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# mindful december

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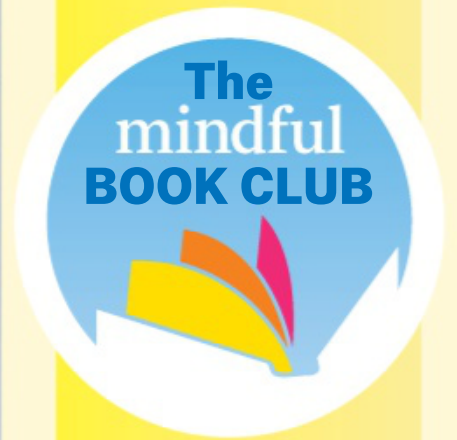
### Living Greatly

What do people who work with death know about happiness? Writer **Stephanie Domet** explores with renowned mindfulness teacher **Mirabai Bush**, hospice pioneer **Frank Ostaseski**, and **Rabbi Rami Shapiro** and discovers what's truly essential.

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### Navigating Difficult Conversations

Learning how to prepare, listen, and communicate mindfully won't prevent challenging conversations, writes **Oren Jay Sofer**, but it will help you navigate them better.



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# december

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### Point of View

By Barry Boyce

"When we understand our identity is changing like everything else, we don't spend all our time propping it up in the same way. When I know that life is precarious, then I appreciate that it's precious."

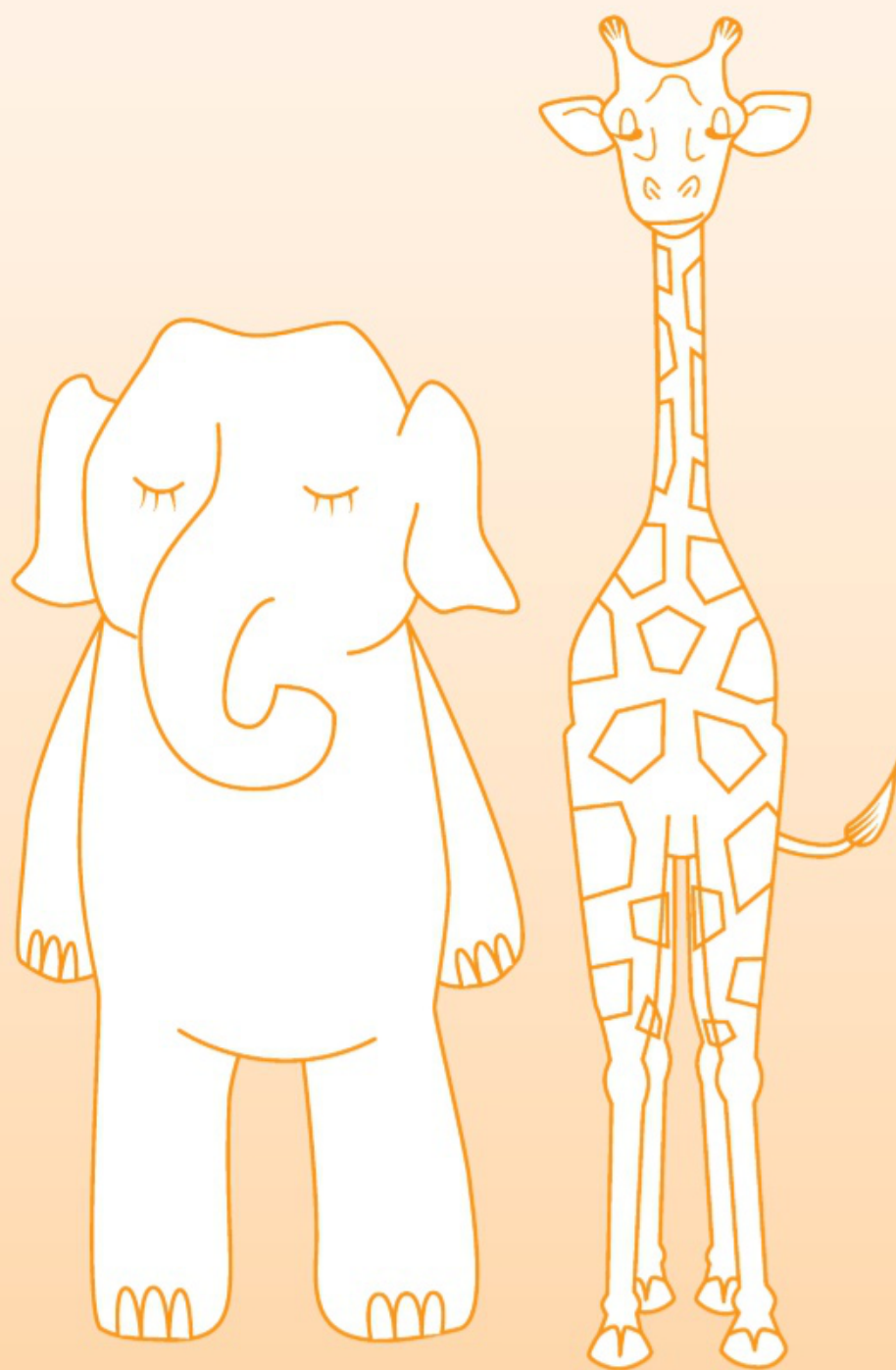
FRANK OSTASESKI

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## Why not invite a friend to meditate?



Going it alone has its benefits, and can be great for getting to know your mindfulness practice—but meditating with a friend is one way to really super-charge the experience. Meditating isn't always so easy, after all—and **the boost that comes from community is one resource that can always be renewed.**

Looking for like-minded meditators in your area? Mindfulness teacher Tara Brach has some great advice: [www.tarabrach.com/starting-meditation-group/](http://www.tarabrach.com/starting-meditation-group/)

Having trouble finding like-minded meditators in your area? Try building a virtual community. Check out our **free instructional mp3s and videos** on our YouTube and Soundcloud channels—and **see how others are bringing their practice into their lives** on our Facebook and Instagram pages.

Looking to form communities of mindfulness at your organization? That's the work we've been doing for nearly 15 years. **Ask us how we can help your organization.**

**Let's make this month (and every month!)  
Bring a Friend to Meditate month.**

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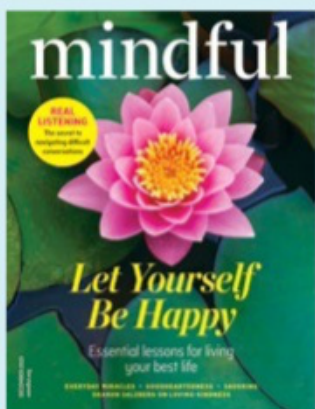


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## On the cover

The lotus—the lovely flower that emerges from the mud—represents freshness and renewal in many cultures. It also has extraordinary biological properties: Lotus seeds can withstand thousands

of years without water and still germinate to produce beautiful blooms. Now, that's inspiring.

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.

# Two Questions

**In a brief conversation, Frank Ostaseski said** something that changed my life.

Frank is a lifelong mindfulness meditator and the cofounder of the Zen Hospice Project based in San Francisco. He has been at the bedside of thousands of people in the process of dying. I ran into Frank outside a hotel elevator at a mindfulness conference and mentioned to him we were starting to work on a story and would love his input. We were exploring how death can reveal what's most important in life, perhaps pointing to what makes us happy while we're still alive.

Without missing a beat, he leaned in. "When people are dying, only two things matter," he said, his bright blue eyes piercing mine with an urgency to convey decades of wisdom. "They just want to know: Was I loved? And, did I love well? Love: that's all that really matters." His voice was hoarse, intimate, important. I thanked him, said we'd be in touch, and we each disappeared into the conference.

Suddenly, I felt a lump in my throat. *Was I loved?* I thought of my three children and a kaleidoscope of images—years of laughter, smiles, inside jokes—flooded my mind and my eyes filled with tears. *Did I love well?* Another tidal wave of emotions—oceanic, epic—formed and crashed in a split second. I could feel a depth of love for them that drowned out everything else. (If I could have flown home at that moment and swallowed my children in full-body hugs, I would have!)

Frank's two questions have stayed with me. They've become a kind of lens through which I try to see my priorities, big and small.

Just recently, my son came into my office and wanted me to follow him into the garage so he could show me his new hobby: welding. I could hear myself saying, *I'll catch up with you in 10 minutes, after doing a few more emails*. Frank popped into mind. "Forget that, show me right now. I'd love to see what you're working on."

Emails can wait. Love is for the here and now.

To hear more from Frank, along with mindfulness pioneer Mirabai Bush and Rabbi Rami Shapiro, I hope you'll join writer Stephanie Domet as she goes in search of what truly makes us happy—and I hope you find words of wisdom that resonate as deeply with you.

With love,

Anne



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# The Gift of Belonging

We all create our own community as we go through life. It can become the wind beneath our wings, or the deep roots that anchor us safely in our home. Here's what *Mindful* readers shared about the many vibrant meanings of community.

## What community have you have felt most at home in?

**“MY NEIGHBORHOOD** is home to me. My neighbors are like family.”

**“MY MARATHON TRAINING GROUP.** We cheered each other on—the competition was only with ourselves. We brought our own meaning to running and races. Anyone could be a mentor, bringing in their experiences to help others. Also, we had fun!”

**“AT MY JOB,** because we all work hard at a difficult job—we form bonds.”

**“MY RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY,** not due to the religion as much as the acceptance.”

**“I am new to where I live, so not yet as connected as I'd like to be, but my town is full of vibrant, engaged, intelligent, compassionate people! I am really looking forward to a future of community here.”**

“Most often it is a **SMALL COMMUNITY**, maybe six to 10 people. It's just more intimate and real.”

“My community of **FELLOW MUSICIANS** and fans is my haven. There's a little escapism, and a good deal of support and diversity bind us.”

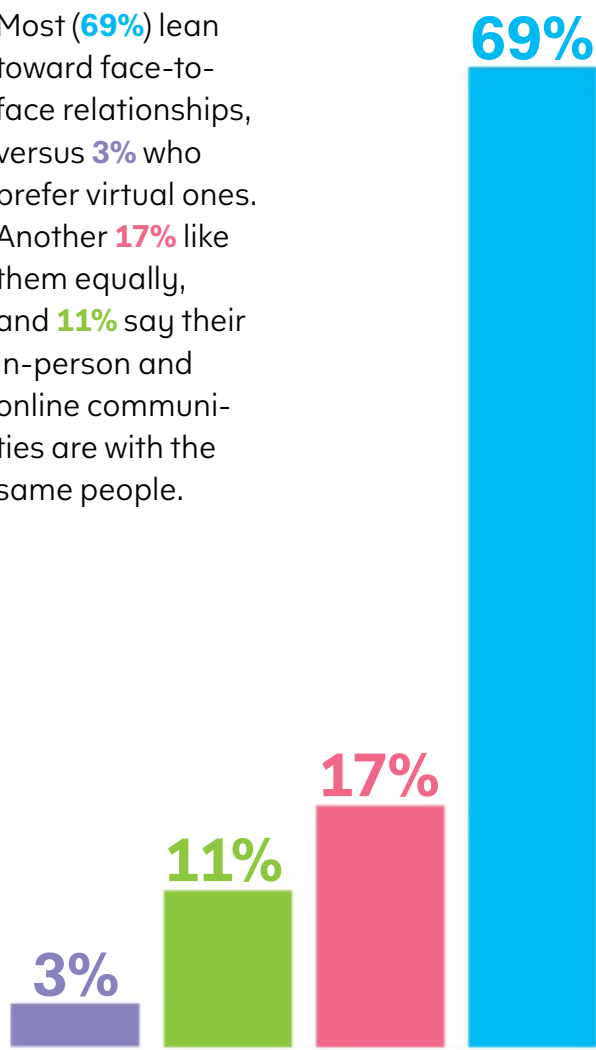
**“AS A CHILD,** with friends.”

“My supportive community of fellow **MUSICIANS AND MUSIC FANS** is my haven.”

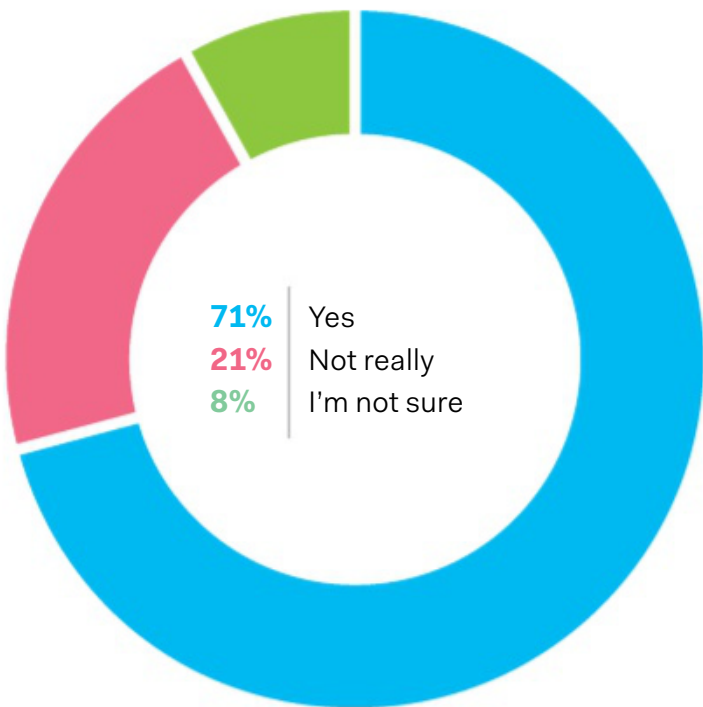
“My group of **INVASIVE SPECIES MONITORS.** Many educated activists with diverse backgrounds and interests, learning and working together to protect our ecosystem.”

## Do you prefer online or face-to-face communities?

Most (**69%**) lean toward face-to-face relationships, versus **3%** who prefer virtual ones. Another **17%** like them equally, and **11%** say their in-person and online communities are with the same people.



## Do you have a community where you feel you belong?

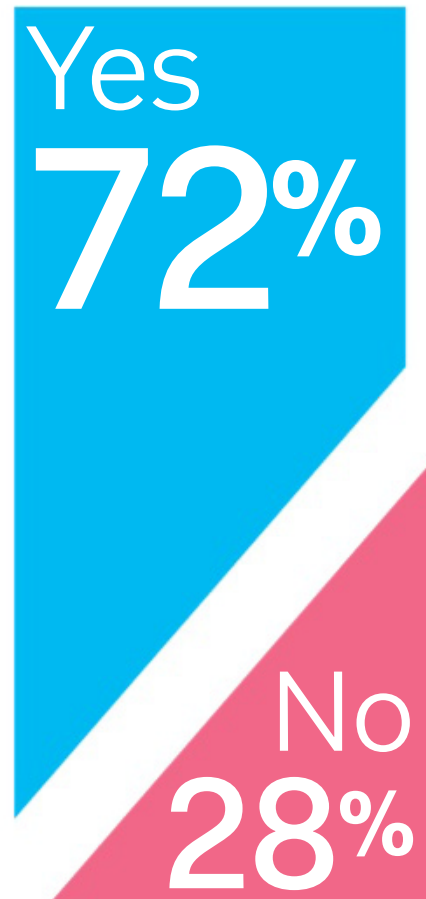




### What are the ties that bind your community together?

For **14%** of respondents, people in their communities bond over shared **ETHNICITY**. A steep **70%** are linked by **BELIEFS**. In the middle: shared **GOALS OR PROJECTS (55%)**, **HOBBIES (54%)**, **PROXIMITY (50%)**, and **IDENTITY (45%)**. Familial ties count for **41%**, while **23%** say their circles **JUST GET ALONG WELL**, and don't have much in common.

### Are there traditions or rituals in your community that bring people together?



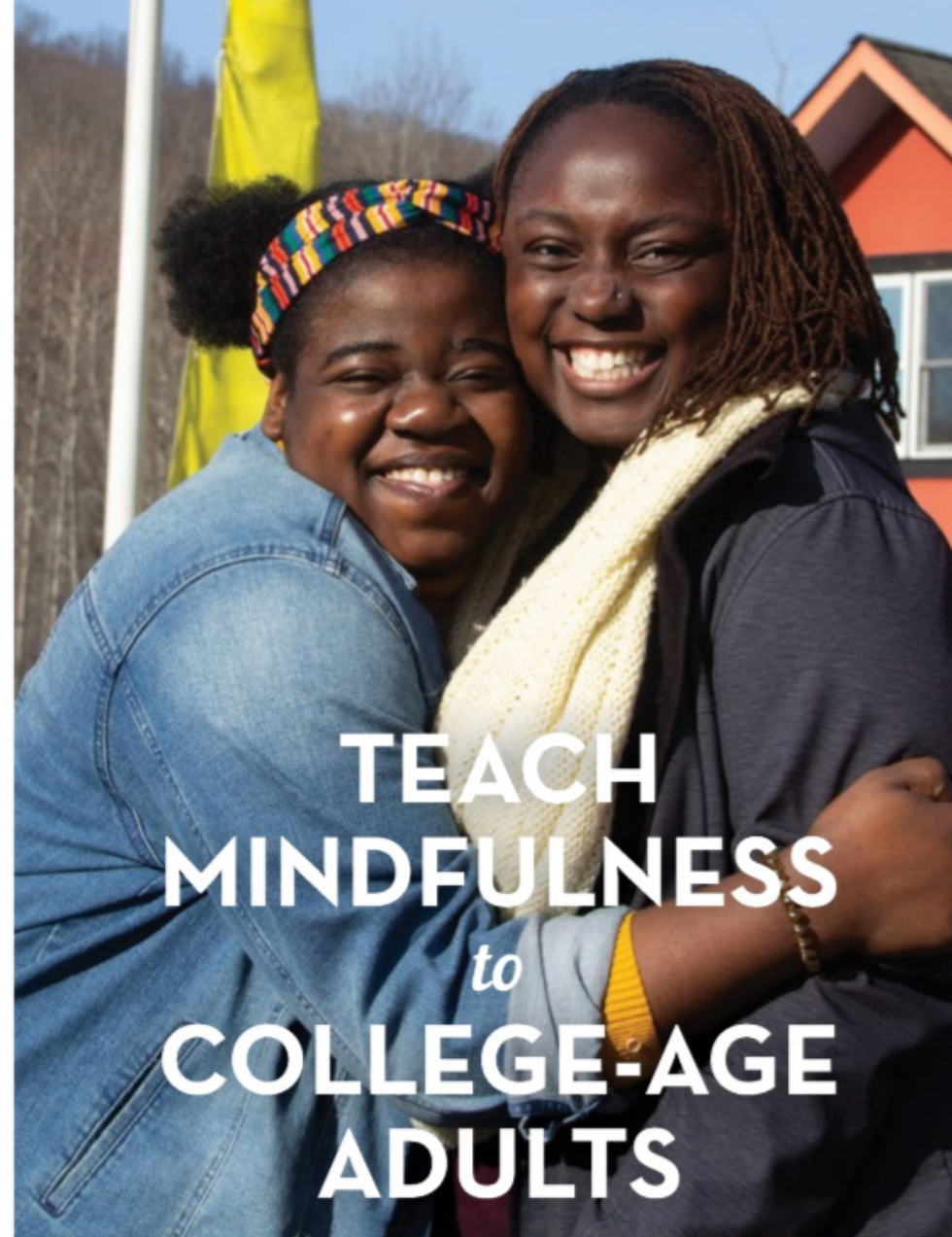
### What makes your community resilient?

- "A strong sense of commitment and dedication."
- "When we check in with one another."
- "Getting through things, being honest, caring about each other."
- "Standing up to all the negative things going on around us!"
- "We're sensitive to others' feelings."
- "A quality of noncompetitiveness."
- "Being inclusive of all ages and all interests."
- "Holding space for each other with respect and support."
- "Awareness, mindfulness, and communication."

Next Question...

#### When your inner critic is loud, what is it usually saying to you?

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



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# Welcome to mindful

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 Director**  
Chelsea Arsenault  
Toll Free: 888-203-8076, ext 207  
[chelsea@mindful.org](mailto:chelsea@mindful.org)

**Advertising Account Representative**  
Chris Gooding  
Toll Free: 888-203-8076, ext 10  
[chris@mindful.org](mailto:chris@mindful.org)

**Editorial & Central Business Office**  
5765 May Street,  
Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3K 1R6 Canada  
[mindful@mindful.org](mailto:mindful@mindful.org)

**Customer Service**  
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**Chief Executive Officer**  
Bryan Welch

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

**Executive Director**  
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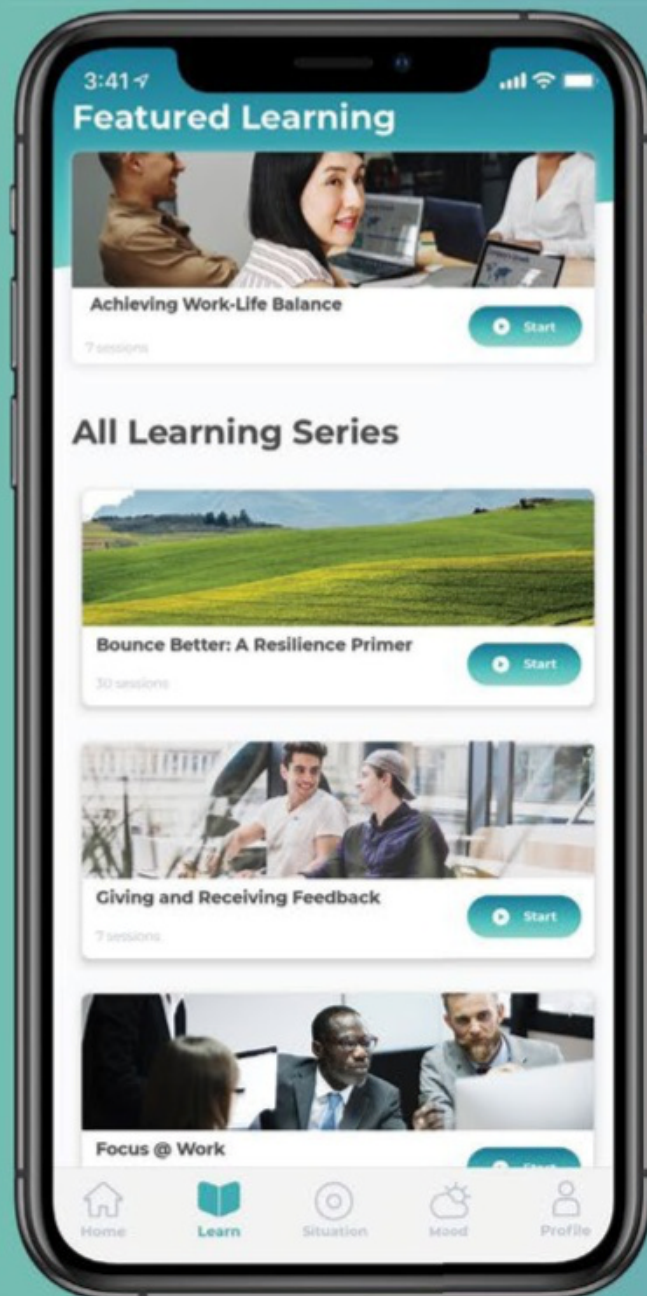




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in concert with the region's Shìshàlh Indigenous peoples, 800 hectares will be protected for both conservation and public enjoyment. The land may also be “bundled” with nearby protected lands to create a 9,000-hectare provincial park, surrounding the entire inlet. Parks, write the Foundation CEO Andrew Day and Board Chair Ross Beaty, are “anchors for our hearts and souls—they are our cathedrals, our towers, our pyramids; the wonders of our world.”

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What happens when you combine a guided meditation and a podcast? You might get *Meditative Story*—a collab by Arianna Huffington's company Thrive Global and WaitWhat, the masterminds behind TED media. Each episode features a well-known host, such as author Dan Harris or astronomer Michelle Thaller, who tells of a transformative moment from their lives. With a relaxing musical

# TOP OF *mind*

**Keep up with the latest in the world of mindfulness.**

**A JOYFUL RETREAT**

In September, InsightLA hosted “Creating Joy in Community,” the first residential meditation retreat by and

for transgender, nonbinary, gender-nonconforming, and genderqueer (collectively, trans\*) people. Mindfulness and Buddhist practitioners, as well as new meditators,

attended the four-day program. It was broadly accessible, thanks to scholarships (from donations), care for accessibility needs, and a trauma-informed approach.

All the retreat's teachers and staff are also trans\*. Martin Vitorino, InsightLA's Director of Programming and a

retreat leader, noted that factors like gendered housing plans and few teachers of diversity can make other retreats untenable for trans\* people. “It's so powerful and healing to see yourself reflected in the teacher at the front of the room,” Vitorino told *Mindful*. A testimonial from

V., who attended, affirms: “The sanctuary of being with all trans\* folks allowed me to be with and offer kindness to parts of my heart that I don't often feel safe to access.”

**PEOPLE FOR THE PARKS**

The British Columbia Parks Foundation crowdfunded \$3 million to purchase part of Princess Louisa Inlet: a breathtaking swath of mountains, rivers, and coastline wilderness. Working



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAVIER PARDINA / STOCKSY, SHARON MCCUTCHEON / PEXELS



background and brief meditations (narrated by app producer Rohan Gunatillake), it's a fresh addition to the podcast realm. (For our review of a recent episode, see page 76.)

### PUTTING THE "KIND" IN KINDERGARTEN

The six-year-old kids in transitional kindergarten at Tropical Elementary, in Merritt Island, Florida, began talking about kindness in class. Now they're working to emphasize kindness on a grander scale. Over the last 18 months, Barbara Wilcox and her students have designed and shared a symbol that represents kindness. "We already have and

use symbols for love, peace, and happiness. A kindness symbol will add to our national focus of being kind," they say on a Change.org petition to have the symbol adopted nationally. Whether writing letters to community leaders, managing the petition, or visiting members of congress, the

### MINDFUL... HOUSE PAINT?

Mindfulness' reach into popular culture is now complete: Interior paint company Behr has named Back to Nature, its new "mindfulness-inspired" yellow-green, as the 2020 color of the year. The eco-paint, according to Behr, "encourages us to reengage with the natural world" and adds "peace and tranquility to any space."

students are working hard as "kindness emissaries," as Wilcox says, inviting those who value kindness to join them. So far, city councils throughout Brevard County, Florida, and in Bellbrook City, Ohio, have recognized the symbol—small yet significant steps to expand the spotlight on kindness.

aka the rubber tree, a native of Brazil. While Hevea is sustainable, demand for non-synthetic rubber has led to pressure to clear-cut rainforest land in order to plant more rubber trees.

Latex is present in hundreds of plants (including dandelions!), but one plant shows particular promise as an alternative to both synthetic and Hevea rubber: guayule, a shrub native to Mexico and the American Southwest. Tire company Bridgestone is researching guayule's potential. Meanwhile, clothing company Patagonia has already begun using it to help replace neoprene, a synthetic rubber product, in its wetsuits.

### SUSTAINABLE RUBBER

Rubber is omnipresent in our lives, from the tires on our cars to the duckies in our tubs. Today many of these products are made of synthetic rubber, a petrochemical. Stronger natural latex rubber comes from *Hevea brasiliensis*,



PHOTOGRAPH BY STEPHANIE HO / PEXELS, SKITTERPHOTO

## ACTS OF kindness

Foul weather and flight delays had Seth Craven worried he wouldn't be at his wife's side when their baby was born by scheduled C-section. Sergeant Craven was traveling from Kabul, where he was stationed with the National Guard, to his home in Charleston, but made it only as far as Philadelphia, which is where he met Charlene Vickers. She was determined to get to Charleston for a conference, and she agreed to take Craven as a passenger on the eight-hour road trip. Craven made it home in plenty of time to see his son be born—and was able to send Vickers a photo of the happy family.

A man in Altoona, Iowa, may have been parched when he held up a sign asking for beer money—and included his Venmo handle—in the stands at a nationally televised football game, but he was soon awash in cash. "I was like, 'Well, this would be a funny idea. I might make a couple of dollars,'" Carson King told *The Daily Iowan*. But as donations poured in, "I realized there was something worthwhile I could be doing with it." King raised more than \$2.9 million for his local children's hospital, and kept just enough to buy his beer.





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top of mind

## Research News

by B. GRACE BULLOCK

Research gathered from University of North Carolina, the Feinstein Institute for Medical Research, and others.



### LOVING-KINDNESS FOR SLOWER AGING

Practicing loving-kindness may protect your genes and slow aging, a new study finds. Scientists at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill wanted to know which forms of meditation were most protective for telomeres (segments of DNA that stop chromosomes from deteriorating too rapidly). One hundred seventy-six adults with no prior meditation experience were assigned to learn either mindfulness meditation or

loving-kindness meditation, or to be in a no-training control group. Over six weeks, mindfulness and loving-kindness participants attended hour-long group meditation classes once per week and were asked to use 20-minute audio practices at home daily. Meditators learned to observe their experience to increase their objectivity and mental clarity, while the loving-kindness group focused on fostering kindness and social connection. Participants' telomere length was measured before and after the study. After six weeks, the most significant decrease in telomere length occurred in the control, with slightly less decline among

mindfulness meditators and the least decline among loving-kindness practitioners. More research is needed to determine what it is about loving-kindness meditation that may safeguard telomeres from the effects of stress and aging.

### MINDFULNESS OR COMPASSION FOR MENTAL HEALTH

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Compassion Focused Therapy (CFT) are among the most widely used mindfulness-based treatments for depression, anxiety, and stress. The two may be similarly effective, finds a new study from the Mindfulness Institute in Reykjavik, Iceland.



At a residential rehabilitation and health clinic, 58 adults were assigned to either a MBCT group, a CFT group, or a group receiving

who ruminated more before treatment showed the biggest increase in mindfulness, but CFT participants were more mindful regard-

already undergoing EEG monitoring (in which electrodes placed directly onto the brain record electrical activity) performed three tasks: They followed a pattern of normally paced, then faster-paced breathing, cycling between paces eight times. Next, they counted inhales and exhales for short intervals, then reported how many breaths they'd taken. Lastly, they did a focusing task while their breath cycle was monitored.

The different breathing styles activated not just the brain stem, or "breathing center," but also brain regions linked to emotion, attention, and body awareness. Quick breathing stimulated the amygdala, suggesting that rapid breathing may trigger anxiety, anger, or fear. This raises the possibility that targeted breathing strategies may help people to manage thoughts, moods, and experiences.

### ***People who tend to get stuck in their thoughts may be better served by compassion training.***

no mindfulness-based treatment. MBCT and CFT attendees were offered eight two-hour sessions over four weeks. Before starting, everyone completed a questionnaire about their experiences of depression, anxiety, and stress, and rated their levels of mindfulness, self-compassion, and rumination.

At the end of four weeks, MBCT and CFT participants reported less depression, anxiety, stress, and rumination, and more mindfulness and self-compassion, while control group members reported no change. They also found that MBCT members

less of how much they'd ruminated before. This suggests people who tend to get stuck in their thoughts may be better served by programs that include compassion training.



#### **LIKE BREATH, LIKE BRAIN?**

Focusing on the timing and pace of breath may help direct attention and boost mood, says a new study in the *Journal of Neurophysiology*. Scientists at the Feinstein Institute for Medical Research studied the brain's responses to breathing exercises. Six adults



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– Carol Meyers  
Apprentice Coach & Student. Washington, DC





POKE, POKE, TRIGGER, TRIGGER... HEY,  
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YOU! YOU'VE GOT A BIG NOSE! HOW DO  
YOU LIKE ME NOW? POKE, POKE...



Notice what is happening with your body.  
Are your muscles tense? Are you frowning?  
Reset yourself—breathe in, and breathe out.  
What do I need in this moment?

## BETTER, STRONGER, FASTER, CALMER

**Bianca Andreescu's** physical training was evident when she beat Serena Williams at the 2019 US Open, but the tennis star says mindfulness played a part too. Andreescu, a meditator since her early teens, told journalists after her US Open win, *"If you can control your mind, you can control a lot of things."*

Minnesota Twins pitcher **Devin Smeltzer** meditates in the bullpen, in view of the crowd. *"It's extremely important for me to be able to meditate with the distractions,"* Smeltzer told *The Athletic*. *"I need to be successful with a stadium that is shaking. I need to be able to control myself."*

University of Wisconsin-Madison Badgers running back **Jonathan Taylor** uses meditation to gain a competitive edge. He told ESPN that mindfulness allows him to *"stop thinking, be in the moment, go out and execute."*

# Mindful Schools

**Thanks to student** activists, public schools in Oregon are now the first in the nation to allow students to take mental health days just as they would sick days. The new law permits up to five mental health days within a three-month period. "A big issue for students with mental health is when you have to miss a day because you're going through depression or you have a therapy appointment," 18-year-old Hailey Hardcastle told NPR. According to reports, the mental health of teens has been

declining since the mid-2000s. Suicide is the second leading cause of death in Oregon for people ages 15-34.

Schools in the Tempe Union High School District of Arizona will now include mindfulness rooms, thanks in part to a grant from MLB's Diamondbacks. The rooms, outfitted with comfortable chairs and soothing décor, are intended to provide students with "a neutral and a calming and supportive place," according to one school social worker.

An innovative membership program brings yoga and mindfulness training to pre-K-8th grade students via monthly training for educators. Yoga Foster, a nonprofit based in Brooklyn, offers subscriptions to schools in order to train teachers and school staff in yoga and mindfulness, donated yoga mats, and lesson plans and guided practices to use in the classroom.

## Meanwhile...

A bill that would reverse a 25-year ban against yoga and meditation in Alabama public schools never made it to the House floor for a vote. The bill's author plans to reintroduce it in the 2020 session, which begins in February.



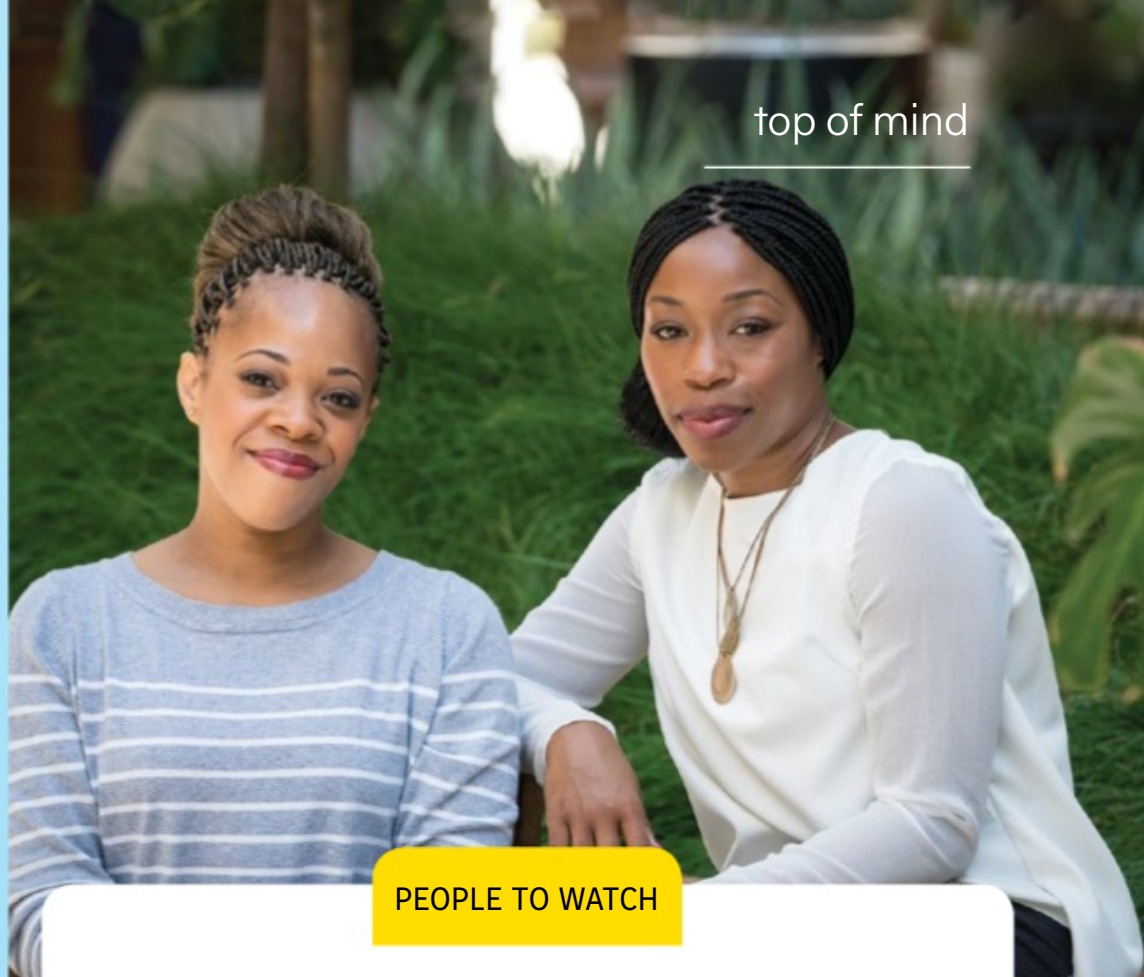
# mindful FAQ

**Q I'm wondering how loving-kindness and forgiveness practices relate to one another when you've been wronged or betrayed. Is loving-kindness extending forgiveness? Does one come from the other?**

**A** People use the word forgiveness in so many different ways. As my colleague and friend Sylvia Boorstein is fond of saying: "Forgiveness does not mean amnesia." But we often think it does. I was teaching a course, and the person I was teaching with used the word "forgiveness" a lot and led a forgiveness meditation, and someone in the audience came to me to complain about it. He said that he was in fact in tremendous physical pain. He had been in a terrorist attack and his body was really trashed. He said, "I will never forgive them, but what I've learned is absolutely essential is to learn to stop hating." And I thought, *I'll take that*. But it's never a coercive activity. It doesn't work that way.

It's more a sense of, usually, compassion for oneself and an ability to acknowledge harm done. Not to deny that in any way, but to want to recapture all that energy. I have a friend, he got into one of those obsessive bouts about somebody—how awful they were and their behavior and their actions and what they had done—and then he realized what he was doing. He said, "I let him live rent free in my brain for too long." And that's sort of the feeling. Really it's like, *I've given over not only the original pain, but all this time and all this energy and all of my life force to you. I want it back.*

**Sharon Salzberg** is a meditation teacher, cofounder of the Insight Meditation Society, and the *New York Times* best-selling author of *Real Love* and *Real Happiness*, among other books.



## Jasmine & Stacey Johnson

BLACK ZEN COFOUNDERS

In New York City in 2011, Jasmine Johnson was in the midst of a rough patch. Frustrated, she tried to pray, but she was so overwhelmed, she couldn't find words. "I remember saying, 'I'm just gonna sit here until I feel better.'"

Meanwhile, in Santa Monica, her sister Stacey found meditation through yoga. So when Jasmine called to describe her experience, Stacey said, "Jasmine, that's meditation."

"And I was like, really?" Jasmine says. "Because that was the first time I'd actually had a real peaceful sleep in a long time. The silence did that."

On opposite coasts, the sisters moved more deeply into mindfulness. When Jasmine returned to California and studied at UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center, Black Zen—an online community, resource hub,

and podcast specifically for people of color—began to take shape. It launched in 2016.

Part of the goal is to be the representation they want to see in the world. "To project a different visual for someone," Stacey says, "reclaim what it means to be a black person."

And there's something else mindfulness offers people of color, says Jasmine. "The right to not take on the weight of someone else's ignorance. Instead to understand that person is on a different path," says Jasmine. "And so the more compassionate we become, the more we're able to say, I see how you are, but that doesn't impact how I live my life."

But there's light, too, Stacey says. "Meditation can bring joy and peacefulness, and a sense of belonging and calm, and community and love, really. That's what meditation provides."



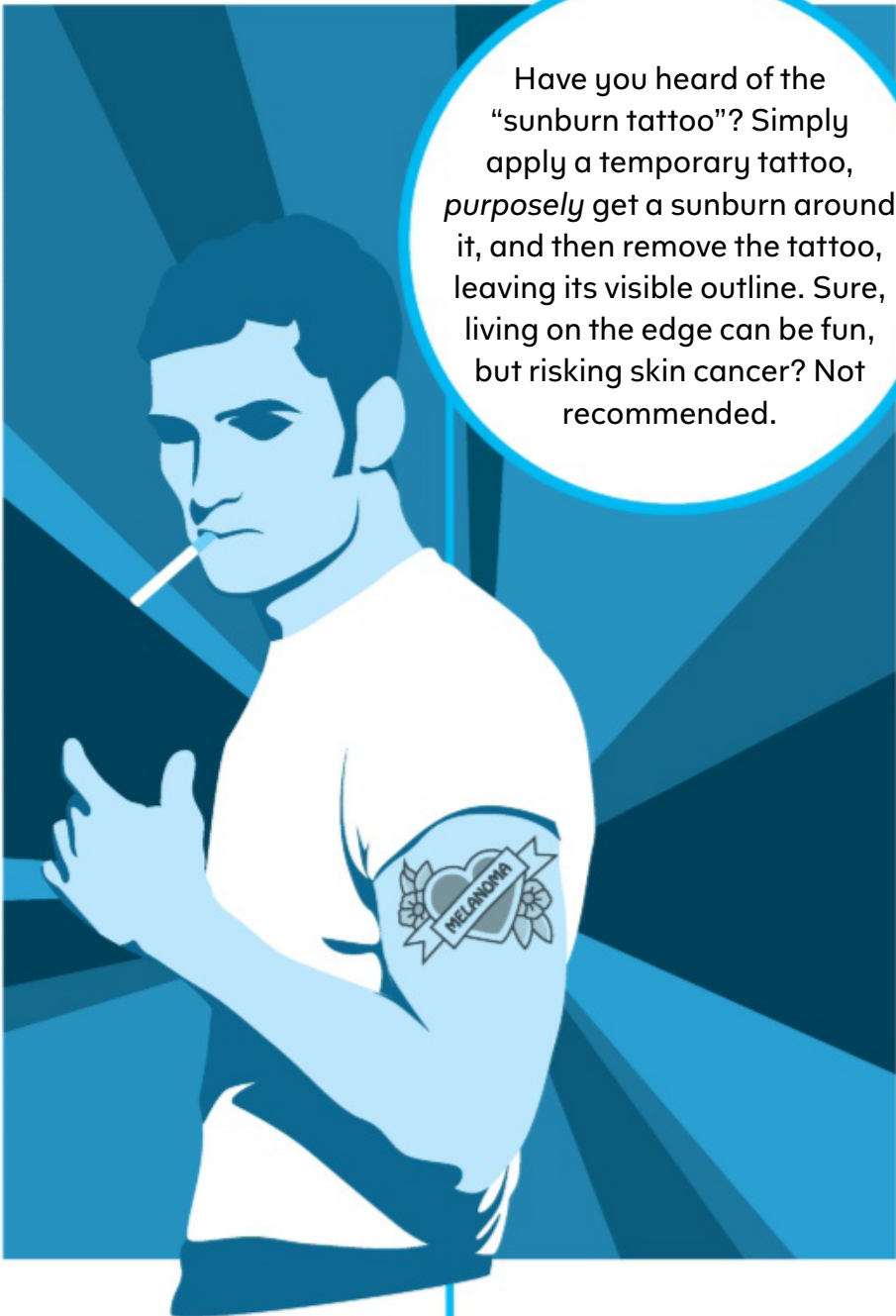
# MINDFUL OR MINDLESS?

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

by AMBER TUCKER



Utrecht, Netherlands, enhanced hundreds of bus stops as bee stops: They covered bus shelters' flat roofs with flowering plants. These lush landmarks provide habitat and food to bees, also filtering the city's air and absorbing rainwater.



For people with autism spectrum disorder, the crowding and bustle of an airport may feel not just annoying, but deeply unsettling. Five US airports so far have added sensory rooms, where soft furniture, dim lights, and calming activities help travellers relax before they fly.



In a creative bid to boost reusable shopping bags and reduce plastic use, a Vancouver market printed (what they considered) cringey, made-up store names on their plastic bags—e.g., “Into the Weird Adult Video Emporium.” But customers found these hilarious and bought more of them.



California blogger Jenna Karvunidis helped invent “gender-reveal parties” in 2008—but recently, she’s spoken against them. Noting her 10-year-old (the first GR-party baby) is openly nonbinary, Karvunidis said gender reveals place “more emphasis on gender than has ever been necessary for a baby.”



In Sydney, Australia, a driver crashed his car into a police vehicle, right outside the station. This is a big enough misstep if you’re not smuggling \$134 million USD worth of meth...which he was. Talk about hazardous cargo. ●



MINDFUL



MINDLESS





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This project is generously supported by the Pure Edge Foundation



savoring

# FAIR

by KELLE WALSH

## *Indulgence*

The mindful effort to make the world's most desired sweet...nicer.

Do you like your chocolate sweet and creamy, bitter and dark, or perhaps a bit fruity or with notes of smoke? Whatever flavor you desire, rest assured there's a bar for that. As the global demand for chocolate keeps growing, amounting to \$98 billion in annual sales, the options keep coming.

And thanks to a craft chocolate boom, the world's favorite confection now enjoys a foodie reputation rivaling coffee and wine—with prices to match. In some groceries and specialty shops, it's not unusual to find small-batch, single-source chocolate bars costing up to \$15.

Yet despite its sunny, universal appeal, creating chocolate remains an intensive process with a far-reaching impact. The chocolate trade is rife with human and environmental abuses, making enjoyment of this delicious treat far more complicated for the mindful consumer.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kelle Walsh is *Mindful's* Senior Editor.





**VIDEO**  
**Give Thanks**

*Five ways to  
acknowledge  
the hundreds  
of people  
responsible for  
your everyday  
food.*

[mindful.org/  
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## FROM BEAN TO BAR

**1** It all starts with cacao, a prolific tree that thrives within 20 degrees of the equator. The tree's large seedpods are manually harvested and then opened to expose the prized cacao beans inside.



Cacao seedpods are harvested by hand.

**2** Once removed, the beans are fermented and then dried, often on tarps or racks in the sun, for up to a week; roasted to confer a desired flavor; and winnowed to remove the outer shell.



The pods are opened to reveal the prized cacao beans inside.

**3** The remaining cacao nibs are ground into a paste called chocolate liquor, and further processed to separate out the fat, or cocoa butter. The leftover solid, the cacao press cake, is milled into cocoa powder.



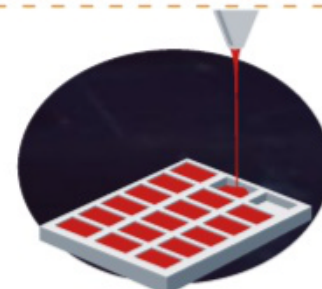
The beans are fermented, dried, roasted, and winnowed down to the nib.

**4** Chocolate liquor and cocoa butter (together called chocolate mass) are blended in varying amounts with sugar and other ingredients, such as vanilla or milk solids, to create a desired flavor. That mixture is then refined in an intensive heating and aeration process called conching, which smooths any residual graininess. (Some chocolate manufacturers skip this step and instead add an emulsifier, such as soy lecithin.)



The nibs are ground into a paste.

**5** The chocolate is then poured into molds, wrapped, and delivered to store shelves. →



Chocolate is poured into molds to cool.



## LABEL Decoder

Chocolate bar labels reveal a lot of information. Megan Giller, author of *Bean-to-Bar Chocolate: America's Craft Chocolate Revolution*, offers tips for choosing chocolate that tastes great and was made with intention and care.

### WHAT'S IN IT?

"Cocoa beans or chocolate should always be the first ingredient, to ensure that it's a quality product," Giller says. If sugar is listed first, and if vegetable oil, artificial sweetener, or vanillin (opposed to real vanilla) are added, "these are all indicators that the chocolate is subpar," she adds.

### HOW DARK CAN YOU GO?

The percentage listed indicates the amount of cocoa mass used relative to other ingredients. The higher the percentage, the more concentrated the cacao—and the darker and more bitter the bar. A lower percentage indicates more non-cacao ingredients.

### WHERE DOES IT COME FROM?

The country listed indicates the cacao beans' origin. Beans from different regions confer different flavors. "Direct trade" or "sourced directly" indicates a relationship with local farmers. "The more a company includes information about the specific cocoa farmers they work with, the more you can guarantee that they're following sustainable and ethical standards," Giller says.

## THE PRICE OF CHOCOLATE

In the West African countries of Ivory Coast and Ghana, where nearly two thirds of the world's cacao is grown, increased crop demand has led to widespread deforestation. These impoverished nations, where cacao farmers typically earn below the World Bank's international poverty line of \$1.90 per day, are also the site of the industry's greatest labor and human rights abuses, including child and slave labor. A 2015 US Labor Report estimated that more than 2 million children work in cacao production.

Despite public scrutiny and pressure, including from the US Congress, the largest chocolate producers haven't been able to stop the problem. Watch groups point to the root issue of extreme poverty in these regions, which feeds desperate measures, even as the world demand for cacao grows. Parents put their children to work farming cacao instead of into school, families send kids across borders to find work in cacao production, and the unrelenting need for cheap manual labor creates an easy target for traffickers.

And new threats stemming from climate change, particularly in Central and South America, have compounded the concerns about both the impact and the sustainability of the chocolate industry.

These factors have led to urgent efforts by human rights and environmental groups, as well as a growing group of small-scale →



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## savoring

chocolate producers, to prioritize sustainable cacao farming and production, fair labor standards, and support of worker-owned co-ops to help stabilize farmer income. “At the core of fine chocolate there is an aspiration that looks to change the world for the better—through better chocolate,” TCHO chocolate’s Brad Kintzer wrote in *CandyUSA*.

Yet these efforts may not be enough, according to Cocoa Barometer, in its 2018 report on the industry. Price drops for sustainable cacao in the past few years threaten what gains may have been made toward incentivizing farmers to transition to sustainable practices. “If business as usual continues, it will be decades—if ever—before human rights will be respected and environmental protection will be a basis for sustainability in the cocoa sector,” the report warned.

The pressure has forced major players in the global chocolate industry to commit to buy 70% certified ethical and sustainable cocoa by 2020—a deadline that many in the industry doubt will be met.

In the meantime, what can a mindful chocolate-lover do to help? Choose wisely, say experts.

## SEAL OF APPROVAL

A handful of organizations try to ensure standards for the chocolate industry that protect workers and the environment. You can look for these certifications on chocolate bar labels:

### Fair Trade Certified

Ensures the cacao comes from farms that provide fair wages and safe working conditions.

### Equal Exchange

The ingredients in the chocolate came from small, democratically run farmer co-ops that farm organically and don’t use child or forced labor. The Exchange itself is an independent nonprofit worker-owned cooperative.

### Certified Organic (also IFOAM)

Farmers use sustainable farming methods. Many grow diverse crops, providing greater protection from weather and supporting wildlife. The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements is an umbrella organization for the organic market, with adopted principles of organic agriculture.

### Rainforest Alliance

Principles of sustainable farming are in place, including biodiversity conservation, natural resource conservation, planning and farm-management systems, and improved livelihood and human well-being. In 2018, Rainforest Alliance joined with UTZ Certified, another international certifying body, to create a new certification that addresses wages and livelihood in cacao production.

### Non GMO Project Verified

All ingredients come from plants, animals, or other organisms whose genetic material hasn’t been artificially altered. ●



# Savor Your CHOCOLATE

To truly appreciate the complexity of chocolate, try eating it mindfully.

## 1 HONOR THE MOMENT

Take a moment to acknowledge the origin story behind the chocolate: where it came from; all the natural elements of sun, rain, soil, and wind that allowed the cacao to grow; the farmers who cultivated it; the chocolate maker who blended it with other ingredients to create the bar you hold right now; even the thought that went into the package design.

## 2 CONNECT WITH YOUR SENSES

Before eating, pause for a moment to take in any aroma. What scents can you pick up? Does a memory emerge? Take a second look. What colors do you see? Then take a bite and see what you notice. How many layers of flavor are there?

## 3 EXPERIENCE EVERY BITE

When we eat we are often “doing” something else at the same time (working, looking at a device, talking with someone, reading, etc.), which takes away from tasting and fully enjoying the food. Try just eating the chocolate without any distraction, slowly savoring every bite.

—Adapted from Elisha and Stefanie Goldstein



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# Why So Mean?

Rekindle your natural goodheartedness by strengthening your ability to choose gentleness and curiosity over cruelty.

**Internet trolling, bullying, and epidemic snarkiness** (online, in the grocery store, or even directed wordlessly to random people walking by) seems to be the new black. Sometimes I wonder, is this our paradigm now? Are we becoming meaner? Is our nature essentially nasty? Have we stopped noticing how participating in meanness never makes us feel better, really? In fact, being mean—spreading rumors,

excluding others, trying to make someone feel bad, or even just indulging in mean thoughts—truly is like drinking your own poison, according to Richard Ryan, professor of clinical and social psychology at the University of Rochester. Giving in to meanness generally just leads to feelings of guilt, shame, and social isolation.

Then why do it? Why would we intentionally or casually choose to act in a way that not only hurts others, but ultimately ourselves?

Meanness is not new. It's used to gain a competitive edge, alleviate boredom, or just to let off steam. We may indulge in it as a reaction to something we don't like, or simply because anonymity (when online) makes it so easy to get away with. Maybe we find our-

selves hanging out with gossipers and nastiness is part of the group sport.

There's another way to live that's closer to your inner wisdom and compassion. It requires practice, but there's a big payoff. Checking in with your intentions when you're tempted to be unkind can help you rekindle your good-heartedness and curb the compulsion to magnify meanness.

## TAKING THE HIGH ROAD

Perhaps you feel down, bad things are happening to you, or you feel abused or picked on. You want to feel better and you think revenge will get you there. Feeling defensive or sensitive are normal reactions when you →

### 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.

PHOTOGRAPH BY KIDO DONG / UNSPLASH



where others see waste



we see possibility

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WE OFFER OURSELVES  
THE GREATEST POTENTIAL  
FOR EASING OUR  
OWN SUFFERING WHEN  
WE DO OUR UTMOST  
NOT TO TAKE IT PERSONALLY.

believe you're being attacked or that your sense of self is threatened. For a moment, you might draw pleasure in writing that extra-scathing customer review or delivering a biting comeback.

But what kind of world are we creating when we follow the impulse to lash out when someone has hurt us? Or unhesitatingly share a tidbit that paints someone else in an unflattering light? To get a laugh at another's expense? Or, rising higher on the meanness spectrum, to demean or even bully someone at work, or to smugly exclude the new neighbors or their children because they aren't your "sort"?

All our thoughts and actions subtly shape the world around us. The more we give in to our own mean tendencies, the less we notice the corrosive impact all this meanness has on our world. How judgment, division, pettiness, even cruelty become the norm.

Living with awareness offers us the opportunity to put ourselves in another's shoes. It allows us to stay awake to the reality of our actions as we stop shielding ourselves from seeing the hurt and mayhem that meanness sets in motion. It can start small. You repay someone for cutting in front of you in the restaurant line by dropping some loud mean-bomb on them, and they repay your meanness by dropping a mean-bomb on the waiter. Just like kindness, meanness gets paid forward.

Mindful practices (like M.E.A.N., to the right) can train you to stay present to the impact of your thoughts and the emotions they incite. They also help you stay tuned in to communications

from your body—such as grinding your teeth or even clenching your fists—that manifest when you're tempted to give in to the impulse to be unkind.

Only once we have awareness of what's been stirred up, do we have options. We can choose to be gentle and curious when negative thoughts and emotions push us around. If we don't want to live in a harsh world, we have to agree to investigate our inclinations to be mean when they show up in us—and more than likely, they will show up.

Certain that you are never mean? Be honest with yourself. Have you ever passed along a nasty rumor? Denigrated a rival, or snubbed a friend when a better offer came along? And what is the price? Did your mean moment bring you closer to yourself or to others? Does it ever bring you real freedom or happiness?

### DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY

A regular mindfulness practice helps you notice the triggers, and the temptation to strike back (or first). There may be a moment of pause, when you can calm yourself by remembering that you don't really know what's going on in the head of the person who just lobbed meanness your way.

It may have nothing to do with you. It could spring from their own prejudice, a misunderstanding, or even mental illness or drugs. We offer ourselves the greatest potential for easing our own suffering when we do our utmost not to take it personally. The best way to work skillfully with everything we feel assailed by is to always offer kindness to our own ruffled feelings.

There's also an opportunity here for understanding, remembering that we've all been there. When you realize that you don't need to volley the meanness, you may feel your heart soften a bit; your hands unclench. Is their cruelty a result of their own fears or wounds? Might a non-reaction from you provide them a small glimpse of what's possible when you approach life with friendliness instead of swords drawn?

When you choose to live a mindful life, you grant yourself a way to stop and check in with the choices you are making, and see if they are truly a good fit for how you want to be. You get the answers by noticing if your actions bring you closer to yourself and others, or whether your justifiable meanness serves to take you further away from connection and camaraderie, warmth, and friendliness. Just ask yourself, which world do you want to live in? ●



PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIK JAN LEUSINK / UNSPLASH



# Lean into M.E.A.N

Investigate strong emotions with this simple mindfulness practice.

M

**Meet** strong thoughts, emotions, and urges to act by noticing them as they show up in your mind and body.

E

**Engage** in awareness by turning to face, feel, and investigate whatever is being triggered.

A

**Allow** yourself to gently let the strong feelings, the powerful thoughts, and the compulsions to act come up...and then let them go.

N

**Notice** how you feel when you pause to connect with yourself before acting out.



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1% FOR THE PLANET



# Hello Darkness

Looking for light (and a glimpse of the northern lights), writer Steven Petrow heads to Iceland at one of the darkest times of the year.

**Last winter I decided to head to** the “land of fire and ice”—Iceland—ostensibly for a yoga retreat. Nearly every one of my friends asked me some version of this question: “Why don’t you wait until summer, when the midnight sun burns all day and night?” My answer was twofold: I hoped there’d be lessons to be found in the long and dark days; and (mostly) I wanted a chance to see the magic of the aurora borealis.

Experiencing the northern lights remains at the top of many people’s bucket lists, and I felt that longing deeply. The Romans named the northern lights after Aurora, the Goddess of Dawn, and if ever a soul needed a new day, I did.

As I revealed to the 14 strangers in our first night “welcome circle”: “I’ve been living in a dark hole for the past two years. Not in an ice cave or anything like that, but the suicide of a friend just before Christmas added to a series of painful losses, including the death of my parents in a three-month window, punctuated by my husband’s exit from our marriage in between Mom’s and Dad’s passing. I’m looking for a new beginning.”

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Steven Petrow** is an award-winning journalist, a columnist for *The Washington Post* and *USA Today*, and a regular contributor to *The New York Times*. He is also the author of five books on etiquette, including his most recent, *Steven Petrow’s Complete Gay & Lesbian Manners*. He lives in Hillsborough, NC, with his Jack Russell terrier, Zoe.

The best odds of witnessing the northern lights means traveling to Iceland in the dead of winter, during a dark and moonless week. To boost my chances I downloaded a five-star app, My Aurora Forecast, which made great promises that I’d witness this phenomenon. I even chose a retreat that would take me to the same location, during the same week of the year, when the aurora had previously made itself visible.

Still, I’d done my homework and I knew that the northern lights are not like Old Faithful. They are unpredictable, and don’t run on a schedule. One travel website warned: “The northern lights are Mother Nature’s creation and as such we can’t even use historical data to predict how likely you are to witness a display.”

## CLOUDY SKIES

On Day One, in Reykjavik, I could tell my odds of witnessing the lights in the capital city were slim. I didn’t need the app to tell me that; I used my eyes—blazing cafe windows brightened dark mornings and evenings, some roofs were illuminated 24/7, bringing “daylight” to the dark sky. In addition to the light pollution, a heavy cloud obscured the skies.

On Day Four, we flew to Akureyri, a small town north of the Arctic Circle. From there our yogi pilgrims caravanned to a remote ski lodge, Klængshóll, home to Icelandic ponies, and surrounded by pristine waterfalls and miles and miles of virgin snowfields. At night, darkness completely engulfed us. We were now in what’s known as “the oval,” or the “auroral zone.” In the far northern hemisphere, →



I'D BEEN LIVING  
IN PERSONAL  
NIGHTTIME FOR SO  
LONG THAT I'D COME  
TO SEEK THE LIGHT  
FROM OUTSIDE, AS A  
WAY TO BANISH MY  
INNER DARKNESS.

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high in the sky above the geomagnetic North Pole, this is where the aurora is mostly likely to manifest itself.

### FIND THE LIGHT WITHIN

On our first night at the lodge—partly cloudy and frigid—my Aurora app gave us a whopping 30% chance of experiencing the northern lights. Our entire group believed that night would be the night.

Our actual sighting: zero. Frustration took root: I knew deep down that a five-star app, a spot-on location, and the strongest of desires couldn't blow clouds into the sky or fire up a solar shower. I didn't grasp that by relying on reason alone I was ignoring the existential magic of the lights.

The next morning, after a vigorous yoga session and a hearty breakfast, I happened upon this blog entry by a local: "No matter how hard you try, you cannot get rid of darkness... In order to erase darkness, you must do something with light, because the light is the only thing that actually exists."

Frankly, I'd been living in personal nighttime for so long that I'd come to seek the light from outside, as a way to banish my inner darkness. But here it was: "No matter how hard you try, you cannot get rid of darkness." I suddenly understood that I would need to find the light within first.

Looking back over the week, I could see that light had revealed itself in unexpected places, as a new spirit of playfulness permeated our group. On a glacier hike, wet and freezing from blinding snow and sleet, two of our group marched onto the slippery ice and assumed the dancer pose, Natarajasana. Their audacity in challenging Mother Nature made the rest of us laugh (as much as we could with frozen faces). On a snowshoeing trek, my friend Tracy took a tumble; she wasn't hurt, nor could she get up. She started to laugh, which proved contagious. All I could think of was the famous catchphrase, "I've fallen and I can't get up!" With each passing day I found myself smiling more—even laughing out loud.



Light, I came to understand, is not only measured by watts and lumens but also smiles and laughter.

By our second-to-last evening I had given up on seeing the Goddess of Dawn. The app and the weather forecast had promised us light; both had let us down. It was late, and the coldest night yet, and I slid under the down comforter in resignation.

### WITNESS THE DANCE

Forty minutes later I heard a voice shout, "Get up!" Then another, "Get out!" I pulled on my clothes and ran out into the darkness, to behold the neon-green glow rising from behind the mountains. There she was, the au-

ror borealis. Dawn at midnight. Light in the darkness.

Within moments, the northern lights were in full flight—turned up to maximum wattage—dancing wildly across the dark sky. They dashed left and then right, undulating, speaking a proprietary language of their own. Magical and mystical, just as purported. Soon our entire group—some clad only in boots and cotton bathrobes—was cast in the light of the night. To my utter surprise and delight, I imagined my late mother, her spirit stitched into the dancing lights, "speaking" to me from the heavens. Mom, ever a free spirit, unconstrained and sassy, was in her element. And I felt as though I were with her. →



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*Carlson.*



Alas, the retreat came to an end. I'd made new friends, learned new poses, and witnessed the northern lights. I knew that my planning, my rational and scientific approach, had laid the groundwork for this viewing. But I also saw that my laser focus on finding light on the outside, on seeing Aurora, had nearly blinded me to the other lights in my midst. There was so much of it in my friends, my fellow travelers—even in myself. I also couldn't escape the fact that it was only after I'd let go of my expectations that Aurora revealed herself. I understood how serendipity and nonattachment—and maybe the power of my mother's spirit—had allowed me to witness the dance of green light in the sky.

I retraced the steps of my long journey and flew home. By the time I got to my front door it was close to 2:00 a.m. Stepping out of the car I looked up into the night sky, instinctively seeking Aurora (or Mom—I wasn't sure). I snapped a photo with my iPhone, and I was astounded to see an eerie greenish glow in the picture. I laughed at myself, because I realized I'd traveled all those miles, made all those calculations, in search of that magical light, and it had been here with me all along. I just had to learn to open my eyes and let it in. ●



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IDEALLY, COMPETITION MOTIVATES US TO ACHIEVE. BUT IT CAN ALSO CAUSE US TO SETTLE FOR LESS THAN WE MIGHT OTHERWISE ACCOMPLISH.

# Are We Wired to Compare and Despair?

Our competitive nature becomes toxic when we're motivated by others' success rather than our own self-mastery.

**How competitive are we? Very, if** you consider the 200 participants in an experiment at Stanford University. They had to ponder a string of letters (RSLALHT, for example) and make as many words as possible (rash, salt,

thrall, etc.). After each round, the researchers informed the participants that an unseen student with whom they'd been paired had beat them by making even more words.

Practically speaking, that didn't matter: The participants would win a \$5 Amazon gift card if they made 100 words in five rounds, regardless of how many the other player—who didn't actually exist—made. Nevertheless, when allowed to change the difficulty of the fake player's task, they gleefully seized the chance to make

their letters mind-bogglingly hard to spell with—even though the opponent's score mattered not a whit to the participants' chances for a reward.

So even when besting someone else has no real-life consequences, it seems, we just can't help competing. In the Stanford study, the fictional partner wasn't even an actual competitor. The participants didn't even know who their partner was, and couldn't see them, but they did all they could to thwart them anyway. They even eased up on their own →

## 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*.



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efforts: Participants who gave more difficult letters to the other student worked less hard on their own word task, apparently feeling that if their partner did poorly, they needn't aim as high as they otherwise might.

There, in a nutshell, is the competitiveness dilemma. "Social comparison and benchmarking—assessing our own performance relative to others rather than to an internal standard—comes naturally," said Stanford's Szu-chi Huang, who led the 2019 study. For evidence, think of all the financiers who accumulate more and more wealth, well beyond what they or their descendants could ever use, so they can rise a place or three on the Bloomberg Billionaires Index, or the parents whose idea of idle conversation is discussing their children's SAT scores or AP credits. Is such competitiveness good for us or society?

Ideally, competition motivates us to achieve. But it can also be counterproductive, causing us to settle for less than we might otherwise accomplish, the research showed. Once we've bested the other guy, we slack off, even if we could have soared higher. It can also make us sabotage others, as the Stanford participants did. That takes mental resources that could otherwise be directed at attaining our own goals, Huang said, and so makes us achieve less.

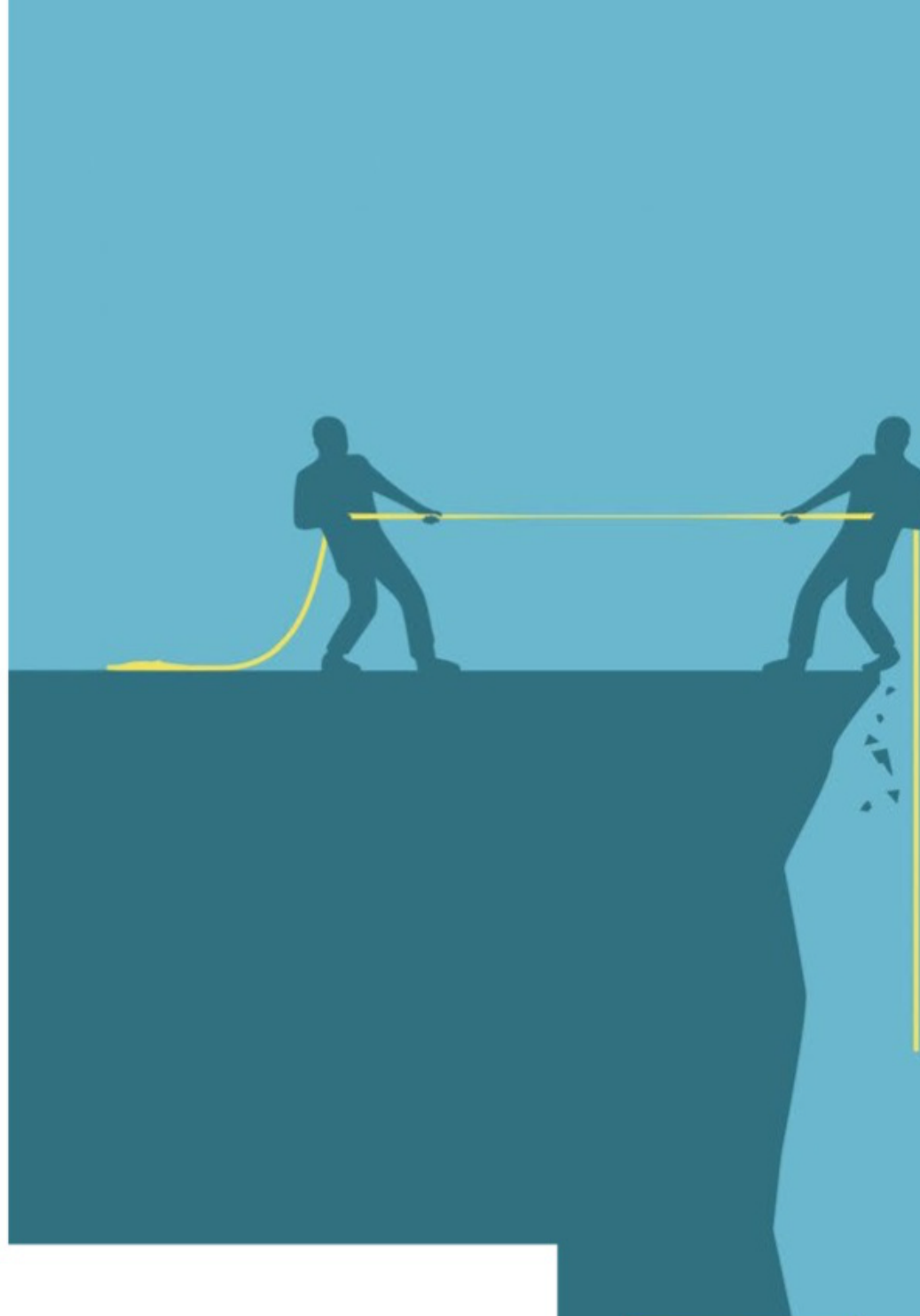
But our competitiveness can also become so intense we just can't resist even when it erodes our sense of well-being. According to scholars of positive psychology, that desirable state comes from mastery, belonging, and autonomy. Although knowing if you have mastered a skill requires measuring yourself against others, it does not require besting them. Although some studies have found that competitiveness is associated with happiness, that may be because happy people can summon more motivation to be competitive, and not because competitiveness boosts our

sense of well-being. If the motivation for competitiveness is purely self-improvement, it can boost one's sense of well-being; if the motivation is wiping the floor with competitors, not so much.

## Dealing with Toxic Competitiveness

When we sabotage others or lower our own goals, settling for just slightly besting others, competitiveness becomes toxic. Huang was drawn to study this extreme competitiveness by how common it is, as well as whether personality, gender, age, or other traits affect how competitive someone is, and whether the toxic version has any cure.

Outside the lab, we needn't look far for evidence of our competitive mindset. Asked whether they would prefer to have more income in absolute terms but less than others (that is, everyone at work got a raise, but yours was



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much smaller), or less income but more money relatively (everyone took a pay cut, but yours was so small you're now one of the most highly paid employees), the vast majority of respondents choose to be worse off, as long as they can rank higher than others on the compensation pecking order. That's held true for the decades that psychologists have been asking the question.

We assess our own status on other dimensions—intellectual capabilities, athletic prowess, even altruism—this way, too. That 3:40:28 marathon we ran feels like a major achievement... until our running buddy crosses the line with a 3:39. When Huang's cycling gym began posting scores for all to see, some people pedaled harder, as the trainers intended, but others (those already at or near the top) slacked off. When people decide how much to give to a good cause, if the \$50 they initially considered giving exceeds the median donation (\$30, let's say), they feel just as generous giving \$35.

If that manifestation of ubercompetitiveness isn't irrational enough, how's this? When people form groups to lose weight, it's not unusual for members to try to entice others into eating, say, a calorie-packed cupcake or two...and then rationalizing that they can skip their workout that day. Let's just say that Fitbit knew exactly what it was doing when it included a "taunt" feature (*I did 3,500 steps today to your 3,000, nyah nyah*).

Even when our pursuit of a goal is not a zero-sum game—your weight loss has no effect on mine—we nevertheless care deeply about how others do. "We view our own efforts through a competitive lens," Huang said.

That makes some sense. By assessing others' performance, we can better estimate what qualifies as high achievement. Who knew that scoring 30 points out of 100 on a problem in my college physics class was fantastic? That's especially relevant when we're new to something. Novices at an athletic endeavor such as CrossFit

tend to assess their performance competitively, something psychologists describe as "ego-involved" (*How many reps is she doing?*), while old hands take a "mastery perspective," focusing on objective goals.

## Is It Our Destiny to Compete?

Competitiveness also arises from our deep desire for self-knowledge. That, of course, can come from introspection, but also from comparisons with others—a prerequisite of competitiveness. People differ in the strength of their "social comparison orientation." Those who rank high in neuroticism, conformity, and self-consciousness, but low in intellectual autonomy—the ability to think for yourself—are especially prone to comparing themselves to others. It's easy to imagine how lacking intellectual autonomy might contribute to hyper-competitiveness: If you don't believe in yourself enough to set goals that are independent of what others are doing, the default is *How is he doing?*

However, we are not inalterably wired for competition: For every colleague who measures her performance by how others do, there is one who seeks excellence and mastery according to her own lights.

To some extent, benchmarking and competitiveness were wired into us by evolution: When resources from food to space to mates were finite, our objective achievement hardly mattered. Even if we weren't all that attractive to potential mates, even a slight edge gave us a better chance of leaving descendants—that's just a function of life in a community.

Still, evidence suggests that life circumstances also affects competitiveness. In a 2014 study, for example, about 70% of men who were only children chose to play a game in which they earned points for besting others (competitive) rather than for correct answers (excellence). But barely 40% of those with older sisters chose

FOR EVERY COLLEAGUE WHO MEASURES HER PERFORMANCE BY HOW OTHERS DO, THERE IS ONE WHO SEEKS EXCELLENCE AND MASTERY ACCORDING TO HER OWN LIGHTS.

competition over excellence—suggesting a competitiveness-damping effect of growing up with an elder sister.

## Older, Wiser, Less Cut-Throat Competitive?

One might expect competitiveness to fade with age—don't we eventually make our peace with what we've accomplished and with the goals we value? A 2011 study found that competitiveness increases until around age 50, and begins to taper off in that decade. Researchers asked men either to choose to solve a specified number of mental math problems, or to solve more than someone else. Only half the men aged 25 to 34 opted to compete, but among those 45 to 54, a whopping 70% wanted in.

Competitiveness, the study revealed, increases with age until what researchers call the "feisty 50s," but not because confidence increases with age. It may be that men (possibly women, too, though they weren't studied) see their 50s as the last chance to make their mark and feel compelled to give it all they've got.

But here's the encouraging part: Competitiveness fell through age 75, the oldest participants. Perhaps age does bring wisdom, at least in the sense of trusting our own north star about what truly counts as an achievement. ●









# The Beauty of **EVERYDAY MIRACLES**

**Chris Willard** shares his journey from being homeless to teaching awareness at Harvard Medical School.

INTERVIEW BY KARIN EVANS  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHANIE DIANI

Today **Dr. Christopher Willard** lives in a charming house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with his wife and two small children, not far from Harvard Medical School where he teaches—but a long way from an “epic meltdown” he experienced in college that led to drug addiction and homelessness. Now a successful speaker, book author, and educator who travels the world teaching mindfulness in schools, hospitals, NGOs, and other institutions, Chris opens up about how he discovered meaning, hope, and well-being through mindfulness. He’s spreading his message around the world, one breath at a time.





*Let's begin with the scope of your work. What's going on right now?*

I'm writing lots of books, working with schools, therapists, hospitals, organizations; consulting in the corporate and nonprofit world. It's amazing to see mindfulness getting bigger—it's also a little overwhelming. I do 50 or 60 trainings every year and travel a lot. I've been to around 20 countries to do workshops. I think I'm not the only mindfulness person feeling (ironically) very busy!

*Why do you think there's so much interest?*

As we get busier and busier, doing more multitasking, becoming more wired, people are looking for a counterbalance. They are trying to find ways to slow down, to singletask instead of multitask. The way we are living is not sustainable for the planet, our communities, families, or individuals. In a secular way, mindfulness has a lot to offer that many religious and cultural institutions used to offer.

*How did you come to mindfulness?*

I got introduced to mindfulness when I was in my twenties. But when I look back, I realize I had experiences that were mindful before I knew the word, like going to nature camp and being told, "Let's walk as quietly as we can." Or, "Let's listen for the sounds of the forest, or watch shapes in the clouds." Many years later, I thought, *Oh, that was basically mindful walking and mindful listening.*

Then I went off to college and I had an epic meltdown of depression and anxiety. It's something I've been more



open about recently. I was into drugs and had a significant heroin problem. I had to leave school. For the next year I was a total mess. I was homeless, living in a park, when my parents dragged me to a retreat with Thich Nhat Hanh that they were attending. That was completely transformative. Suddenly I felt calmer, more creative, more connected. I felt like life was worth living. I felt hope. Then I went straight from there to a treatment facility and continued my journey in recovery. I think, like many people, I got started through suffering.

*How did you decide to focus your work on young people?*

I spent the first few months of getting sober listening to Jon Kabat-Zinn's tapes and reading Thich Nhat Hanh's meditations. Knowing how helpful mindfulness was on my path of recovery from substance abuse—and general misery—I wished I had had this when I was younger. From there, like any recent convert, I wanted to bring this to others. I thought, essentially, how do we reach kids who are having a hard time, or who might at some point, in a way that is creative and fun and accessible? That's what really got me fired up.



*Top: Chris with his wife, Olivia Weisser, and their children Leo and Mae at home in Cambridge, MA. Four-year-old Leo has already begun learning to notice his breathing.*

*Bottom: Chris teaching high-school students and teachers about neuroplasticity and the power of mindfulness to rewire your brain.*

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karin Evans is a journalist, author, and frequent contributor to *Mindful*. She lives with her family in Berkeley, California.



# BREATHING ABC'S

## Chris Willard on working with kids and his new book, *Alphabreaths*.

*What did you do next?*

I went back and finished my undergrad degree, went to graduate school in clinical psychology, and got interested in exploring mindfulness, which was just becoming popular in psychology.

I also took my summers to travel to places like Asia and South America, trying to understand other wisdom traditions, what universal concepts there are for humans, how mindfulness manifests in different ways in different cultures. As I learned what else was out there, it blew up a lot of my stereotypes and expectations about mindfulness in other places. I spent a lot of time reflecting and then integrating what I learned into my work as a therapist.

Through my dissertation, I started writing about mindfulness with kids. I'd always wanted to write a book and got my first contract for *Child's Mind* after I read a book on publishing, and it sent me on a path that was completely unexpected. I had thought I'd keep working as a therapist or at a college, but soon I was asked to do public speaking, which terrified me, but I got more confident and it snowballed. Now I can't believe this is my life. I get to teach, go to interesting places, meet and work with amazing people. I tell my wife every day, "This is so crazy, what a journey!"

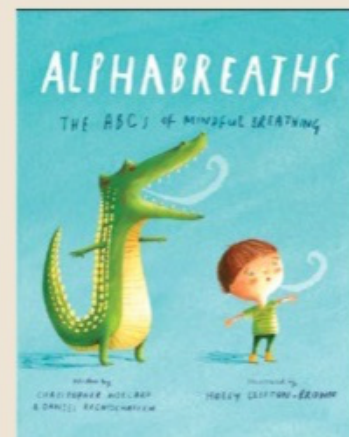
*You've said that teenagers are the most stressed-out group in America right now. Can you elaborate?*

What we're seeing with young people around the world is an epidemic of mental health issues and stress. One in three teens now has a diagnosable anxiety disorder. We're seeing anxiety and depression in college, where huge numbers of kids are dropping out, like I did 20 years ago. There's a tremendous amount of stress—from college pressure like I grew up with, and →

The main intention I have when I teach kids mindfulness is that they will have a positive experience, that the seed is planted so someday they can have an opportunity to practice and it's a happy memory, not a chore. What's critical is that we always keep it fun and positive.

I'm excited about *Alphabreaths* because we think of the fun and funny breaths it encourages as the training wheels for mindfulness. First, we make breathing fun, help kids become aware of their breath, then we teach them how to regulate the breath with these kinds of practices. Concepts like the polyvagal theory and other understandings of the stress response show us that as we slowly regulate the breath, we regulate our bodies, our physiologies and our brains, which of course regulates our attention, impulses, and emotions.

If kids can learn that, we've taught them something incredible. And if they go from there to actually developing a deeper mindfulness practice, even better. With the mental health crisis in young people, I also think more than ever we need to give kids skills, starting at *Alphabreaths* age, which is stuff even three-year-olds can do, that can grow with the kids so they will be more resilient and skilled going into the stresses and suffering they will inevitably face.



We want to protect our kids and we should, of course, but we also can't protect them from every B minus, breakup, or worse, that they inevitably face. At some point they need these skills themselves.

For teens, play means things like wordplay, joking around, having fun. But teens can respond to a bit more seriousness, too, depending on a young person's personality. I try to use science with them, talking about the breath being a remote control to shut off the alarm of the amygdala and the fight-or-flight system.

Older kids also have a greater attention span for practice and don't need as much imaginary stuff. Although guided imagery is great, they are going to roll their eyes at something like "butterfly breathing," so a longer metaphorical image, like watching thoughts by imagining them to be like leaves floating in the river, or clouds passing in the sky, might resonate.

—Karin Evans



“Mindfulness doesn’t make us happier exactly, but it helps us know clearly when we are happy and when we are unhappy. That means we are less likely to perpetuate our own suffering through doing things that make ourselves and others less happy.”

**CHRIS WILLARD**

in other places there’s poverty, and racism and other stressors. If you ask educators—the folks on the front lines who know our kids better than anyone—what’s changed, they talk about an uptick in mental health issues, and problems with emotional regulation, resilience, attention, and social skills. We are seeing lots of addiction. All of these respond to mindfulness.

Kids are worried about their own safety, of course, about acts of violence or shootings. They are concerned about climate change, wondering what’s going to be left for their generation. There’s financial anxiety and worries about our relationship to technology. It’s not helping to be on our devices all the time; phones aren’t helping us communicate or commune as they should. They are tearing us apart in many ways.

There are also so many stressed-out parents, and when parents are stressed out, kids are stressed out. To create mindful kids, you need to surround them with mindful adults.

*What can help? What about mindful programs in schools?*

There’s a lot of excitement around mindfulness programs in schools, and they’re becoming more accessible to more communities. Such programs are also very hard to do: What do young people need? Long-term retreat practice, or a few skills to help them through the day? It’s like calculus: Not everyone needs calculus, some just need arithmetic. Some kids just need a little breathing practice. Others need or want more. Then questions like how do you maintain quality while reaching the most people?

I hope that every kid gets at least one good experience with mindfulness, so later in life, when they need it, it is already there. I was lucky enough to have that—I hope every kid can, too.

*What’s your own personal practice like?*

My practice is sometimes really formal, sitting at a certain time for a certain amount of time, but it’s different than it used to be. When my son was born, my practice became, well, extremely irregular. About a year ago, I was getting back to sitting every morning and then my daughter was born.

I took a meditation course after my daughter was born. It was good, but it was hard to be away from her. I found myself thinking, *I should be at home with the kids. Am I getting enough out of this?* My practice has definitely been different since I had kids.

So now my practice also manifests in other ways—when I lie down with my kids, we practice gratitude before bedtime, or when my wife and I and our children express what we call “happy thoughts.” We also find ways to integrate mindful breathing before meals.

I’m teaching some mindfulness now to my young son, who is four.

When he is with me in the car and I’m stuck in traffic, I do this thing where I get him to breathe with me. These are the basics that he will grow up with. Recently, though, he told me, “Dad, no more books about breathing!”

*You teach at Harvard Medical School, so I wonder how mindfulness is viewed in such places.*

It’s widely accepted and mainstream at this point, increasingly in medical education, certainly in psychiatry, but also in other aspects such as managing stress, managing life–work balance. And mindfulness is creeping into medical school. What we’re doing at Harvard is trying to make it creep a lot faster.

Jon Kabat-Zinn did a lot of excellent early research that’s known, so by now mindfulness is not totally hippy-dippy. Today, at least in the mental health world, I can’t imagine a single program out there that doesn’t include a bit of mindfulness. That’s also increasingly true in education.

*You’ve talked about the link between mindfulness and happiness. Can you expand on that?*

My thoughts keep coming back to the topic of awe. Research has found that awe boosts happiness and connection, even compassion. Part of what I think mindfulness does is help us find “the miracle in the mundane,” as a friend once put it. To experience awe in the simple act of eating a raisin, taking a walk, or in other ordinary moments. My first encounters of mindfulness were profoundly powerful because they sparked that sense of awe, made life meaningful, and made me feel connected. And it was going to take something truly extraordinary in order to compete with the highs of IV heroin. Of course, it also strongly outweighed the lows and side effects of drugs →









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### **MINDFULNESS FOR BEGINNERS**

By Jon Kabat-Zinn

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By Sharon Salzberg

May

### **HAPPIER NOW**

By Nataly Kogan

June

### **MINDFUL OF RACE**

By Ruth King

August

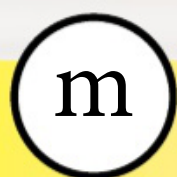
### **HOW CHILDREN THRIVE**

By Mark Bertin

October

### **THE LITTLE BOOK OF BEING**

By Diana Winston



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and alcohol, as well as the fact that I was homeless.

Thich Nhat Hanh and others are masters at helping us find meaning and miracles in everyday life through mindfulness practice and mindful awareness. For me and so many others, to be able to find more happiness, less anxiety, sobriety, less stress, a sense of lightness, a sense of freedom, has often come through finding meaning. For some people that's spirituality; for some, family and community; for others, a hobby, an art, a career. For many people, mindfulness has opened us up to the things that bring meaning into our lives.

*Have you found that to be true in your own life?*

Yes. Mindfulness doesn't make us happier exactly, but it helps us know clearly when we are happy and when we are unhappy, and that means we are less likely to perpetuate our own suffering through doing things that make ourselves and others less happy. In that sense, it creates the conditions for more happiness and joy to enter our lives. It feels pretty crazy to me that my life has gone from homeless in a park to teaching at Harvard Medical School.

*You've said that kindness and generosity can be catching, that there's a kind of social contagion possible.*

We all know that kindness is good, but what's really interesting is how compassion and generosity impact the structure of our brain. And these qualities actually start to affect our behavior: If I act one way and it becomes a habit, and I act that way tomorrow with other people, I get positive feedback. It keeps going. Years ago I remember hearing "courtesy is contagious" in drivers' education class, and at the time I was a teen and we all thought, *Oh that's so stupid.*

"Sometimes I think, 'What are we doing sitting on our cushions? We should be out in the world.' But both are really important. We need to sit on our cushions, but also be mindful out in the world."

**CHRIS WILLARD**

But now I'm 41, and this question of "is mindfulness contagious" is really exciting to me.

A team in England showed that an individual's mindfulness practice can lead to more positive emotions in the people around them. Every week if someone practiced, the roommate or the boyfriend was in a better mood. This contagion again trickled out.

This stuff blows my mind, the way that our practice really makes an impact in the real world. We know these practices change our brains, our bodies, our behavior, even our genetic expression. But can *my* practice actually change the brain, body, and behavior of people around me? Well, according to the research it looks like it can. Parents who practice can change the brains and behavior of their kids. Teachers who practice change the behavior of their students. Therapists who practice change the mood of their clients. Roommates who practice change their roommates!

Sometimes I think, 'What are we doing sitting on our cushions? We should be out in the world.' But both are really important. We need to sit on our cushions, but also bring mindfulness out in the world, because that has an impact that we need now more than ever. ●



get real

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# ***beyond the buzz***

5 things people  
get wrong about  
mindfulness

By Barry Boyce  
Illustrations by Brad Amorosino





# MYTH 1

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## Mindfulness is just Buddhism in disguise

**Mindfulness is a basic human inheritance** and capability, and it's not owned by any group, religion, or philosophy. As a capacity of the human mind, mindfulness can be trained with practices and disciplines, just as one can become a more skilled violinist through long practice or build one's strength through weight training. Buddhist practitioners have done deep research on the subject, and the many Buddhist traditions offer myriad insights, but that doesn't mean Buddhism owns mindfulness any more than Italians own pasta or Greeks own democracy.

Ironically, two concerns surround the relationship between mindfulness and Buddhism: Some Buddhists are concerned that mindfulness, if ripped from its moorings in Buddhism, is a sham; another group of critics is concerned about the opposite: that mindfulness—in a hospital or school, for example—is stealth Buddhism that will pop out and ensnare participants once they're trapped in its web. Both of these assume mindfulness is inexorably married to Buddhism. It is a central practice in Buddhism, but the Buddha would not have claimed to have invented mindfulness, just as Newton would not have claimed gravity as his invention.

Some say it's simply wrong to take mindfulness out of the context of Buddhism. They argue that it can be ineffectual—or even harmful—without two supports they feel are essential to meditation practice: ethical action and wisdom. Yet, the notion of ethical (or beneficial) action and seeing things clearly were also not invented by the Buddha, nor did the compassionate Buddha regard

them to be part of a closed system. It's unfair to deny the benefits of meditative practice to people because they're not Buddhist and presume they can't discover their interdependence with others and find ethical conduct and wisdom within themselves and the communities they're part of.

For most of its history, *mindfulness* was not a word in wide use. This made it ripe for the picking when translator T. W. Rhys Davids decided to use it to render the Pali word *sati*, a Buddhist term for one of the key elements of meditation practice. Some commentators like to make reference to this event to establish the *true* meaning of *mindfulness*. But words don't have "true" meanings. They grow and change and enter new contexts. Semantics is tough enough for concrete words, but when you venture into describing aspects of mind, you're in a whole nother mess of bother. Words fail you.

Mindfulness today is no longer *only* the English translation of *sati*. It has also become a general term to describe qualities and virtues that arise from meditation, including compassion. Buddhism is a healthy and growing tradition with a long history of dedicated meditation practice and insights that have been contributed to the world. But mindfulness, both the innate human ability and the practice to cultivate it, are open source. →

*Newton didn't  
invent gravity,  
nor did the  
Buddha invent  
mindfulness.*







## MYTH 2

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# The result of meditation is a boring, bland, cult-like calmness and complacency

**It's so easy to confuse the *practice* of meditation with what the *results* are presumed to be.** Since we slow down when we meditate (we move little or not at all, and our thought process eventually decelerates a bit), it's natural to think this means everyone who meditates is supposed to be slow, forever, in everything they do: Meditators can't be short-order cooks, nor sprinters. They do everything in slowmo, one thing and one precious thought at a time. Air traffic controllers can forget about meditating.

According to this mythical notion, the meditator is colorless, bland, blissed out, and

checked out. So wrapped up in her own mind and how it's doing, she has no time for worldly matters. She's not only a pacifist. She's a passivist. No outrage, lust, sarcasm, or humor allowed. Unfailingly earnest at all times.

This is an old stereotype, but like all stereotypes, it's pernicious and evergreen. And it gains new currency from new commentators. In a screed in *GOOD* magazine a few years back, a writer lamented the years she lost to meditation, the ones where she "moved at such a slow pace and got so little done and participated in so little in the world outside of those who have the luxury to yoga-fy and meditate and manage their thoughts that I am ashamed."

Whoever suggested mindfulness meditation requires you to *manage* or *police* (her word elsewhere in the piece) your thoughts—and also get nothing done out in the world—missed the point. The point of slowing down *during meditation practice* is to allow one to see how one's own mind operates. And there are, as we all know, countless types of minds (shy, outgoing, fast-moving, slow-going, ambitious, reflective...) and within each mind a vast array of emotions (from sad to ecstatic and every shade in between, including complex amalgams of various emotions that defy description). A healthy mind and a healthy community is diverse and able to draw on all its glorious parts to their fullest extent.

One of the leading institutions studying meditation is about just that. The Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, founded by neuroscientist and emotion specialist Richie Davidson, uses that phrase to refer to inquisitive minds that make full use of a wide range of capacities and colorations. Meditation is one means to enable that fundamental healthiness of mind. Far from dulling us into sameness, mindfulness practice allows us to be ourselves more freely, with all the juicy and unique bits in full flower.



# MYTH 3

## Mindfulness fixes something that's wrong with you

### **What's wrong with me? Why can't I do this?**

*I'm so bad at it. I'm just bad altogether. My mind is a scattered mess! These other people seem fine.* Everyone who has ever meditated, or tried anything new—playing the guitar, becoming a parent, snowboarding—has had thoughts like these running through their head. Often repeatedly, and in a downward spiral that ends with “I’m not cut out for this. I’m no good. I quit.”

It’s an odd trait we humans have. We like to beat up on ourselves. We like to say, “the problem with you/me is...” And popular meditation literature can provide lots of adjectives to complete that sentence:

- Too distracted
- Too speedy
- Too negative
- Too spaced out
- Too etcetera

All of them lead to corresponding ideas of what meditation must be like. We’ll solve these problems! Heads vacuumed free of thought, utterly undistracted, we’ll go to a special place where each and every moment is momentous. We’ll be... Wait for it, cue flute music... Meditating.

But it’s not like that.

Meditation is not getting to a fixed destination. It’s exploring. We get to venture into the workings of our minds: our sensations (air blowing on our skin or a harsh smell wafting into the room), our emotions (love this, hate that, crave this, loathe that), and thoughts (*wouldn’t it be weird to see an elephant playing a trumpet*).

The practice of mindfulness—being curious about what’s happening in our mind—is freeing: We come to feel that the movement of mind is not so mysterious, so we can learn to navigate sensations, thoughts, and emotions more skillfully. The voice in our head is less annoying. All the benefits of meditation arise from experiencing our mind as more workable. We can focus and guide it better, and we can also let it go.

More dance, less straitjacket.

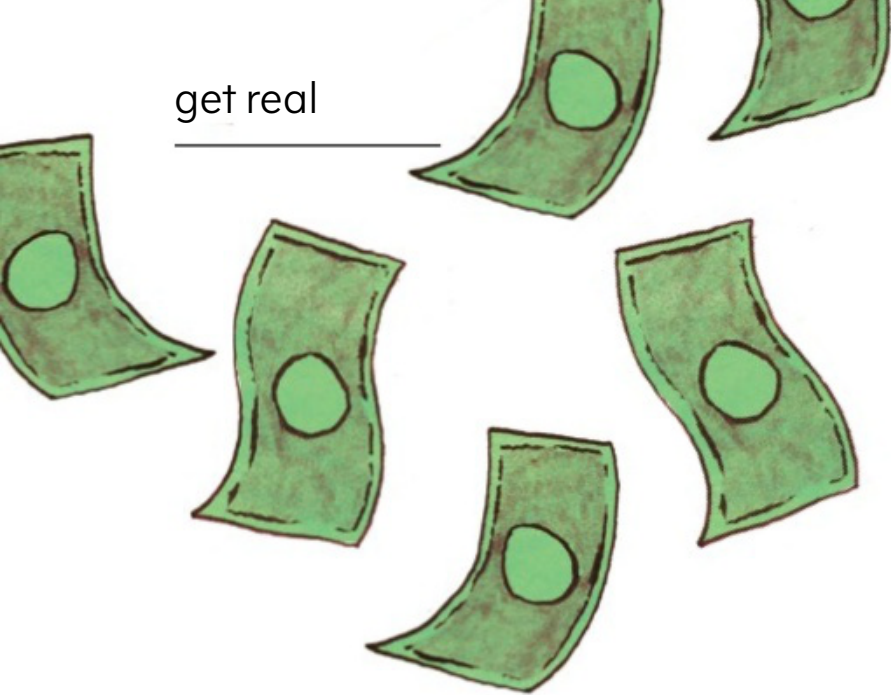
But it’s not fixing. Your mind is naturally capable of mindfulness, awareness, kindness, and compassion. It’s not in need of fundamental repair.

Of course we stumble and stray and flail about in confusion from time to time, and sometimes frequently. What we need first is a modicum of stability. By gently repeating a simple habit, returning to an anchor for the mind, such as our breath, bit by bit a steadiness emerges that allows a better view of what’s happening in our mind and more opportunities to make choices. The point of returning to the breath is not that thinking itself is problematic. When you’re learning to cook, you may turn the heat up too high and burn something. It doesn’t mean you’re not a cook. It means you need to adjust the heat. →





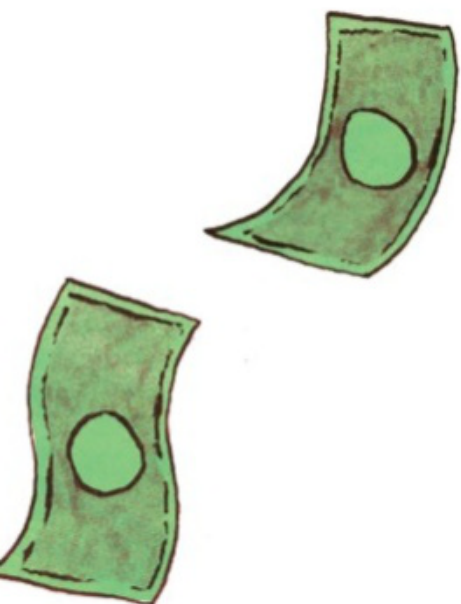
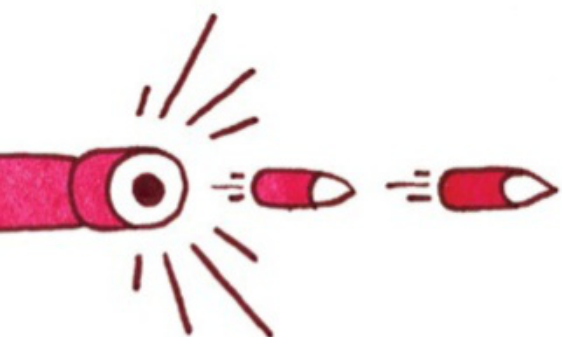
get real



*Mindfulness puts you in a better position to make ethical choices for yourself.*

## MYTH 4

Mindfulness is being used to create perfect soldiers... and capitalists



**Now that mindfulness is taught in so many practical contexts, a fear has emerged that it's becoming no more than a handy trick to improve mental acuity. And the even bigger fear is that mindfulness is being used toward any end whatsoever, regardless of the ethical consequences. Critics who voice this concern worry that mindfulness practice without an ethical system will result in a world filled with snipers trained to aim "mindfully" and mindfully rapacious CEOs like Gordon Gekko from the movie *Wall Street*.**

But genuine mindfulness practice—taught by experienced practitioners properly trained to teach—carries with it the understanding that the bare attention of mindfulness naturally

grows into broader awareness and inquisitiveness. It causes one to see and take into account one's interconnectedness with other people, the community, society, and the planet. Mindfulness can also give you the space to rediscover, examine, and refresh the underlying values that drive your choices in the heat of the moment.

The mindfulness programs under development for police and soldiers are intended to help them regulate their nervous systems so they make better choices and act less impulsively—and to mitigate the trauma inflicted on their bodies and minds. Whatever military choices political leaders make on our behalf, the fact remains that soldiers can reduce harm to themselves and others if they can keep a cool head. In addition, stints in the military are short. When soldiers return to civilian life, meditation practice may still be of great benefit, to them personally, to their families, and to society at large. This is a key part of the vision of those who teach mindfulness to military personnel.

Some people say workplace mindfulness programs are no more than cynical tools to squeeze more work out of people by improving their focus. This viewpoint is rarely informed by actually talking to people who have taken part in these programs. Most of us work somewhere, would like to enjoy our work more, and want to be better at it. Yes, employers look at the bottom line, but in the main they know it's important that we feel our work is rewarding and our workplace is a good place to be. Programs that genuinely improve employee health benefit both the employee and the employer.

Any good thing can—and will—be misused, but raising the specter of mindful militias or mindful corporate sociopaths is demagoguery. Extreme examples are used to cast a harsh light on something that's largely beneficial, like saying mental health days for students will lead to a lazy do-nothing generation. Mindfulness training doesn't dictate the ethical choices you should make, but it puts you in a better position to make those choices for yourself.



# MYTH 5

## Mindfulness is just the next trendy industry

**The media and marketing machine can't help** but make the worst of a good thing. Think of *natural, organic, green, holistic*. Now *mindful* is having its moment: *mindful* burgers, *mindful* petcare, *mindful* this, that, and everything. (And yes, *Mindful* magazine.) Once a word gets trendy and overused, it can grate on the ear, but because *organic* has been overused doesn't mean that genuine organic food has somehow become a shallow thing of no value. Just so, with mindfulness. Everyone feels they know a little bit about it, so that naturally leads to a lot of misconceptions, and indeed it can lead people and companies to try to make a fast buck off it.

But there will always be sham versions, knockoffs, and snake oil. Already writers for *The New Yorker*, *The Huffington Post*, *The Economist*, and *The Guardian*, among others, have claimed that mindfulness is big money. I know a large number of mindfulness teachers. Their median income is modest, to say the least, and almost all of them have "day jobs."

If authentic mindfulness teachers are to beat out the scam artists, they'll need to be able to earn a living. It takes time to learn how to teach mindfulness, and it's hard. It's as much a calling as a profession, and just as in other callings, like college professor or clergy, it's not ignoble to draw a paycheck.

The danger of the over-commercialization of meditation is real. The problem is not money *per se*. Some selling has to take place. Anyone who started meditating was sold on it by someone, but it's overselling that's the real danger. When meditation is presented as a panacea, with Pollyannaish language that makes it sound as

if five minutes of easy, breezy meditation will transform you, it's literally too good to be true.

Mind training is serious business. Our minds are powerful and wonderful, and basically sound and good, as noted above, but there also be dragons there. We are capable of developing or inheriting mental illnesses; we have deep, dark fears; and our lives and our world, however glorious and joyous they can be at times, are filled with pain. Real mindfulness must take place within full view of the *whole* truth of life, with all its challenges and difficulties.

To go there, we need good guides, who themselves are continuing to explore and learn—and learn together with those they teach. As interest in mindfulness continues to grow because of the genuine benefit it brings, weaker, phony versions of mindfulness will also keep popping up. But because they offer empty calories and ultimately don't satisfy, many people will continue looking and find their way to authentic mindfulness. And we'll all be better for it. ●





finding meaning

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# Living





# Greatly

*What do people who work with death know about living? Writer Stephanie Domet goes exploring with renowned mindfulness teacher **Mirabai Bush**, hospice pioneer **Frank Ostaseski**, and **Rabbi Rami Shapiro** and discovers what's truly essential.*





I used to believe in something I called Cosmic Hints. Big signals from the universe about what I should or shouldn't do, did or didn't want. I believed the universe was looking out for me, particularly, and putting symbols and metaphors in my path that helped me see who I was and who I wanted to be. I was forever in search of the Big Why—constantly looking for meaning, making narratives that sewed together the events of my life, the coincidences and conditions and happenstances, into something that was leading somewhere, and meaning something.

I believed, strongly and vocally, that Everything Happens for a Reason.

Then my brother died, when I was 30 and he was 32. He had something called pseudomyxoma peritonei—a cancerous abdominal tumor. It affects about one person in a million. Talk about a Cosmic Hint!

Except, what was it trying to tell me? And why would it kill my brother? Was my attention that hard to get? And why did

I think my brother's death was about me, anyway? How self-absorbed do you have to be to derive *that* meaning out of something so senseless? And if that wasn't what Chris's death was about, then what was it? If Everything Happens for a Reason, what was the Reason for the death of a brilliant, otherwise healthy young man who had a wife who loved him and two kids under the age of three?

## Desperately Seeking Meaning

It is almost 20 years later and I have been unable to sew up a narrative that fits.

I drifted rudderless and grieving, with no operating system, for some time. I had been raised with a Catholic vision of the afterlife, and though I liked the idea that my brother was playing rummoli and eating meatballs with our deceased grandparents and uncles and aunts—and the idea that I might someday join them—that whimsical notion didn't give me a framework for how to live. And in the face of such an out-of-order death—parents shouldn't have to bury a child, little babies shouldn't have to bury a parent—I developed a new ethos.

Anything Can Happen to Anyone at Any Time. So Live While You're Alive. For someone so dedicated to narrative and reason, this first felt dizzying. *How do you Live While You're Alive? What does that even mean?* Seize the moment, I thought. Do all the things. I had been horribly struck by what cancer took from my brother's body, the indignities it visited upon him. Intellectually, I knew I wanted to move my body

"The more you are able to become present in the moment, the more you can feel like, if death happened now it would be OK, I have led the best life I can."

MIRABAI BUSH

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie Domet is a writer and editor in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where she is living happily ever after.





PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHELLE KERR

well in order to honor my brother. Climb big hills, lift weights, maybe learn to run. I wanted to take big chances, see the world, strive and achieve!

Constitutionally though, I'm more of a "lie on the couch and read or think" kind of person. Obsessively plan the future, and anxiously ruminate on the past. Slowly write a quirky novel

every seven or eight years. Putter around the garden. Pay some bills. Roast a chicken. That kind of thing. I am soft and round, and every time I find myself in a gym trying to do a side plank, gritting my teeth and exhorting myself to live while I'm alive, I just kind of want to disappear.

So, nineteen years into my life as a bereaved person,

with all my fancy thinking, and my annual essays on the anniversary of Chris's death, the additional loss of my father a few years after Chris, two novels and a third on the way all dealing with grieving and the reality of death and how to live in the face of it, and here I am: struggling, sweating, grimly determined to Live While I'm Alive. →



## An Invitation to Know More

There's something about that, somehow, that feels not true to the original intention. But I don't realize it until after my conversation with Frank Ostaseski.

Frank cofounded the Zen Hospice Project in 1987, and served as its executive director until 2004. Zen Hospice Project is a nonprofit committed to bringing mindfulness and compassion to end-of-life care. In his time with the Project, Frank sat with thousands of people in the final stages of life as a companion, listening to what they wanted to say, holding space for their silence.

"The eyes of the dying person," he tells me, "are really clear mirrors, and they show us ourselves unlike anything else I know."

His decades of bedside experience led him to write a book called *The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully*. Packed with scenes from Ostaseski's own life, and the lives of those he encounters in his work, *The Five Invitations* offers practical, gentle, yet urgent advice for living well in the face of death. For Ostaseski, those invitations are most alive in the eyes of those who are dying.

"They show us where we're clinging, where our aversion is, where our deeply held identities are, and they reflect our deepest capacity for love."

By the time I arrived at the hospital where my brother was in the final stages of life, he was unconscious, in a medically induced coma. I didn't know how to be, as I sat with him, silently trying to beam at him all the things I wanted him to know. Even now, when I turn my imagination to that hospital room, my body tightens, my throat aches, tears are immediate. My mouth feels profoundly shut. I still don't know how to be with this. There's grief in these cells, for certain, but alongside that grief there's something more elemental. I recognize its prickling tentacles as fear.

## Getting Close to Comfortable

It's not surprising to find fear adjacent to death. "The obstacle to being able to accept dying is fear," says Mirabai Bush. She co-wrote *Walking Each Other Home: Conversations on Loving and Dying* with Ram Dass. The book emerged out of two years' worth of conversations between the two friends, when Ram Dass was in his eighties and Bush in her seventies.

"I found that after those years I'm much lighter with it," Bush says. "Not that I'm less sad, or that I miss my friends any less. But I feel closer to the rightness of it, or the naturalness of it, and the ease of it."

With regards to clinging, aversion, and deeply held identities, Bush says, "It's

important to think about it and talk with your friends about it and look into your own fears about it. And in that way, mindfulness is really helpful. Notice what's going on in your mind and your body when the subject comes up; notice what it is that's keeping you from being fully there."

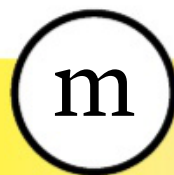
"I would push back on the notion that your life has to amount to something. It's just an amazing thing that you exist at all."

**RABBI RAMI SHAPIRO**

Bush remembers years ago asking a visiting Tibetan teacher a simple question: "Why should we meditate?" And he said, 'You should meditate to prepare for death,' and I thought, Oh well, I can put that off for a bit!" Bush laughs.

"Of course, the more you are able to become present in the moment, the more you can feel like, *If death happened now it would be OK, I have led the best life I can*. That's hard for us, but that's what these practices are for."

It is indeed hard for us, I think, as I recall a Friday evening cocktail hour last year, in our living room, with my spouse and his brother, and his brother's partner. My sister-in-law was talking about a man she knew who was living with cystic fibrosis. "He's going to die young," she said. My husband mentioned a woman he knows who was in kidney failure. "She could die any time," he said. Solemn nods all around. Then I raised



### VIDEO Welcoming Everything

Explore this mindfulness practice from Frank Ostaseski, which is an invitation to fearless receptivity.

[mindful.org/  
frank](https://mindful.org/frank)





my glass. “I just want to pour one out for mortality, here,” I said. I could feel my husband give me a hard glance, the kind that said, *Must you?* I ignored it. “Any of us could die, at any time,” I persisted. I looked my sister-in-law in the eye. “You’re gonna die,” I said. I looked at my husband. “And you’re gonna die.” On to his brother. “And you’re gonna die.” I lifted my glass a little higher. “And I’m gonna die. It’s coming for all of us, and no one knows when.”

I don’t know what I expected. What I got was a beat of silence, and then the conversation continued, as if nothing had happened.

## Going with the Flow

“We think death will come later,” Frank Ostaseski says. “But constant change, impermanence, is not later, it’s right here. And so, studying constant change, impermanence, is another way not just to prepare us for dying, but to see that dying shows us how to live.”

When it comes to studying impermanence, the place to start is with ourselves.

“We tend to think of ourselves as the one solid thing going through a changing world,” says Ostaseski. “But I am nothing *but* change. When I take myself out of the river of impermanence, of constant change, I step on the banks and I feel alone, I feel separate, I’m cut off from the flow, from →



“Studying constant change is another way not just to prepare us for dying, but to see that dying shows us how to live.”

**FRANK OSTASESKI**



# Awareness of Endings

How do you meet endings in life? The end of a day, the end of a meal, the end of something precious and rare, the end of this sentence. Most of us have developed habits about how we meet endings. This series of prompts is a practice from Frank Ostaseski that invites you to, without judgment, notice and be curious about your habits and attitudes—and offers reflections that can lead to a deeper connection.

**By Frank Ostaseski**

Author of *The Five Invitations: Discovering What Death Can Teach Us About Living Fully*

**When you go to a party or a business conference, do you leave emotionally and mentally before the end actually arrives?**

- Are you the last to leave the parking lot, waving goodbye to others as they depart?
- Do you isolate or withdraw emotionally into a protective cocoon? Do you stop talking to others?
- Do you sense a certain indifference or ambiguity when the end is arriving?

**Or maybe endings are very emotional for you, causing you to feel sad or scared. Some of us want to use endings to say whatever is left unsaid or we feel we need to say again.**

- Do you wait for others to acknowledge the end, or do you jump the gun?
- When leaving work for the evening, do you say goodbye to colleagues?

- When a friend is dying do you visit?

**What are your patterns? Is the way you normally end things satisfactory, or is there something you want to change? You don't have to follow your acquired habit. You don't need to enact your past patterns. You have a choice.**

- When an end comes near, what happens in your body? Do you tighten, or sigh with relief?
- Are there emotional feelings of anxiety, relief, worry?
- What thoughts or images come to mind when an ending is apparent? Planning thoughts, remembering thoughts?

**I want to draw your attention to these tendencies because:**

- We know that birth will end in death. Reflecting on this might cause us to savor the

moment, to imbue our lives with more appreciation and gratitude.

- We know that the end of all accumulation is dispersion. Reflecting on this might help us to practice simplicity and discover what has real value.
- We know that all relationships will end in separation. Knowing this we make wise choices on how so we will care for those we love.
- The way we meet an end of one moment shapes the way the next one arises. Being aware of endings is a worthy practice.





#### VIDEO Meeting Endings

Explore this mindfulness practice from Frank Ostaseski to uncover the habits surrounding the way you meet endings.

[mindful.org/  
endings](https://mindful.org/endings)



the nature of reality. Then I feel like I gotta protect myself, I'm full of fear."

If we can accept that we are part of the river of impermanence, not separate and solid, Ostaseski says, we can find freedom and opportunity in it. "This moment dies and then the next moment. That really boring dinner party is going to finally end. Presidential terms end. We rely on impermanence. So study it." In *The Five Invitations*, Ostaseski writes about these gorgeous blue flax flowers that bloom in Idaho and live a single day. "Doesn't the brevity and fragility of them lead us into wonder?" he asks. And then, with urgency: "Not just that things end, but that things *become*."

My blood thrums in my veins as I read these words, though I barely know why. There's just something here that feels elemental the same way the fear I feel is elemental.

"The law of impermanence," Ostaseski says, "is sometimes referred to as the law of change and becoming. Every thing is subject to change and alteration. Take for example the life of an individual. It is a fallacy to believe that a person would remain the same person during her entire lifetime. She changes every moment. She actually lives and dies moment by moment, as each moment leads to the next. So this is happening all the time—not just at physical death."

As for what we become, Ostaseski points out, "reli-

gions and cultures have been speculating about it for millennia. I doubt it is a full stop."

Things become.

## Just Do It... Imperfectly

Rabbi Rami Shapiro doesn't have a bucket list. That's because he spends ample time thinking about death, which, he says, is liberating. "It frees you from the obsession that life has to be perfect. If you know you're going to die it leaves room for other imperfections in the system. I don't have to worry about doing it all, being it all, and seeing it all. If there's something I really want to do, I just do it. But not because I'm in a hurry and I'm afraid I'm going to die."

The idea of accepting imperfections in the system is one I struggle with, daily. I am a systems-and-outcome-oriented creature, one who is always measuring and often striving. But this conversation with Shapiro, the author of dozens of books and a column in *Spirituality & Health* magazine, offers another way of looking at my determination to Live While I'm Alive. One that invites me to, perhaps, grit my teeth less while I perform self-punishing side planks.

Shapiro was a congregational rabbi for 20 years, and he is incredibly practical about living and dying. "I would push back on the notion that your life has to →



amount to something. It's just an amazing thing that you exist at all."

Like Ostaseski, he also chooses a water metaphor to talk about the flow, the nature of reality.

"I like the idea from Hinduism of the ocean and the wave. The ocean is god or tao or the great mother or whatever you want to call it—and everything in existence is a wave of that ocean." Bodies, like waves, have form and presence. Waves build and crest—and then they die, just like bodies do.

"The form fades," he says, "but your true essence is the oceanic reality and that doesn't die at all. With that understanding of life, death is part of the process."

For Shapiro, recognizing that we all share an essential nature allows us to open ourselves to others. This is what Bush has been working on, too, since 1970, when Hindu teacher Neem Karoli Baba first instructed her to love everybody. She allows it's not always easy. "He didn't say to *like* everybody. But to recognize that we are all humans here together, and that we're all imperfect and we're all trying to do our best however we see that."

Bush often leads a practice called Just Like Me, in which participants sit in pairs, facing each other, while the meditation leader says variations on a theme of *This is another human being, just like me. This person has had physical and emotional pain and suffering, just like me. This*

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEXANDER GRABCHILEV / STOCKSY





## A POEM FOR CONTEMPLATION

### INSTANTS

If I were able to live my life anew,  
in the next one I would make more mistakes.  
I would not attempt to be so perfect. I would relax more,  
I would be more foolish than I have been. In fact  
I would take very few things seriously.

I would be less hygienic.  
I would take more risks, would do more trips, would behold more  
sunsets, I would climb more mountains, would swim more rivers,  
would eat more ice creams and less broad beans.  
I would have more real problems and fewer imaginary ones.

I was of those kinds of persons that lived sensibly and prolifically  
each minute of his life. Of course, I had moments of happiness  
but if I were able to return back, I would try to have only  
good moments.  
Just in case you do not know,  
of that is life composed—only of moments.  
Don't lose the now!

I was one of those who never went anywhere  
without a thermometer, a hot water bottle,  
an umbrella and a parachute.  
If I were able to live again, I would start to go out barefoot  
at the beginning of the spring, and I would continue like that  
until the end of the fall.

I would wonder more, I would behold more sunrises  
and I would play more with children,  
if I had another life ahead of me.

But you can see, I am 85 years old  
And I know that I am dying.

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*Instants, translated from the original Spanish text and often attributed to Jorge Luis Borges, came as a suggestion from mindfulness expert Shelly Tygielski. She received a copy of the poem from a Holocaust survivor as part of the Jewish l'dor v'dor tradition (passing wisdom from "generation to generation").*

*person has been angry, sad, disappointed by others, just like me. This person will die, just like me.*

"It's so powerful," Bush says, "because it's true, we forget! In that way, you can open up to other people and recognize that they're failing and falling down in life just like you are."

## The Questions to Be Asking

Another way to describe that insight is love, which Ostaseski believes is the key. "Very few people talk to me about their regrets. I'm not so interested in people's regrets. I'm interested in what transforms them. And the big question that's on most people's hearts is: Am I loved? And sometimes also: Did I love well? Now if that's the most important thing, why wait until the time of our dying?"

Ostaseski harkens back to impermanence, to becoming—treasured objects fall and break, cars break down, people you love are going to die. So: "How do we want to care for them now? That's what dying can show us."

What does that mean, I wonder, *Did I love well?* Ostaseski says it's not a judgment. "It's really an assessment. Did I give all the love I had to give? Can I love more? That's on people's hearts when they're coming close to the end of their lives."

Mirabai Bush says it's a muscle we can work. "We →



can cultivate loving, we can deepen it, through practices and simply through loving other people,” she tells me. “That’s what we can do in order to lead a fuller life, a deeper life, and a life that will lead us to a good death.”

This is a tricky one, because it’s an unconditional kind of love Bush is talking about, a love that transcends “me” and “you.”

“We start out identified with ego, thinking that we are our thoughts and sensations and desires and personality.” With time and practice, she says, we can start to see the ways in which we are all interconnected by love—and thus to serve those we encounter in every facet of our life. *This is another human being, just like me.*

## Love Is All There Is?

Here’s where I get stuck: Shouldn’t it be harder than this? I mean, can the answer to living a good life—a life in which I let myself be happy, even—be as simple as: Love more, love well?

Ostaseski says yes. In a bit of a roundabout way.

“We don’t have to get rid of the fear to be happy,” he says. “We’re always busy managing our conditions, trying to get the fear to go away, the grief to go away, the anger to go away. Happiness doesn’t come from lining up all the conditions and getting them just right, because inevitably those conditions change.”

That river of impermanence again. “Whenever we fight with reality, we lose. We say, ‘That’s not fair! Death’s not fair!’ But death is the most fair thing; it comes to everybody.”

This is what I was trying to tell my siblings-in-law and my husband over cocktails, but somehow it sounds different when Ostaseski points it out, probably because he quickly follows it with this: “When we understand our identity is changing like everything else, we don’t spend all our time propping it up in the same way. When I know that life is precarious, then I appreciate that it’s precious, then I don’t want to waste a moment, and that leads to happiness. I step in, I tell the people I love that I love them, I care for the world in a responsible way, I live with integrity because this is what I’ve got.”

It is indeed that simple, says Mirabai Bush. “Being in the moment in a loving, kind way, that’s *it*.”

So we’re back at Live While You’re Alive, but I think I can see a kinder, gentler way to conduct my living. What if I stopped using my grief worldview as a brickbat to clobber myself and others, and switched my métier to love? What if, in the middle of that side plank, I just marveled at my very existence, and what a body will do? What if, at Friday night drinks when someone talks about death as if it’s a distant possibility that probably won’t even happen, I just raise my glass to our friendship and love—and to what we become? ●

PHOTOGRAPH BY JOVANA RIKALO / STOCKSY













# Navigating Difficult Conversations

Learning how to prepare, listen, and communicate mindfully won't prevent challenging conversations, but will help you navigate them better.

By Oren Jay Sofer • Illustrations by Mariko Jesse





T

he difference between ordinary conversations and challenging ones is a bit like the difference between canoe-

ing on open water and running rapids. Both involve paddling with balance, but the stakes are much higher and the skills more demanding in white water. Think of a terrible argument you had with someone or a time when you tangled with a coworker. Intense emotions, personal blind spots, and mistaken assumptions can make high-stakes conversations unproductive and even explosive. The boat capsizes, your gear gets soaked, and you wash up on shore somewhere downstream.

Like any journey where risk is involved, knowing how to handle yourself when conversation gets complicated is key. Preparing ahead of time helps clarify what's important, reduces reactivity, and increases the likelihood that we will be able to engage in a way that is in line with our intentions. Paramount to this is our internal preparation:

1.

**Nourishing yourself *before* a difficult conversation can help you feel clear, balanced, and well resourced.**

This means getting some empathy for any pain, anger, or upset you may feel. Empathy can reduce reactivity and create more space to hear the other person. Find someone you trust, and ask them to listen to what you want to say, and reflect back what they

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Oren Jay Sofer** teaches meditation and communication retreats and workshops nationally. A member of the Spirit Rock Teachers Council, he is a Certified Trainer of Nonviolent Communication and a Somatic Experiencing Practitioner for the healing of trauma.

## Grounding in the Body

**Use one of these physical anchors to feel more alert and present in conversation.**

### Finding Gravity

*The downward force of gravity tends to balance the stimulating, upward movement of attention in conversations.*

**Sit comfortably.** Start by taking a few moments to orient to your surroundings, looking around the room. Gently close your eyes and take a few deep breaths to help you settle in. Feel any sensations of weight or heaviness in your body. You might notice your body's contact with the chair, any hardness or give in the surface you're sitting on. You might feel the sense of your whole body sitting, its mass, or warmth. Let your attention rest with these sensations of weight. Can you feel the downward force of gravity? When you notice your attention has wandered, gently let go and bring it back to the feeling of weight or heaviness in your body. Anchor your awareness there.



## The Centerline

*The centerline can bring a sense of inner strength and clarity.*

**Bring your attention to your upper body.** Sense how your torso rises up from your waist and pelvis. Can you feel your back, shoulders, and neck? See if you can sense the midline or centerline of your upper body. Try feeling your spine, running from your tailbone, through your back, up to the base of your head. Rock forward and backward slightly, and side to side, until you feel the balance point in the middle. See if you can rest your attention here, on the centerline of your body. Can you feel how your body is upright?

## Touch Points

*Touch points can dissipate the intensity of emotions.*

**Explore specific areas in your body that tend to be rich in sensation.** First, put all your attention in your hands. Feel any sensations there: warmth or coolness; tingling, pulsing, or heaviness; maybe moisture or dryness. Now shift your attention to your feet, feeling any sensations there: temperature, weight, texture, the contact with the floor, the pressure of your shoes. You can try this with any other part of your body that has strong sensations, such as your lips, tongue, or eyes. When your mind wanders, gently bring it back to one of these places.

WATERCOLOR ILLUSTRATION BY STELLALEVI / GETTY IMAGES

hear. This could be a friend you feel comfortable enough with to help you discern your core needs.

You can also use mindfulness to help sort through your feelings to get at what matters most to you in the situation. Thinking about what you want to say, gently bring awareness to any emotion you feel, asking yourself, “What matters about this to me?” Then, “If I had that, what would I have?”

**2. Investigating what’s at stake helps us recognize the most important aspects of a complicated or intense situation and can inform our choices about how to proceed.** What do you want from the conversation? Understanding? Resolution? Are you entering with a range of ideas that might work for both people? What specific requests can you make to move forward? Pay attention to any blame or judgments that you hold.

Try to discern what parts of the conversation for you are logistical and which parts are relational. For example, is your upset about the addition to your already full to-do list, or do you feel frustrated that the person hasn’t clearly communicated with you or doesn’t seem to respect your time?

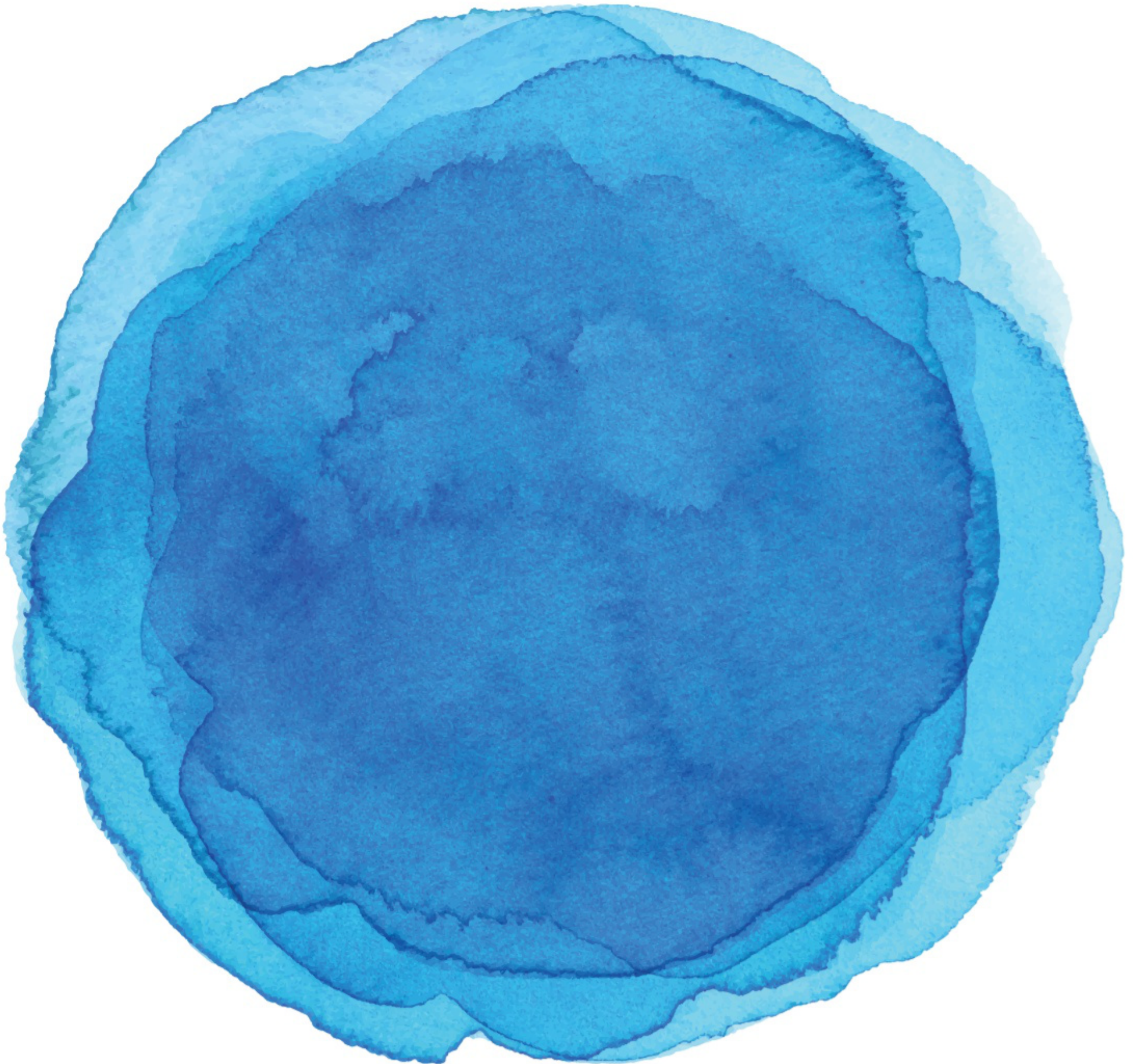
Finally, consider if your goals are realistic. Do you have the capacity to have the conversation in the way you’d like? Does the other person? Is this the right time to have the conversation or even the right person with whom to talk? Are you asking someone to resolve something that they don’t have the power to do?

**3. Humanizing the other person requires the humility and empathy to step outside of your own story and consider other perspectives.** If you can put yourself in their shoes and imagine, even for a moment, what might be going on for them, it can →





# Principles of Mindful Communication





## Listen

When in conflict, if we aim to listen to the other person first it increases the chances that they will be willing to listen to us.

## Notice

Attending to our own reactivity—by noticing the rise of activation and supporting the calm of deactivation (see page 71)—can help us make wiser choices about what to say and when.

## Reflect First

People are more likely to listen when they feel heard. To build understanding, reflect before you respond.

## Try Understanding

The more we understand one another, the easier it is to find solutions that work for everyone. Therefore, establish as much mutual understanding as possible before problem solving.

## Identify Wants

Conflict generally occurs at the level of our strategies—what we want. The more deeply we are able to identify our needs—why we want what we want—the less conflict there is.

## Emotional Awareness

Being aware of our emotions supports our ability to choose consciously how we participate in a conversation.

## Take Responsibility

The more we take responsibility for our feelings, connecting them to our needs rather than to others' actions, the easier it is for others to hear us.

## Hear the Need

The more we hear others' feelings as a reflection of their needs, the easier it is to understand them without hearing blame, needing to agree, or feeling responsible for their emotions.

have a profound effect on the conversation. Whatever the situation, however confusing or harmful another's actions, there is some internal logic behind their choices. Decide how you want to show up in this conversation and focus on that, rather than on proving a point or being right.

Sometimes our best attempts at preparing for a difficult conversation aren't enough. We get triggered, the other person gets angry, and we realize we're headed straight for the rocks. This is when the time you spent running drills—honing your mindfulness muscle—comes in. Tuning in to your body, recognizing your own signs of upset, and skillfully riding the waves of activation can help guide you back toward calmer waters.

## Redirecting the River

Conflict can send a cascade of physiological effects through our body. Our breathing changes, stress hormones release, and, if we lack skills to meet this swell of energy, our cognitive function alters.

Every time we respond by blowing up, running away, or shutting down, we retrace and strengthen the neural networks for that behavior, like floodwaters carving a riverbed into a hillside. Inundated with stimuli, our sympathetic system prompts us to react with aggression, fear, or confusion, and we fall back on one of the four learned conflict behaviors (avoidance, confrontation, passivity, and/or passive aggression).

With mindful presence and skill, we can shift these patterns by carving new conduits into the hillside of our mind and body, creating different streams for that energy to follow. Progress is incremental, but every drop we redirect deepens the new riverbed, attracting more and more water to change the course of the river of consciousness.

In tough situations, the main thing to be mindful of is our nervous system. You can do this by recognizing when you're getting worked up, →



# How to Have a Tough Conversation

Try these 5 tips to start off a discussion on the right foot:

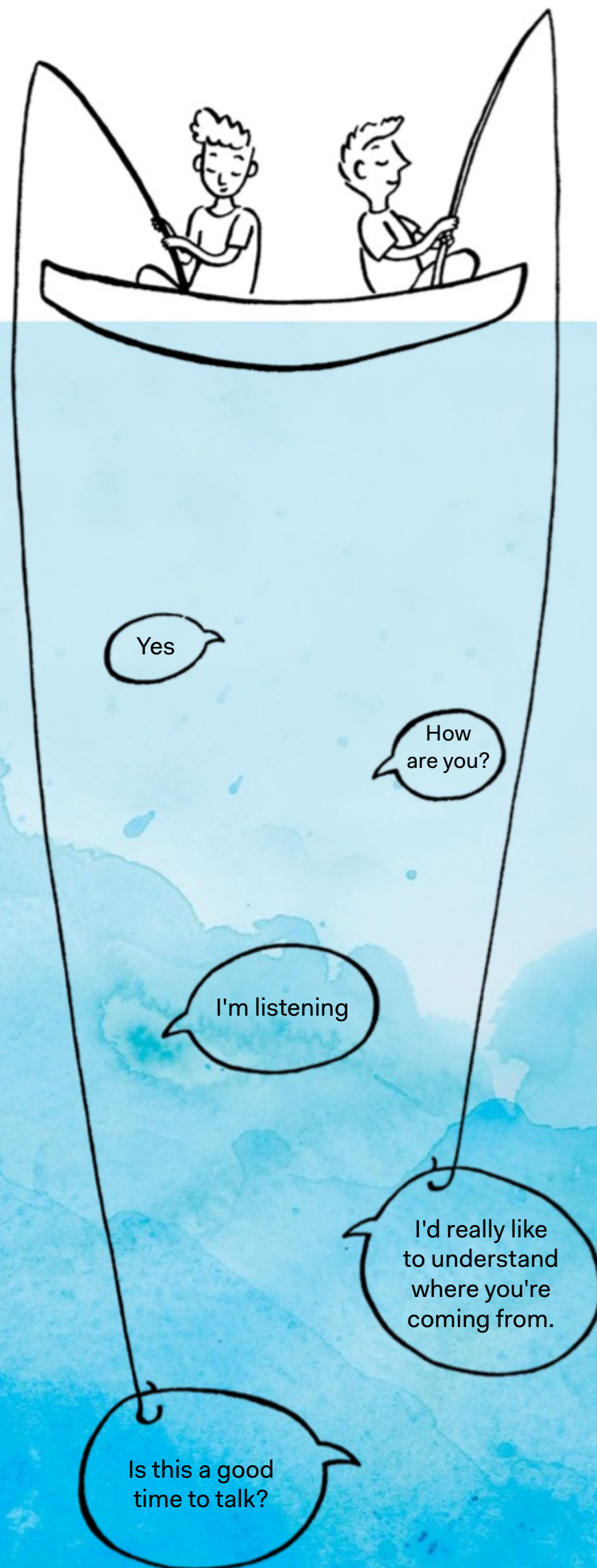
**1** If you have choice over where and when to talk, try to set supportive initial conditions: time, place, who's present. Consider how you can lay a foundation of curiosity and care prior to the conversation. For instance, a kind email or a few simple words can let the other person know that you're looking forward to talking and working together to figure things out. If you've initiated the dialogue, ask, "Is now still a good time?" This can create a sense of agreement and mutual respect from the start.

**2** Pay attention to the pace of the conversation. Things tend to move quickly in heated dialogue; a lot of the work is about slowing down. The more you can find ways to naturally pause and deactivate, the easier it will be to stay clear, hear one another, and respond wisely. Taking time to reflect before you respond naturally downshifts the pace of a conversation.

**3** Try genuinely to understand. This will show up in your body language, your tone of voice, and other nonverbal communication that supports an atmosphere of goodwill and collaboration. When appropriate, state your intention explicitly: "I'd really like to understand where you're coming from..." or "I'm committed to figuring this out in a way that works for both of us." Such statements can shift the entire tone of a conversation.

**4** Focus on what matters and keep your attention flexible. Instead of belaboring the story of "what happened," listen for what matters to both of you. If you're hearing demands, internally translate them into requests and respond in a way that honors the other person's needs.

**5** If the situation is complex, consider breaking it down into multiple conversations on different days. Your initial pass might just focus on empathy, trying to listen and hear the other person. Next time, share your side and endeavor to build mutual understanding. For the final pass, explore strategies for moving forward.





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using mindfulness to help navigate the situation, and actively seeking out moments to pause in order to help integrate information and bring the emotion down a notch.

## Recognize Activation

Under ordinary circumstances, our body and mind naturally ebb and flow through activation and deactivation, arousal and settling, like waves rocking a boat. Breathing itself follows this rhythm. The elasticity of our nervous system, its resilience, is our ability to navigate this cycle with ease, tolerating the stress of sympathetic arousal, allowing the settling of parasympathetic deactivation, and returning to a baseline state of “oriented awareness,” when you feel relaxed but alert.

During interpersonal conflicts, the sympathetic arousal can snowball. Danger signals get amplified, and—to use a very precise, technical term—we lose it. Our ability to access higher cognitive function in the prefrontal cortex declines and we’re along for the ride, like losing our paddle in white water and we get carried along with the churning, wild, and unpredictable rocks and river currents.

If the level of stimulation exceeds our capacity to respond, we freeze. We shut down, withdraw into ourselves, or zone out, effectively ending any attempt to create understanding.

## Ride the Waves

Feeling activated is completely natural. Mindfulness doesn’t aim to suppress activation or achieve some imaginary neutral state. The goal is to become aware and adept at riding life’s waves.

We each already know something about how to ride the waves and handle activation without reacting impulsively. Ever felt the inner agitation of wanting to say something but needing to wait for the right moment to interject? Anytime you relate to that internal pressure wisely—taking a breath, shifting your weight, making

a mental note—you’re handling the activation. Doing this for even a split second can yield more choice about what to say and when.

Your ability to ride a wave of activation depends on your capacity to tolerate discomfort. In contemplative practice, every time you observe an itch, a knee or back pain, without immediately jerking, you are developing the inner balance to respond rather than react. If the wave is too big, step back, feel the energy in your body, and allow it to dissipate.

The paired practices of *pausing* and *grounding* are especially helpful in difficult conversations. Pausing—anything from a micropause to a full breath to a break in the conversation—creates the space to recognize activation. Then, grounding in the body (see page 66) provides an anchor to steady your attention instead of losing your center. Whenever possible, do your best to take things slowly so your system can adjust.

## Settle Downstream (aka support deactivation)

Just as we learn to recognize and attend to the arousal, we can also train ourselves to notice any calming. This can occur at many points, during and after a conversation. If we’re skilled, we’re sensing it all along, continually enhancing these naturally occurring intervals in our nervous system.

Deactivation occurs both literally and figuratively as an outbreath. Any shift in the state of our nervous system is reflected in the breath’s pace, depth, duration, or rhythm. We exhale. Muscle tension releases, our jaw slackens, our shoulders relax, our gaze softens, our breathing slows or deepens.

When we give mindful awareness to a feeling of ease or relaxation, it amplifies like a bell ringing, like the stroke of a bow resonating through the body of a cello. Taking small moments to feel the soothing quality of this deactivation nourishes us and strengthens resilience, in conversation and in life. →

# The Do-Over

Life is messy. In spite of our preparations, training, and best intentions, we all blow it from time to time. In the heat of the moment, an emotion or reaction gets the best of us. A wave of arousal rises, lifts us up, and we crash onto the rocks.

A do-over is like pressing the reset button. We acknowledge where things went awry, restate our intentions, and ask the other person if they’d be gracious enough to let us try again. We can own our part for something as small as a single remark or as broad as an entire conversation. When we take responsibility for losing it, most people are happy to give us a second chance. It’s rarely too late to ask for a do-over. Depending on the situation, this may be as simple as making a request:

- “That didn’t come out quite right. Can I try that again?”
- “I’m concerned some of the things I said aren’t helping. Can we start over?”
- “Things didn’t really go the way I was hoping when we talked. Could we rewind and try having the conversation again?”



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## wise words

In conversations, find the transitional space between exchanges or phrases, pauses or breaks in the flow of dialogue. Notice any settling when you complete a cycle of communication.

In *difficult* conversations, even the smallest amount of agreement, acknowledgment, goodwill, or concession can provide a raft in the flood of words and emotions. If those moments aren't apparent, seek them out. Shift your attention to any sound or the space itself, or use your creativity to insert a pause or take a break.

Shepherding a challenging dialogue to some resolution relies on our ability to find these moments. We can do this internally, with our own attention, drawing out small successes by naming and appreciating them.

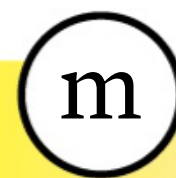
As you practice with these stages—recognizing activation and riding the waves, noticing deactivation and allowing the churning waters to subside—you will learn to use them in other situations and in shorter periods of time. Simply notice what's happening: The seeing itself creates the possibility for shifting the pattern.

Over time, your body will begin to feel the potential for a new way of relating. You may experience a different order of being in tense situations, as new messages flow through your nervous system: "Ah, maybe I don't need to defend, attack, or try to disappear."

In whitewater canoeing, building skill slowly is essential: Start small in class 1 rapids, taking time to learn. When the waters are dangerous or the rapids are beyond your skill level, pull ashore, unload the gear, and portage to safer waters.

The guidelines for difficult conversations are the same: Slowly your capacity to deal with more difficult situations will grow. You can learn to trust your ability to hear someone else without losing yourself and to have a voice without trying to control or overpower another.

And if you find yourself headed for conversational rapids? You'll also have gained the wisdom to know when your best option might be to steer your boat safely to shore, for now. ●



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## Making It Real

**Oren Jay Sofer weighs in on the stickier points of mindful communication.**

***Mindful:** What about when the other person doesn't have these tools or when they just want to fight?*

**Oren Jay Sofer:** We cocreate our relationships; it takes two of us to dance. Regardless of whether or not the other person is familiar with these ideas and practices, you can shift the dialogue by how you relate. In martial arts, if you tense up or resist and your opponent is more skilled than you, they can easily take you down. Fighting back immediately puts you in the realm of struggle and power dominance—and right there you've already lost something important. You lose balance, your own equilibrium and responsiveness. But if your mind and body stay flexible and dynamic, you can redirect their energy and things can take a different course.

When someone comes toward you with aggressive, blaming energy, if you respond with empathy, meeting their intensity in an authentic way, the game stops there. Try to see their behavior as a strategy to meet their needs. What do they want? If you can connect with that, you can start to defuse the situation.

***How do you actually remember to use these tools?***

Take the long view and create a positive feedback loop. What matters most is that we remember, not when we remember. The next part

is being persistent. It takes patience, dedication, and willingness to forge and remember again and again. Over time, the gaps get shorter. The wonderful thing is that most people welcome a do-over. If you realize you totally bungled a conversation, why not let the other person know? Say, "Hey, I said some things I didn't mean earlier. Would you be up for rewinding and trying that again with me?"

***How do you deal with people who won't acknowledge certain facts, who have different data or "alternate facts"?***

Focus on the needs. Getting alignment on shared values is what enables us to have meaningful conversations. The real work is in establishing that mutual framework, criteria for the solutions we devise.

When we care deeply about the issues, such dialogues are by nature challenging. It's therefore important to do as much inner work as we can ahead of time. Get empathy for any pain, fear, despair, or anger you have about the impact of the other person's views. Then try to see their humanity. Stretch your heart with empathy. Try to make sense of their choices, to reach for the deeper needs behind what may seem incomprehensible on the surface. This can create an important bridge in hearing one another and can protect us from devolving into reactivity.

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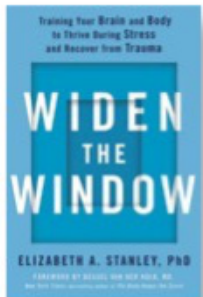
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## WIDEN THE WINDOW

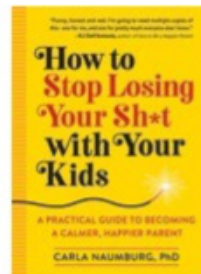
**Training Your Brain and Body to Thrive during Stress and Recover from Trauma**

Elizabeth A. Stanley • Avery

Liz Stanley—a graduate of Yale, Harvard, and MIT; a retired military officer; and an associate professor of security studies at Georgetown University—readily admits to operating in over-drive. Early in *Widen the Window*, she lets us know that a Stanley has served “in the US Army every generation since the Revolutionary War, including on both sides of the American Civil War.” Her experiences in the army, including sexual harassment, led to a diagnosis of PTSD.

Apparently resilient “as our society usually understands it” (i.e., “capable of tolerating and functioning through an immense amount of stress”), she was actually just “sucking it up and driving on,” which results in “tremendous achievement and success...until it doesn’t anymore.” Mindfulness and loving-kindness helped her see the possibility of working in extreme situations without ignoring what’s going on with our central nervous system, inspiring her to formulate training that focused on the main asset in any organization: a fully functioning human being. In developing Mindfulness-Based Mind Fitness Training, she emphasized that military personnel needed it pre-deployment, not just to clean up psychophysical messes after the fact. A strong component of bodily awareness was needed, too, so she learned Somatic Experiencing and incorporated it into the program, which lasted several years and was taught to thousands of people, producing positive research results.

*Widen the Window* is a comprehensive overview of stress and trauma, responses to it, and tools for healing and thriving. It’s not only for those in high-intensity work, but for everyone: We’re all exposed to a culture that asks us to barrel ahead oblivious to what’s going on in our brains and bodies, no matter how damaging.



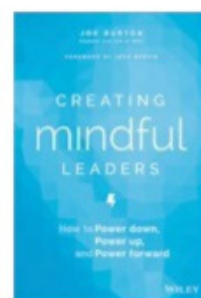
## HOW TO STOP LOSING YOUR SH\*T WITH YOUR KIDS

**A Practical Guide to Becoming a Calmer, Happier Parent**

Carla Naumburg • Workman Publishing

Part of what’s refreshing about Carla Naumburg’s work is that she isn’t out to pretend parenting is a walk in the park. Of raising her own three children, she quips, “Bear in mind, I have a PhD in clinical social work, and I was reduced to Googling that shit.” Throughout the chapters, from “How I Stopped Losing My Shit (Quite So Often)” to “After

the Shitstorm Has Passed,” she emphasizes that the key is *not* maintaining an iron grip on your offspring but rather knowing what presses your parental buttons and focusing on tiny, practical ways you can shift to stay on a more even keel. What’s also refreshing is her voice, which comes through as compassionate, witty, wise, and (no shit!) a little profane.



## CREATING MINDFUL LEADERS

**How to Power Up, Power Down, and Power Forward**

Joe Burton • Wiley

With a list of leadership positions and industries as long as your arm, Joe Burton is clearly someone who has led a busy, and very accomplished, life. Somewhere in the middle of all that, while trying to be a good spouse and parent as well, he “discovered mindfulness as a super-stressed-out executive after dismissing it as ‘definitely not for me.’” Before too long, he decided not only to take up mindfulness but

also to make it the centerpiece of his career, founding Whil, a “digital well-being training platform.” Its Creating Mindful Leaders Workshop forms the basis for this book, which is playful while also backed by solid evidence. It’s chock full of enjoyable illustrations, charts, diagrams, boxes of advice, and practices. A very hands-on introduction to bringing mindfulness into a high-performance culture.



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## PODCAST reviews



### EMOTIONAL BADASS WITH NIKKI EISENHAUER

#### Episode: The Power of a Healing Goodbye

Parting ways with someone you've grown close to can feel overwhelming. "Most of us get a little tense, a little sad," says therapist Nikki Eisenhauer. "We don't quite know how to deal with them." With warm understanding, Eisenhauer explains why goodbyes matter in the

context of therapists with clients: It offers a chance for each party to come to terms with "all that has happened over the course of our therapeutic relationship... It seals up our work and gives us a healthy 'you are ready to go, and you don't need me anymore.'"



### THINK AGAIN

#### Episode: World Makes Mind, with Barbara Tversky

For over five decades, cognitive psychologist and professor Barbara Tversky's work has illuminated ways of knowing—and not knowing. Her late husband Amos helped uncover the reason for "blind spots" in cognition, but Tversky is no less of a giant in visual-spatial reasoning and collaborative cognition. Delving into the brain's chessboard-like way of organizing data, and how

basketball players signal to teammates while fooling the other team, she emphasizes our behavioral potential: "This idea that we're one thing? No way. We're always intention and conflict, cooperation and competition. They're all in us." After listening to this conversation, Tversky's new book, *Mind in Motion: How Action Shapes Thought* (Basic Books, 2019), might be a good next stop.



### MEDITATIVE STORY

#### Episode: The Perfect Photograph I Never Took

Back in 1994, photojournalist John Moore traveled to the Congo, hoping to capture the elusive silverback mountain gorilla. The strongest pictures, he says, "are often a combination of preparedness and luck." Without a lot of both, "the image never finds its way into your camera." Yet

despite the low odds, he can't suppress a romantic goal: the perfect image of a magnificent wild being. What results is truly a message for the Instagram age. In the second half of the podcast, host Rohan Gunatillake narrates a guided meditation to reflect on Moore's narrative.





# TUNE IN TO mindful

Visit [mindful.org/tunein](https://mindful.org/tunein) for featured meditations from Sharon Salzberg, Ed Halliwell, and Elaine Smookler

## THREE MEDITATIONS TO ENCOURAGE GRATITUDE

### 1 A Loving-Kindness Practice to Foster Acceptance from Sharon Salzberg

**Open the heart.** If you want to appreciate the life that you already have, it's helpful to stop yearning for things to be "different" or "better" than they are right now. By practicing loving-kindness, you can connect to a place within yourself that fosters love and compassion and allow that place to flourish. Follow this three-minute practice to open up your heart to all the good in your life.

### 2 A Guided Meditation for Resting in Flow from Ed Halliwell

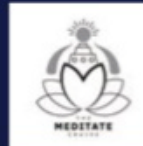
**Appreciate the moment.** When your thoughts become focused on what could be, you lose contact with what actually is. This guided meditation helps you notice your experience as it happens, so you can notice what's going right, instead of worrying about what might go wrong. Rather than falling into harmful thought patterns, you can embrace challenges that come your way. Doing this strengthens your sense of gratitude for the present moment.

### 3 A 5-Minute Gratitude Practice from Elaine Smookler

**Savor the good.** On days when gratitude feels difficult to find, tune into your senses. This meditation invites you to cultivate thankfulness by slowing down and noticing what you can see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. There doesn't have to be anything special going on in order to practice gratitude—maybe it's as simple as feeling grateful for your morning coffee, or for a good book. Explore this simple practice to appreciate the little things. ●

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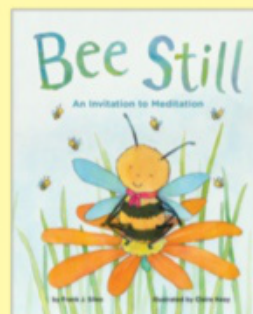


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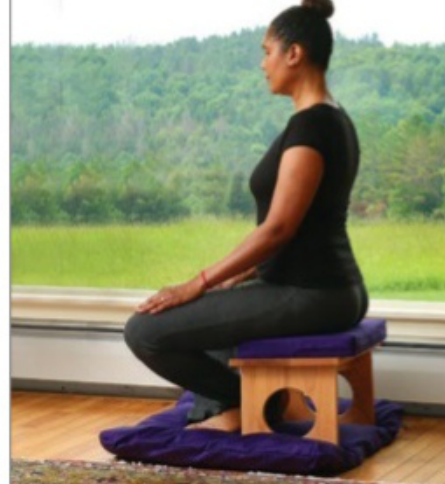
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# LET YOURSELF BE BORED

by BARRY BOYCE, FOUNDING EDITOR

**My mother, like so many mothers,** must have gone crazy from hearing the refrain over and over and over again:

“Mom, I’m *bored*.”

My oldest brother, helping our dad in our vegetable garden, asked after about five minutes, “Dad, do you still have to keep working after you’re bored?” My dad found this particularly amusing, since he was an HR manager who dealt with adults struggling with the same question.

Boredom

was for me a state truly to be loathed, brought on by sitting in classes that dragged on with teachers who droned on. But it was generated equally by lazy summer days we had pined for

but couldn’t seem to fill with enough entertainments. Why couldn’t life be a perpetual Disneyland?

As time went on, boredom seeped into relationships—it kicked in once you got past the early flush of excitement. It also became a signal feature at my early jobs. When I bagged groceries at the A&P (a once-august grocery chain that died a long, slow death), we had a three-foot-high clock on the wall, and I used to watch the minute hand just crawl, while I wanted to crawl out of my own skin.

Boredom was the enemy. Do anything to avoid boredom, no matter how unhealthy.

So imagine my surprise, and disappointment, when boredom turned out to be a central feature in mindfulness meditation. Noticing your breath repeatedly is hardly an exciting project to do for hours or tell your friends about. Worse, if you cooked up some entertainment for yourself—like thinking about what you were going to do as soon as you could get out of the room—you simply got bored with

interesting.” OK, so that’s a paradox that landed with me: Boring is interesting.

What he was pointing to was something I was starting to discover in meditation: Boredom is an active struggle to first compare where I am with somewhere else—perhaps anywhere else—and then decide I don’t want to be where I am. It’s not a state; it’s an activity. It’s something

*Could it be that a simple feeling of well-being is the baseline running underneath the entertainments and the boredom?*

that after a while. The whole thing was just so, well, boring!

Honestly, the boredom I encountered minute after minute and hour after hour was almost enough to make me throw in the towel, but what kept me there was an underlying feeling of well-being that would pop up occasionally as I sat there doing absolutely nothing engaging or productive. Could it be that a simple feeling of well-being is the baseline running underneath the entertainments *and* the boredom?

Because the taste of that little carrot of well-being kept me there, I made a personal study of the boredom. I got a little help when I started *kyudo*, Japanese contemplative archery, where for a very long time in your training, you put little to no focus on the target, just like in meditation: It’s the process, not the product. One of my archery teachers pointed out, “Once this starts getting boring, that’s when it starts getting

I’m doing with my mind. I’m deciding that this is not for me and I need to get out of here.

With meditation, as we sit through the layers of boredom, we can begin to exhaust this eagerness to compare, to jump from where we are to somewhere else, to fill up every moment with something. The boredom transforms at that point from struggle to relief at how possible it is to be simple and self-sufficient mentally. We are where we are and that’s just fine.

In an age of smartphone addiction, where dopamine hits await us at every turn, a practice that cultivates the ability to patiently, simply be where we are is a great tool. I can see that big clock on the A&P wall in my mind’s eye now. Go ahead, crawl. See if I care. ●

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

## PODCAST Point of View

*Dive in deeper with Barry Boyce and managing editor Stephanie Domet.*

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