Michael Zaurov, PMHNP
hello@zaurovpsychiatry.com

Mindfulness tools

"Live the actual moment. Only this actual moment is life." – Thich Nhat Hanh

"You are the sky. Everything else is just the weather." – Pema Chodron

"Mindfulness isn't difficult, we just need to remember to do it." – Sharon Salzberg

Background

What is Mindfulness? Essentially it is learning to contact the present moment (sensations, thoughts, and feelings) in a special way, with openness and curiosity. This leads to a shift in consciousness where your perspective completely changes, allowing for freedom to make clear decisions. Mindfulness leads to psychological flexibility, which allows you to make changes and start moving toward the rich and meaningful life we all yearn for. This approach as a method of meditation or prayer has been around for many thousands of years in ancient cultures, and has been validated in numerous studies to reduce stress and anxiety, resolve trauma, prevent depression, and ultimately increase quality of life. Mindfulness in and of itself will not resolve all of your issues, but having a regular practice will not only give you more capacity to handle life's difficult twists and turns, but it will also shine a light onto self-limiting beliefs which are obstacles preventing your true potential from shining forth.

My goal here is to give you the basic tools needed to begin a mindfulness practice for yourself. Please read through these paragraphs slowly in a quiet place, contemplate what is said, and see if it is true in your direct experience. Then, begin to integrate what you learn into your life. It is very much worth the effort.

If you are feeling distressed and want to learn a technique for grounding when overwhelmed, you can skip ahead to the Anchoring section towards the end.

Imagine a wide open blue sky with white clouds. The sky is spacious, without boundaries, and accepting of whatever is in it. Even if the clouds become dark and dreary, the sky is accepting, open, and ultimately free and unaffected by any storm that may be occurring within it. There is a part of you that is open and spacious, just like the sky. Every single person has access to this or else they would not be alive, since it is simply the nature of consciousness. Thoughts, feelings, and sensations are all like clouds, constantly changing, but there is a deeper part of you that is always aware, present in every moment, and not affected by the content of your experience.

What prevents our access to this part of ourselves, what I would call Awareness, Presence, or simply the part of you that is aware, are resistance patterns stemming from difficult childhood experiences, traumas, and protective belief patterns. It takes a lot of courage to undertake this work of unwinding these once helpful but now painful patterns. It is important to understand

that this work requires patience and is not a quick fix to all of our problems. Often the situations giving rise to our suffering are complex and require time to untangle. Learning to ground yourself in the body and present moment will begin the process of unwinding and serve as an anchor in difficult and stormy situations.

The Body

In our modern culture, we are constantly thinking, planning, judging, reacting, always looking for problems to solve, etc. We live in our heads and have grown to become disconnected from our bodies. If you want to live a happy and joyous life, it is very important to reconnect with your body. Your body is where life happens. It is where we feel joy and a sense of aliveness, and it is also the gateway to access Presence. If we are disconnected from our emotions, then we are numb to life, unsure of ourselves, and constantly feeling like something is missing. Also, when we are disconnected from ourselves, we lack resilience and don't do well in difficult situations. Ideally, you want to be able to react from a stable and grounded perspective, and this requires some practice. A tree is grounded because it has roots that go deep into the Earth, and if a big wind storm comes, the tree is grounded and not going anywhere. Your body has the capacity to handle many feelings and sensations, so building that connection is what leads to a sense of groundedness and capacity to respond to situations. But if we are lost in thought and resistant to experiencing these feelings, then tension builds up in the body causing discomfort and pain. Connecting with your body through mindfulness practice allows this tension to open and release, and the underlying emotion, memory, or story is allowed to finally dissolve. Allowing yourself to be present with an accepting, perhaps even curious, attitude will transform negative feelings and minimize your suffering. It all comes down to your resistance.

Remember this simple equation: pain × resistance = suffering

Let go of resistance and inflexibility by developing an open, willing, and accepting attitude toward whatever is in your experience, and your suffering will be drastically reduced.

Where to start? A good place to begin is deep breathing. This is a great practice for you to learn to breathe properly and regulate your nervous system, connect with your body instead of your thoughts, improve concentration, and also serves as an anchor to connect to Presence.

Belly breathing

This is also sometimes called calm breathing or diaphragmatic breathing. If you ever watch a baby breathe, they naturally use their bellies. But as we grow up and start holding tension in our bodies, we breathe from our chest. Starting the breath in the lower abdomen instead of the chest allows your whole lungs to get more oxygen in. This also releases calming hormones that help to relax the body. When people get anxious, we tend to take short, quick, and shallow breaths. This actually worsens anxiety, so getting in the habit of breathing properly (slow, deep belly breaths) will help you to manage stress and anxiety.

Calm breathing can be done in any situation: walking, laying, standing, sitting. But it is best to practice while you are sitting upright because this will keep you from falling asleep and minimize distractions. If you are feeling very agitated, try lying down.

Take slow deep breaths in through your nose and into your lower belly. Nice and easy, with a relaxed but alert attention. At first, it may be helpful to get into the right rhythm and then let your body take over. Start by breathing in slowly through your nose for about 4 seconds, hold for 1 or 2 seconds, then exhale slowly for about 4 seconds. Wait a few seconds before taking another breath. Go at whatever pace you feel most comfortable with. Eventually, drop the counting and allow your body to just breathe. **Relax into the sensations of the breath, and let go.**

It is very common to get distracted, and you are not doing anything wrong if there are a lot of thoughts. The practice involves recognizing when you are sucked into a thought and coming back to the breath. If you are very distracted, stay with the counting for a while. It is very normal to have a monkey-like mind at first; simply come back to the breath and let the thoughts go. Don't be hard on yourself. Be patient and eventually you will get the hang of it.

One challenge that often comes up is difficulty with letting go of controlling the breath too much. This happens because we are so used to controlling everything that we end up just watching the breath as if we are separate from it, and our focus stays very tight and rigid. Try instead to **rest in the experience of the breath**. What makes up the breath? All the little sensations moment by moment throughout the body. Allow your attention to relax into the breath and the body, and allow it to merge, like a wave merging with the ocean, until there is only the breath. Allow yourself to rest. Nothing else matters but this. Let go of control. Let go of trying to make something happen. Let go of the sense of being a manager. Let it all go and let it be. Just the breath. Just the here and now. Rest.

This is an important foundation, and most people would do well with stopping here for a bit before moving further. Letting go into the body, into the breath, into the here and now, has a strong effect on the health of both body and mind. It may take weeks to notice the benefit though, and at first you may feel a little worse as you ease into being more present with what feelings and thoughts are popping up for you. When you start to feel like you are getting better and better at this but need more tools for working with difficult feelings, then it's time to move on.

Working with resistance

After you have practiced belly breathing for a little while, let's add the quality of allowing, which is what leads to letting go and release. The basic idea is to start to recognize and allow resistance that shows up in your experience. What is resistance? It is usually felt as a subtle, or sometimes not so subtle, tension in the body related to thoughts. Sometimes these thoughts are loud, like a voice saying "no" or "don't feel that." Sometimes resistance is very subtle, and we can only notice the tension in the body at first. You may feel tension in your jaw, your chest, your throat, your abdomen, or anywhere else in the body. You will start to see that resistance and tension are very closely linked. If you are feeling anxiety, pain, sadness, anger, or any other uncomfortable

feeling, notice that there is resistance to the feeling. The resistance is how you have been protecting yourself all these years, but the resistance actually has the opposite effect and increases your suffering. We cannot push away resistance though, as this is resistance upon resistance. But simply starting to acknowledge that there is resistance is an important first step. When we start to acknowledge that there is resistance showing up, we are actually starting to really support ourselves in a way nobody else can.

We cannot change our pain, whether it is physical or emotional, but changing our relationship to the pain by acknowledging resistance will drastically reduce suffering. This may be surprising to you. We are taught from a young age to resist difficult feelings (push push push), and we do so out of fear that the feelings will become more difficult if we allow them. Is that truly the case? Has resisting your feelings actually worked in the long term?

In this way, start to open up and make room for the difficult feelings that show up by noticing them and noticing the resistance to them. If sadness is coming up, see if you notice where in the body you feel that emotion. You don't have to jump into the sadness and lose yourself in it completely. Instead, notice that a 'part' of you is sad, and that part is felt in the body, usually localized somewhere in the chest, throat, or abdomen. Instead of "I am sad", see instead that "a part of me is sad." This way, you are not losing yourself in the feeling, and you can start to allow the feeling by noticing and acknowledging it. If the feeling is quite painful and difficult, try just saying "hello" to the feeling. It may not seem like much, but it's actually a very big step to acknowledge the painful feeling. There is a big difference between "I am terrified" and "something in me is really scared." I can't convey this in words, but try this and notice how differently it feels in your experience.

One way to help with acknowledging is to use words. You can notice the feeling and name it, like 'sadness,' and you will notice a shift in how you feel when you do something as simple as that. Naming a feeling is acknowledging it, and this will ease up a lot of the tension around the feeling. Then, if it's still uncomfortable, that means that there is resistance. You can notice now that it feels like a part of you does not like that feeling. It may feel wrong, too much, or just a sense of "no." accompanied by a strong contraction/tightness somewhere in the body. This is perfectly normal and how it should be, given that we are all raised in a society that resists feelings. What we want to do here is to connect with that resistance, not push it away. You can say inwardly towards the resistance "**it's ok to not like this**" or "**thank you"** and notice what happens. You are validating the part of you that is resisting, basically saying "you are ok." Since this resistance is a part of you, and like every other part of you is only trying to help, you will start to feel more relaxed when you do this.

Practicing allowing your feelings will lead to an immediately noticeable shift in your experience. By shift, I mean that you will feel that part of you relax a bit as if the tension just dissolves, or the feeling may change into something else. You will feel this directly in your body, and your experience will change from feeling stuck inside of an emotion, rigid, and contracted to feeling more free and spacious. Your focus has shifted from a cloud to the sky.

The words are only helpful in that they guide you toward how it feels inwardly to open, turn towards a difficult feeling, noticing the resistance towards the feeling, and allowing it. We all have the capability to do this, but our beliefs stop us, such as the common belief we receive in childhood that certain feelings are bad, wrong, and should be pushed away. Through this practice, we start to see that it's actually not the feelings that cause pain but the resistance, the pushing away of the feelings.

Emotions are like signals; every emotion has something to say, and if we can let ourselves hear the message with some openness and willingness, maybe even some curiosity, then that signal can dissolve. The words **"you can be here"** can help you to feel into a sense of allowing whatever is felt, and when that part of you is opened to, there may be some release of pent up emotion and repressed thoughts. This may come up as words or images (thoughts), but will also be felt as sensations in the body, like chills up the spine, contraction being released in the gut, etc. There are almost always going to be words or pictures (thoughts) related to a feeling. If you are not noticing any thoughts and the feeling is very much 'stuck', then there is resistance, a part of you does not want to hear those thoughts. It seems like you will feel worse if you allow those thoughts but it's actually quite the opposite, as only repressed thoughts have power over us. As the thoughts are allowed to come up, be observed, and dissolve, they have less and less power over you.

The more that you acknowledge your feelings, you will start to feel a sense of kindness towards yourself. Another word for this is self-compassion, and this will blossom and grow the more that you practice mindfulness. In other words, you learn to hold and support yourself in times of difficulty and struggle in a way that no one else can do for you. You do have this capability, but at first you may have doubts. The more that you allow yourself to be vulnerable, allow the difficult feelings to be there, and watch as they transform and change before your eyes, the more you will see that you do have the capacity to handle these feelings. The beliefs and doubts will change, and your confidence will grow.

Allowing change with curiosity

When we are young, we are infinitely curious, and life is one big mystery. As we get older, we tend to get cemented in our beliefs, and our attitude completely changes. An important facet of mindfulness is curiosity. To look with curiosity is to look at something without assuming and judging. In other words, being open minded and dropping the assumptions you may have about it. This may not seem too important, but I will give you an example of how powerful this is. When we resist feelings, we are just trying to survive and feel better, but in reality we are actually freezing up our feelings so that they cannot change. It seems that if you ignore something, it goes away, right? Out of sight and out of mind. So where does that feeling go? It goes into the body and gets 'stuck' as tension. But what if you looked curiously as a feeling came up? Try this next time a difficult feeling comes up. See if you can be a bit curious about it, forget everything you learned, all your previous experiences, etc. and try to see it with fresh eyes. What happens? It may surprise you that looking in this way allows the feeling to change and be released right in front of your eyes. When we don't look at a feeling and resist it, it stays unprocessed and gets stuck. When feelings stay stuck in the body, it is not very comfortable, and

they will try to come up from time to time to be released. This may show up as anxiety, panic, anger, heaviness, restlessness, muscle tension, chronic pain, racing thoughts, or impulsive behavior, to name some examples.

This can be very helpful when working with difficult emotions. If say you have a lot of anger coming up, what you can do is find a way to be curious about why there's so much anger. Where is this coming from? What does this anger mean to me? Treat the emotion like it's a messenger with something to say. If we ignore what it has to say, then it will only grow stronger until we have no choice but to acknowledge it.

When we get out of the way and allow a difficult feeling, we start to feel what it's like from the perspective of the sky rather than the clouds. You can allow and observe feelings come and go, pop in and dissolve, and yet there is something that does not change. There is a sense of Presence, a sense of 'something' that knows thoughts and feelings. It is not an inert nothingness though. There are qualities of curiosity, openness, and kindness there. This presence is not a sense of dissociation; we are not ignoring the clouds (thoughts and feelings) by pointing out the sky. But it is helpful to point out this observing presence since otherwise we may miss it, given that our culture does not really talk about consciousness in this way.

Summary

To sum it up, the approach to working with difficult thoughts and feelings is as follows:

Pause - no matter what is happening, you can always pause and take a moment to look inward. This is vital as we often stay busy to avoid our feelings.

Notice and acknowledge - recognize how you are feeling in your body without judging. Notice any tension in the belly or chest, tightness in the jaw, etc. See if you can be a little curious when you look. Then name the feeling if you are able to: sadness, anger, fear, guilt, or shame are the usual ones we get stuck in. If you cannot verbalize the feeling, (it's OK to not know at first) see if you can stay a little curious and just notice the sensations of where there is contraction/tightness and use a word to describe how that feels, like tightness, heaviness, pressure, vibrating, movement, warmth, etc. Often just naming what you are feeling will ease suffering.

Allow - give that part of you permission to be here by saying inwardly "thank you, stay as long as you need", or you can welcome it directly "Welcome, sadness." This will trigger some resistance within you towards the feeling. This feels like a part of you tightens up and pulls back, and there will be words or pictures (thoughts) popping in saying something like "no" or "don't feel this." Try and stay open to hearing these thoughts just by noticing them, and the tightness will start to open. Resistance is OK and what should happen. We do not need to push through. We can now acknowledge the resistance directly, as it's only a part of you trying to help protect. If you can feel the resistance, acknowledge it and let yourself feel it fully (the tightness, relax into it and around it a bit) and stay open to any words or pictures that arise. "It's ok to not like this" say this inwardly towards this feeling, and notice how the resistance softens as you validate that part of you, making some room for it and letting it be.

If resistance is not coming up, you can connect with it more by asking "is there a part of me that doesn't like this?" You will feel a "Yes!" and that is what you allow, simply by noticing the words and tightness in the body and not reacting. Instead choosing to make room for it and welcome it. "This is ok, it's OK to not like this" — Notice how allowing the resistance will actually dissolve the suffering around the emotion (allowing the resistance to sadness will soften sadness, and then it dissolves naturally). You will also notice everything feels more spacious and open.

Rest - let yourself rest for a few moments by staying with the body and senses, feel the spaciousness, and notice how differently this feels (uncontracted and open vs contracted and tight). Relax into this and stay here for a bit as it's very calming/nourishing for the nervous system.

Savoring and appreciating

To start to feel alive and more connected to life, we can make some effort to be more present throughout the day in various activities by noticing the senses and body. No matter what, whether it is walking, driving, eating, showering, talking, etc., you can connect with the present moment. I recommend starting with small activities, like drinking water, eating, or going for a walk. For example: as you contact the here and now when walking, savor the moment by moment experience of what's happening. Noticing the feel of the ground underneath you, the smell of the morning air and the way it feels on your skin, the vivid colors and sounds all around you, and how your body feels as it is moving. You are letting your attention expand into the body and the senses, and if you get distracted by internal chatter, just recognize it and come back to the present. Thoughts may still be happening, but with your attention you are continually choosing to stay in the senses and the body, or in other words the present moment. It's as if your attention starts to dilate and open, like a camera lens, to take in more of what is happening. As you do this, you will start appreciating more and more and will start opening to the pleasure of being present and in the flow of life.

There is a difference between being present and being tense. Since nobody ever taught us these things, we tend to focus by tightening up and getting frustrated. This is fine, but notice the difference between presence and tension. We do not need to strain to be present, in fact it's quite the opposite. See how much effort is actually needed to be present and do an activity. We tend to overdo it as humans. Presence is actually quite effortless, as it's always the case, always available.

Notice how the more that you relax into the experience of the senses, the more vivid they become and the more alive you feel. Also notice how satisfying and fulfilling it feels to stay with this bare awareness with the here and now. Even if you just get a momentary taste, allow yourself to notice how it feels afterwards and savor it.

Anchoring

Anchoring is a grounding tool that you can learn and use when you are feeling very overwhelmed and not in control.

When you're out at sea on a boat with a big storm coming your way, what else can you do but drop an anchor and ride out the storm? If there is an emotional storm and you are feeling very overwhelmed or helpless, anchoring will help you ride out that storm and feel like you have some control again. It is important to have a technique you can rely on when there is a big storm coming your way and you recognize that you can't do anything about it. Everyone goes through something like this.

The point of anchoring is to drop or let go of whatever your mind is fixated on and then refocus onto what is within your control or needs to be done in the moment. Anchoring works through opening and grounding into our present experience, which then frees up a lot of capacity and allows you to refocus. Remember that we can't get rid of anxiety or difficult feelings by trying to change them, but we can drop the struggle. When you do that, then the momentum of whatever pattern you are stuck in can dissipate and dissolve on its own. All we can do is recognize, allow, and open, and then everything will change.

There are 3 steps to Anchoring, and you can remember the steps as "ACE" (the order of the steps does not matter, find what works for you. If you are particularly overwhelmed, starting with Connecting to your body can be helpful)

1. Acknowledge Your Thoughts & Feelings

Notice whatever thoughts and feelings are present. Acknowledge them by noticing and naming them in some way: “Anger”, “Anxiety”, “Worrying”, “Daydreaming”, “Beating myself up” etc. Make some room for it, if possible, by just dropping the struggle with it and letting it be. It is common to over-complicate this step of acknowledging. All you're doing is simply seeing that there are thoughts happening by noticing them, words being spoken by the mind. It doesn't matter the content of the thoughts, just notice that there is thinking happening without judging them. The same with feelings. What is my mind saying? What is the body feeling? It only takes a moment to notice and acknowledge what is here, and in that moment something very special happens: we actually start to feel some space.

2. Connect with Your Body

To anchor deeper, we want to reconnect with the body: lightly stretch, breathe, move a little, push your feet down slightly against the ground, straighten your spine. Regain control over your arms and legs. Notice what it feels like to have a body. Whatever you were feeling may still be there, but now there is the spaciousness of the body around it. We are not pushing anything away, just connecting with what is always here, the body, which instantly gives you a sense that you have much more capacity to handle whatever is happening.

3. Expand into the world

Notice what colors and shapes are around you, the space of the room you are in, the sounds that you are hearing, any taste or smell that may be present. When you do this, you'll perceive your attention naturally expanding, going from a tight laser-like focus to a wide diffuse focus. Just rest here if you have time by dropping any effort and relaxing (letting everything be as it is), or refocus if you have things to do. You can refocus your attention on whatever is most useful for the task, situation, or activity at hand.

Guided meditation

Sometimes practicing on your own can be too difficult. Maybe the mental habits are too strong or you're too easily lost without the ability to focus. Guided meditations are a great way to learn and stay focused on the practice because there is a voice guiding you and keeping you on track. Thankfully we live in a time where there is a plethora of meditation resources. **Calm** and **Headspace** apps are both excellent. I would recommend trying both and see which you connect with more. My general advice though is not to get too dependent on guided meditations. In the beginning they can be very helpful, like training wheels, but eventually they can turn into a crutch where we get too dependent on what was once useful.

Final thoughts

You may notice how often throughout the day you get caught up in unconscious thinking patterns. As you notice this, pat yourself on the back! Noticing is the first step to changing for the better. Most people do not get this far. And we do not give ourselves enough credit for taking the first steps toward something bigger. Small steps, like noticing, are necessary on our path toward a fully mindful presence. Keep noticing and try to do some sort of mindfulness practice every day, even if it is 10 minutes. As you continue to practice mindfulness and integrate it with your life, it will naturally lead to a sense of joy as well as the strength to deal with any difficult situation. When you are in your head, you don't have much space, so it is easy to get overwhelmed. But when you are grounded in your body and the space of the present moment, you have all the space in the world. You can contain anything that happens and respond tactfully and with grace.

There is a hesitation to being truly with our experience due to doubt and fear. We can't help it really because this has been collectively taught to us by our ancestors who just didn't know better. In the moment, feelings come up but they're automatically labeled as 'negative' and then our minds get lost in thought trying to fix an imagined problem or prepare for a scenario where we won't feel the same feelings we did in the past. This may work sometimes, and there's nothing wrong with this behavior since it serves a function. But most of the time, there is no actual problem except that we're avoiding feelings and getting lost in stories about the feelings, which only reinforces the assumption that these feelings are problems. Doing this work can be challenging because we are going against what our conditioning is telling us to do, our survival instinct. It is also perfectly normal for your interest in all of this to wax and wane. Ideally, you should be working with someone who is helping you integrate all of this and facilitating you so

that you can get a real taste of what this is about. This is challenging to do on your own. It can be very easy to get lost in delusion because our minds are very good at keeping these survival patterns going.

Lastly, the more you choose to be present and allow what is happening, the more trust you'll have to relax into your experience, which is what allows spontaneous action or "flow" that musicians and athletes experience. When we hesitate, go into our thoughts, and struggle, we do this because we have habits of not trusting ourselves in the moment. But the more that you notice this urge and instead relax into the moment, and see how effective it is and how it leads you toward the life that you want, then naturally trust will develop. No matter what's happening, it's always a good time to relax into the present moment.