenge you to study and try new things.

In the roots of mindfulness—Buddhist tradition—practicing with others is considered essential. The Buddhist path is considered to consist of the “three treasures” of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. In simple terms, think of buddha as each person’s innate ability to wake up and see your life clearly—everyone possesses “Buddha nature”. Dharma is the method of waking up to the true nature of life and living and the study of what brings true happiness for self and others. Sangha is the community of people practicing these elements together.

If you’re resistant to participating in a group, you’re not alone. Despite any wariness you might feel, however, it’s worth investigating a few groups (assuming you’re fortunate enough to live near some). Your local MBSR teacher might be able to refer you to one. Look online for mindfulness or meditation centers, groups, or meet-ups. In my experience, most groups are open, inviting, and used to new people coming and going. They’re generally very accepting of different approaches to life, and I’ve never been pressured to commit to theirs. If you encounter anything that makes you uncomfortable or confuses you, either ask about it or find a different group.

You might also try attending a Buddhist center. Sometimes, completely secular mindfulness groups can be hard to find. Keep in mind Buddhism is a nontheistic religion and can be called more of a philosophy or a way of life than a religion. A Zen or vipassana center will generally be most compatible with a more secular approach to mindfulness. These centers will generally be very happy to allow you to meditate and study with them, even if you aren’t interested in Buddhism. If you’re unable to get to a group, you might want to check out Treeleaf Zendo (treeleaf.org), which has regularly scheduled communal meditation sessions (done by video), as well as a discussion forum and other resources.

Mindfulness is just like any other skill or discipline—the more you practice, the better you get at it. However, it is unlike other kinds of skills or disciplines because it asks you to give up the habitual kind of effort that involves striving after goals and ideals. You can trust your intuition about whether you’re being mindful and what helps or hinders your mindfulness. You may experience thought-free or blissful times in your practice. Maybe not. That’s not the goal. Keep in mind that mindfulness is about being present for your experience, even if it’s not thought-free or pleasant. It’s helpful to be openminded when it comes to finding ways to strengthen your practice, whether exploring new approaches, taking a class, or meditating with a group. Find your own way.



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