How To Guide Mindfulness Meditations For Well-Being and Resilience

mindfulness EXERCISES

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About This Guide

This guide is for people who would like to teach mindfulness in formal or informal settings, individually or in groups.

The setting may be a mindfulness course, single coaching sessions or integrating mindfulness into another environment, such as health treatments or consulting. It is written primarily for group teaching environments, but the concepts and guidance here apply equally to one-on-one teaching.

Mindfulness is an ancient practice that is becoming increasingly relevant as daily living becomes faster and more complex. It is a gentle but radical response to this complexity that can deeply affect our well-being and peace of mind.

Generally, the practice of mindfulness affects us positively, even if it is uncomfortable in the moment. Research finds that approximately 1 in 10 people may experience lasting adverse outcomes following meditation. Being aware of the reality of trauma, the signs of trauma, and how to help participants stay within their window of tolerance is crucial as a mindfulness meditation guide.

Trauma-sensitive mindfulness training is beyond the scope of this eBook. If you're not already a student of our Mindfulness Meditation Teacher Certification Program and/or our 15-hour Foundations of Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness Certification Course, either of these programs will help you expand your understanding of trauma and how to lead meditation with more sensitivity towards it.

This guide takes you through the essentials of mindfulness itself, how to create a mindful learning environment, tips on how to guide people through common challenges, and how teachers can do their best to keep biases out of their teaching.

When a mindfulness teacher has a genuine desire to support students in learning mindfulness, it is a growth experience for everyone.

Chapter 1 | What is Mindfulness Exactly?

Let's begin by looking at a simple, but complete, definition of mindfulness: paying attention to the present moment, with curiosity and non-judgment. Essentially, mindfulness is nonjudgmental awareness of your moment-to-moment experience. Most people can understand this definition, at least conceptually. In practice, mindfulness is designed to illuminate some of the most common and stressful ways we can relate to our inner and outer worlds.

The first part of this definition, "paying attention," is the practice of letting attention follow or rest on the objects of your choosing. The result is surprising to many people who discover how often their attention wanders where it will, without any seeming direction from the person themselves.

Let's begin by looking at a simple, but complete, definition of mindfulness: paying attention to the present moment, with curiosity and non-judgment.

"The present moment" refers to "now" and whatever it contains. It comprises internal and external experiences in any moment we choose to pay attention. And, of course, now is not static, but always appearing in a new form.

The effect of following this instruction is to help students notice when they may be thinking about the past or the future, with only a fleeting awareness of what's happening here and now. Through practice, students can experience what "now" actually feels like.

The most important part of the instruction is "with curiosity and non-judgement." If a learner follows the first and second parts of the instruction perfectly–first, paying attention and second, to the present moment–but fails in the third, they won't actually be practicing mindfulness nor will they reap its benefits.

It's an unfortunate truth that many people have an internal dialogue that comments on their feelings, thoughts or actions, with criticism and judgement–or even worse, with disdain or shaming. Curiosity and non-judgement are the antidotes to these self-harming attitudes. Their aim is to help learners establish a completely new way of relating to themselves that fosters openness, relaxation and growth.

Learning mindfulness is not like learning any other skill or activity. This is the promise and the challenge of learning–and of teaching.

So, when this practice is taken to heart– paying attention to the present moment, with curiosity and non-judgment–learners have a powerful tool that can help unwind years of negative mental patterns. They create a peaceful inner environment and begin to discover their own depths and resources.

There is Nothing Quite Like Mindfulness

Learning mindfulness is not like learning any other skill or activity. This is the promise and the challenge of learning–and of teaching.

Mindfulness does require a certain amount of the student's effort, but it doesn't have the same goals or achievements as other forms of learning.

The only goal of mindfulness is to be fully present with what's happening in the moment, including and centered on what's happening to the learner themselves. Another way of saying this is: the only goal of mindfulness is to be fully present with your experience.

It's very common for people learning mindfulness to use their usual template for learning, like being focused on what they need to do, what the steps are and so on. While this guide will describe several concrete steps that are part of practicing mindfulness, a core element of mindfulness is that it's less about doing and more about being.

The only goal of mindfulness is to be fully present what's happening in the moment, including and centered on what's happening to the learner themselves. Another way of saying this is: the only goal of mindfulness is to fully be yourself.

Being and Doing Modes

The distinction between doing and being is one that is often used to describe mindfulness and its uniqueness among other skills. It encapsulates a 180° shift from our usual way of learning or describing our experience.

Here are descriptions of a few differences between being mode and doing mode:

Being	Doing
Non-doing	Effort
Safe	Alert
Focused on Process	Focused on Outcome
Sensing	Thinking
Simple	Complex

These modes and the differences between them are referred to throughout this guide. For now, it's enough to introduce them and how they might affect understanding and learning. Essentially, the difference is helping students to go deeply into what is here now vs. believing there is somewhere else they need to go.

The Importance of a Mindfulness Teacher's Presence

Another key difference between teaching mindfulness and other skills is that the teacher's state of consciousness is integral to the learning experience. Whether the teacher themselves embodies nonjudgmental awareness is a strong determining factor in students openness to the teaching and practices.

This will be discussed in more detail in the section, "Three Elements to Skillfully Guide Practices."

The Power of Trust

Through mindfulness practice, the student's ability to trust in their own experience, and in themselves, grows. It is a healing act to trust how your life is showing up in any given moment.

Mindfulness practices are designed to support students in this gradual movement away from seeking, toward an interest and deepening trust in what they already know and have always known. This trust is key, as students should eventually shift their dependence on a teacher's instruction to their own inner guidance

When students learn to honor the simplicity of the everyday, to give it center stage in their attention, they begin to reconnect with the wholeness that's within them. They practice again and again, not moving toward an imagined time or place when they are different or better, but rather abiding or resting in the increasingly revealed peace of the present moment.

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Mindfulness isn't about becoming good at sitting on a meditation cushion and doing some exercises. It is people learning new ways of sensing, understanding and responding to everything in life, from the most mundane everyday activity to the deep questions of meaning, purpose and connection with others.

Chapter 2 | Guiding Mindfulness Practices

What Students Bring

Personal Factors

It may go without saying that everyone who comes to learn mindfulness will come with their own history, biases, habits and assumptions. Each brings their own world with them wherever they go. That world is to be welcomed and reflected in a learning environment.

Mindfulness practices are designed to guide students into a close, kind connection with personal experiences. Paradoxically, the more students are able to deeply connect with the personal, the more they come out the other side to see the common humanity in those experiences.

Balance is a central part of teaching. A teacher helps students to see, understand and respond to their personal habits and wounds in skillful and transformative ways. Guiding them to see their personal difficulty as human difficulty can be a crossroads in their understanding. They may even come to see that, when they heal themselves, they may share that healing with others who share their suffering.

A mindfulness teacher needs to be perceptive and flexible to find the right blend of support and challenge to help a student through a personal difficulty.

Group Factors

There are challenges and benefits to teaching groups that require a teacher's mindful attention to foster a positive learning environment for everyone.

It takes time to learn to be aware of and respond to the needs of a group, as well as students' individual needs. There is more potential in groups for competitiveness– some people may tend to dominate, while others pull into the background.

It's common for someone in a group to shyly offer an experience, believing it is negative or embarrassing, only to find that others in the group share the same experience. This is another place students can recognize the common humanity in their strengths and also in their so-called weaknesses.

There are also rich benefits to groups, such as the synergy that comes from sharing and interpreting experiences.

It's common for someone in a group to shyly offer an experience, believing it is negative or embarrassing, only to find that others in the group share the same experience. This is another place students can recognize the common humanity in their strengths and also in their so-called weaknesses. This can foster lasting connections between students in the group.

Of course, groups also give learners an opportunity to both get and give support. The teacher can nurture this sensitivity for each other and build a shared environment of non-judgement and caring.

Three Elements to Skillfully Guide practices

The essential skill for learning mindfulness is do mindfulness practices. They are the place and the process that bring the instructions to life. Mindfulness practices give students tools to explore their inner and outer worlds in novel ways.

So, guiding mindfulness practices is the most important skill for teachers to develop. Many new teachers use mindfulness practices that have been written by more experienced mindfulness teachers. The practices, implicitly and explicitly, incorporate key mindfulness approaches and principles, and are written in such a way as to guide students through a range of experiences and challenges.

Guiding a group through a mindfulness practice is not as simple as reading the script. It is a dynamic, rewarding task that takes time and experience to master. There are three parts to taking a group through a guided practice:

- The script
- The student or students
- The teacher's state of consciousness

A mindfulness teacher's attention moves among these three elements during a guided practice, doing their best to use equal attention for each. If they are too focused on one, there may not be enough attention to track the other two. It's quite common, for example, for new teachers to focus on reading the script well which, while important, may leave the needs of the group or the teacher's own meditative consciousness outside of their attention.

As a teacher's experience of the three elements deepens, the process of holding all in attention becomes less effortful.

The Script

When the teacher has chosen a script written by an experienced teacher, all elements of the script are purposefully crafted to guide students through an experience of mindfulness, including any instructions for leaving silence, instructions for the teacher's tone, and so on.

Some teachers memorize these practices, so they stay as true as possible to the original intention of the script. This can be a good idea for new teachers who are developing their intuition and skill in reading scripts. Over time, teachers can and do grow more able to confidently improvise in the moment with a practice, to meet the perceived needs of students.

The Group

The teacher needs to be aware of how the group is functioning, where they may be off track or where they need some encouragement to trust the practice. Teachers can adjust their instruction based on their intuition or on the feedback they are getting from the students.

More learning is happening in remote settings today, where classes meet online through video or audio sessions. Without visual cues from students, teachers need to depend even more on their intuition and instinct to gauge and respond to the group's focus and needs in the moment.

The Teacher's Presence

The third element of the teaching triad is the teacher's own meditative consciousness. When a teacher is resting in a meditative space, grounded and open, this influences their teaching in ways that are hard to describe, but is clearly felt by students. It makes any stumbles in the reading of the script or any other small missteps seem unimportant.

A teacher's nervousness or lack of meditative consciousness, will also be obvious and undermine students trust and openness to the teaching.

When a teacher is resting in a meditative space, grounded and open, this influences their teaching in ways that are hard to describe, but clearly felt by students.

Teachers need to do their best to achieve balance: they cannot go fully into their meditative consciousness or they will lose touch with the more practical awareness needed for the script and the group.

Again, the teacher's balance is a model for students as they try to connect with their meditative consciousness and balance it with awareness of the pragmatic concerns of the moment.

Creating A Mindful Environment

The environment a teacher creates is like the air students breathe. It is not visible, but it surrounds the students and fills the teaching space.

The teacher's presence has already been mentioned as a key factor in a mindful environment. *How* a teacher teaches, the environment they create over and above the exercise itself, is more important than

what they do. The teacher becomes a model for students about the importance of the environment they create when they practice themselves.

We'll look at the what and the how of teaching more in the section, "Two Components of Mindfulness Practice."

Being and Doing Modes

First let's take another look at being and doing modes from the teacher's point of view. Here are the pairings from earlier in this guide:

Being	Doing
Non-doing	Effort
Safe	Alert
Focused on Process	Focused on Outcome
Sensing	Thinking
Simple	Complex

Students who come from Western cultures will likely be more practiced in the "doing" half of these pairings: to use a great deal of effort, to think something through, to be focused on a particular outcome, and so on.

So, one of the teacher's tasks is to acknowledge this orientation, while also encouraging students to explore the "being," such as feeling safe, sensing their way through an experience or staying focused on process.

In fact, one of the usual first steps in teaching is to help students recognize what each mode feels like, particularly the less familiar being mode. Body scan or breath practices that bring awareness into the body are common tools for introducing awareness of "being."

From a mindfulness perspective, doing mode is not "wrong," it is useful and practical. There is only a problem if a person believes this is their only way to see, understand or respond to experiences. The practice of being mode helps students discover inner resources they may not yet be aware of.

Two Components of Mindfulness practice

It's helpful for both teachers and learners to view mindfulness through the lens of two key components: attention and attitude.

The attention component tells students *what to do*, like asking them to notice when their mind wanders. The attitude component tells them *how to do it*, like reminding them to do this in a friendly, nonjudgemental way. A student can become an expert in noticing when their mind becomes distracted, but if *how* they do it is unkind it undermines their progress.

A balance between attention and attitude is something teachers continually aim to achieve: giving students direction on the practical aspects of an exercise, but also giving direction, in words and through their manner, that skillful attitudes are an essential part of the practice.

This balance between what to do and how to do it is not always the same, for each person or group. Part of a teacher's task is to be sensitive to the inevitable fluctuations of attention or mood that are part of a teaching space. When a teacher senses the students are solid in the *what* they can expand with more guidance on the *how*, moving back and forth to expand the student's circle of learning.

The relative emphasis on attention and attitude is also different for new students. It's usually most helpful if new students are given more instruction on the *what* of paying attention and less on the *how*. When they have attained some familiarity with *what to do*, more instruction on integrating an attitude, like curiosity can be introduced to broaden their understanding and experience of the practices.

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Again, many people from Western cultures are biased toward doing. They very much want to know what to do–in this case, focusing attention. They may need repeated encouragement and direction to explore the attitude side of the mindfulness equation–while being reminded that attention and focus are necessary parts of the practice as well.

Students who have a regular practice sometimes find themselves on a plateau where their practice is not progressing. This can be because of an unconscious attitude like self-criticism which prevents the practice from taking root. A change of attitude may be just what's needed to create a more conducive environment for mindfulness to grow.

Guidance on attitude can also be the missing link for people who have become dependent on listening to mindfulness recordings to practice. Mindful attitudes, like curiosity or non-judging, create a welcom-

ing internal environment that draws people to practice mindfulness on their own. They can begin to explore and strengthen their own individual relationship to the practice and its meaning for them.

Attention

The instructions for students around attention are straightforward and practical. Most mindfulness exercises will use phrases, such as:

- *Bring your attention to your body….*
- *What are you aware of as you breathe in….?*

The instructions are intended to help students with this foundational step: to become aware of their attention and direct it. Attention is so interwoven in our experience of what is happening that it can be hard to tease it out. But this drawing of attention to attention is the first step in guiding people to become more familiar with their internal world of perception and knowing.

Mindful or positive attitudes work in a similar way. Just a touch of a mindful attitude, acceptance, will trigger a learner's natural movement toward health or wholeness.

Attitude

Craniosacral therapy, a form of physiotherapy, has as one of its hallmarks very small amounts of pressure to realign parts of the body. The premise is that the body only needs a gentle reminder to move toward health or wholeness, and once given that reminder, the body will naturally follow that path. This distinguishes it from more forceful therapies that aim to "put" the body back into place.

Mindful or positive attitudes work in a similar way. Just a touch of a mindful attitude, acceptance, will trigger a learner's natural movement toward health or wholeness.

Curiosity and Openness

It will bear repeating to students that there is no right way to feel and no right state to achieve when practicing mindfulness.

One way to encourage this mindset is to suggest they be curious about themselves. When a child is curious, for example, they have a hunger to see and understand what's in front of them. There's a desire to connect. This attitude can have a profound grounding effect on students during mindfulness. Teaching curiosity helps learners shift from habits of judgement or resisting, in a way that can make their internal environment immeasurably friendlier and more welcoming.

Teachers guide students to be as curious and caring as they can with whatever is happening in the moment–there is no specific achievement to aim for. In a real way, students practice being a curious friend to themselves. And who doesn't need a friend, if they're feeling a little unsure or frustrated when learning something new like mindfulness?

Kindness

Integrating kindness takes the attitudes of curiosity and openness one step beyond openness or neutrality.

Many people have a stream of criticism, mild or not, running in the background of their minds. When learners start becoming aware of this in mindfulness practice, it can be quite a revelation. In practice, students then observe how judging affects their experience of what is happening–and of themselves.

Does it help them to understand or does it create a barrier? Do they want to go deeper or move away from experience? And, similarly, what does kindness engender?

Allowing/Acceptance

Pushing away or grasping parts of our experience is a common habit for almost everyone. We want more of things that are pleasant and less of things that are unpleasant.

Nothing could be more understandable than this, but from the mindfulness perspective these habits can become so ingrained they take on a life of their own. They can limit what we see and are able to understand about people and situations.

Acceptance can be one of the hardest things for both new and experienced practitioners to understand or even want to understand. It seems to advocate a relinquishing of right and wrong.

Acceptance can be one of the hardest things for both new and experienced practitioners to understand or even want to understand. It seems to advocate a relinquishing of right and wrong. People can feel they are being asked not to have opinions and to be passive.

But acceptance only means seeing things as they actually are right now. It doesn't mean that you must like them, only that you try not to add the second arrow, as it is said in Buddhism.

If you have a broken foot, for example, that's the first arrow. Your broken foot is a reality you need to cope with, to accept. The second arrow could be anger about having a broken foot or thoughts of blame

about how it happened. The anger and blame don't add anything to your experience, except more suffering.

When teaching mindfulness, teachers help students to recognize their habitual second arrows–small movements of resistance or judgement that are often revealed during a practice–and guide them to accept what is as much as they are able. Teachers help learners see the connections between what happens in practice and what happens in their daily life, where acceptance could alleviate stress or conflict.

Beginner's Mind

Zen Buddhism uses an instruction called "beginner's mind–a practice of meeting objects, experiences and situations, even those that are very familiar, as if for the first time.

Beginner's mind is a wonderful attitude for teachers to include early in mindfulness training because it speaks directly to new students' worry about inexperience. From the point of view of beginner's mind, inexperience is an asset. When this idea is introduced early, a teacher can use it to draw out students' assumptions about mindfulness–good or bad–and to encourage students to let these ideas go if they notice them coloring their experience.

The Third Component is Silence

There is actually a third component to teaching mindfulness, alongside attention and attitude–silence.

A teacher gives the clearest instruction they can about what to pay attention to, and describe and models the attitude that will best support the instruction. Then they leave space. Students need time "alone," to go deeper into the instruction without the teacher's guidance. These moments of silence are often where each person's insights and challenges show up. Silence allows the student to hear their own inner dialogue, better sense their emotions or connect to a feeling of wholeness.

Guidance-free silences offer students mini-experiences of what it is like to practice on their own between sessions. They give students the opportunity to debrief with their teacher "live" in the moment, so they know better how to work with challenges when on their own.

Language Matters

Personal vs. Impersonal language

Mindfulness helps people relate to the whole range of their unique personal experiences more skillfully. At the same time, it helps them to see their experiences as impersonal– as human experiences shared by many people.

Because most people are already strongly oriented to believing their experiences are personal, part of a teacher's role will be to suggest the impersonal aspect.

Mindfulness helps people to relate to the whole range of their unique personal experiences more skillfully. At the same time, it helps them to see their experiences as impersonal– as human experiences many people share.

For example, a teacher can use impersonal language during a guided practice, by referring to "the breath," rather than "your breath", or "the body," rather than "your body." Using impersonal language lightly and intermittently in this way introduces the impersonal perspective in an unobtrusive and gentle way.

Teachers' Biases and Expectations

Every teacher comes with their own biases and expectations. However, teachers can do their best to be watchful for them and leave them outside the teaching environment.

For example, a teacher may be biased toward the efficacy of a certain practice more than others or may be unconsciously invested in students understanding being mode. These biases can be especially powerful if a teacher has themselves benefited from a particular practice. In these situations, the teacher can inadvertently limit a learner's experience.

Even with the best intentions, expectations can shape the teacher's approach or instruction in such a way that students sense what they should be doing or where they should be heading.

Even with the best intentions, expectations can shape the teacher's approach or instruction in such a way that students sense what they should be doing or where they should be heading.

Someone who wants to teach, therefore, will do well to contemplate their possible biases and expectations before they start teaching. With some openheartedness and non-judging, it may become clear which hopes or beliefs are present. For responsible teachers, keeping an eye out for bias or expectation in the teaching environment is an ongoing process.

Chapter 3 | Mastering Mindful Teaching

Balance is Key to Masterful Teaching

One of the themes in this guide is that good teaching requires balance or a holistic approach. In fact, any aspect of skillful teaching can be viewed through the lens of finding balance.

Here are some of the ways teachers aim for balance or a holistic view:

- Not too much instruction and not too little.
- Guiding people to use their attention and to remember mindful attitudes as they do it.
- Guiding students not to try too hard, but also not to drift into inattention and daydreaming.
- Including guidance on personal and interpersonal concepts to encourage awareness of both.
- Keeping learning light, while helping students go deeper when it is called for.

Of course, not all of these goals need to be active at once! A teacher's own experience grows through practice, achieving balance will become more natural and intuitive.

Inviting vs. Directing

Students should always be in the driver's seat of their own experience. Teachers help students keep this fact at the center of their practice by using language that invites them to try or adopt certain approaches versus instructing them to do so. Every such "invitation" reinforces a student's autonomy.

This can be done through mindful use of language, such as using phrases like:

» *For just a moment, try doing this...*

» *See what it feels like when...*

Nurturing Process, Rather than Results

It has already been mentioned in this guide that learning mindfulness "isn't quite like anything else." One assumption that people bring to mindfulness, as with other forms of learning, is that there will be a result or outcome that will show they "did it right." This is one of the ways doing mode will make its presence known in the teaching environment.

A good way to address this assumption is to ask students to experiment with being mode by paying attention to their process, rather than seeking a "right" outcome. This is essentially coming back to the basics of mindfulness: paying attention to the present moment, with curiosity and non-judgment.

Helping Students Notice Their Experience

One of the fundamental skills of mindfulness practice is noticing internal experiences, like thoughts, worries, moods or physical sensations. People who have mindfulness experience may think that this kind of introspection is something everyone can do. However, for a range of reasons, this is simply not true.

Many people who come to mindfulness need guidance to turn their attention inward and become aware of what are often subtle experiences. In Western cultures, just as there is sometimes a bias toward doing mode, there can be a bias toward focusing on external experiences or external causes.

This is something that can be talked about at the beginning of a teaching series or session. People who may be unsure about the differences between internal and external focus are put at ease and know they are included in the circle of learning.

Many people who come to mindfulness need guidance to turn their attention inward and become aware of what are often subtle experiences.

This is another place where the language teachers use can be a great help to new learners. Phrases that invite exploration serve this purpose well, such as:

- *Are you having any thoughts that are drawing your attention right now…*
- *See if you can notice any tension in your body, like in your neck or jaw….*

This is one reason why many beginner mindfulness practices use breath and/or sound as their objects of focus. Breath and sound are bridges from the external to the internal, experiences that people can literally follow from an outside source, all the way into their inner perception of them.

Leave Nothing Out

Everyone has experiences that live just outside–or far outside–of conscious awareness. This could be mood or a habit of negative self-talk or something deeper like trauma. Some of these experiences are the hardest for new and experienced students alike to notice and to bring into a mindful practice space.

Often these experiences are so established, they feel like they *are* the person. It's just what is, just who they are.

So, these parts of experience can be left out of a person's practice–they are not able to be mindful of them. And this, in turn, undermines learners' efforts and can lead to frustration with themselves or with mindfulness itself.

This is one of the most challenging and subtle aspects of teaching–to gently guide a person to expand what they are aware of, to help them do their best to leave nothing out.

At each opportunity, teachers can give direction or ask questions to help students stretch the edges of their field of awareness:

» *Is there anything else you're aware of right now?*

» *What else is calling for your attention?*

» *Is there something you have a feeling about that you're overlooking?*

If a teacher senses a student's readiness to look at subconscious experiences directly, they can be more direct as well:

» *There are some experiences, some things inside us, that are so familiar it's very hard to see them. Like seeing our own eyes. But they can affect everything we do. You can ask yourself gently, 'What else is here?' Do your best to listen and watch. If you're not aware of anything right now, that's totally OK.*

Use of Metaphors

Metaphors are a powerful tool teachers can use to help students grasp and practice mindfulness. Metaphors create a link between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Some common metaphors are:

- Mindfulness is like standing on the shore of the river and watching the raging rapids go by, rather than being swept downstream with them.
- Mindfulness is like resting your mind in the depths of the ocean, even while waves, or tumultuous thoughts, may be crashing at the surface.
- Mindfulness is like being a good parent: paying attention, mirroring and caring about what someone is experiencing.

Allowing Difficulty

An invaluable skill students learn through mindfulness comes through first-hand experiences of how mindfulness can help learners cope with familiar difficulties better. Teachers who resist the impulse to step in and solve students' "problems," give their students room to learn this skill.

By not intervening, and instead allowing a student to work through the challenge themselves through practice, teachers help the student develop trust in the practice.

Through experience, learners discover how mindfulness can help them handle common moods, unhealthy habits or long-standing painful patterns more skillfully.

Ideally, mindfulness practice will give students many experiences like this, over time. Through experience, learners discover how mindfulness can help them handle common moods, unhealthy habits or long-standing painful patterns more skillfully.

The same requirement of trust in practice exists for the teacher. The more trust a teacher has in a practice through their own experience, the more they will be able to welcome and allow for a wide range of students' experiences. The more a teacher practices on their own, the more than can be a model for equanimity in the face of difficulty.

What Is and What Could Be

There is a teaching paradox in the tension between what is and what could be.

Teachers help students accept their experiences, while also suggesting they stay open to their experience changing in some way.

Students sometimes see this as a contradiction. "It sounds like you're telling me to accept things as they are, but you're asking me to change, too, right?"

It is understandably confusing because people often turn to mindfulness to change something that is causing them stress or suffering: they want to get from *here* to *there*.

This paradox is most confusing when students are in doing mode: "What do you want me to do?" But, in being mode, learners can tolerate this paradox a little better. In being mode, a student can experience a place where acceptance doesn't mean resignation and change doesn't mean judgment of what is.

Until students are practiced enough to shift to being mode, the best thing a teacher can do is to foster attitudes, like openness, acceptance and kindness. This helps create the space for new perspectives and makes paradox more tolerable.

Bringing a Problem to Mindfulness Practice

When students have some consistent experience with the basics of mindfulness, teachers can invite them to bring a current challenge to a practice session.

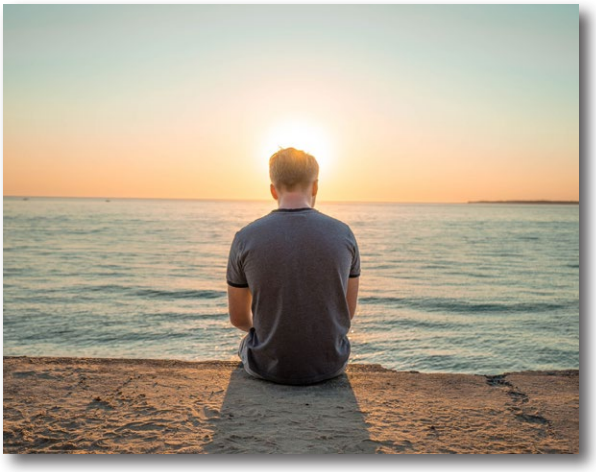
For example, before guiding students through a practice, teachers can ask students to think of something that's currently challenging them in their lives, something with a mild to moderate degree of upset. The teacher begins by inviting the students to let the usual thoughts and emotions they have about the situation happen.

When students have some consistent experience with the basics of mindfulness, teachers can invite them to bring a current challenge to a practice session.

Then, teachers guide students through a mindfulness practice––paying attention to the present moment, with curiosity and non-judgment–holding this familiar situation gently in their attention. Students may notice that, as they pay attention, their usual thoughts and emotions change.

This kind of practical application of practice, with an experienced guide by their side, can be a powerful way for students to understand and practice mindfulness "in daily life."

Chapter 4 | Addressing Misunderstandings



There are many misunderstandings about mindfulness and its purpose; some of the most common have been mentioned explicitly or implicitly in this guide. Misunderstandings range from fantasized benefits of mindfulness, like achieving blissful states, to misconceptions about the role of thinking in mindfulness.

There are different ways a teacher can bring those misunderstandings into the teaching space.

One way is to include a brief questionnaire about mindfulness when people sign up for a course or session. Another is to discuss some of these misunderstandings in the first session with students. This can be a good way to clear the air of ideas that could hinder learning, and to let students know their ideas, worries or hopes for the classes are welcomed for discussion.

I Shouldn't Have Thoughts

Many teachers would say the number one misconception about mindfulness is that it eliminates thoughts. Many people insist, rightfully, that they can't stop their thoughts or don't see why they should, so they believe they could never succeed at mindfulness.

This misunderstanding is an important one to get out of way at the beginning, but beware that it may reappear many times in slightly different forms.

One way to phrase this is:

» *Mindfulness is the practice of becoming more aware of and excepting of all parts of experience, including thinking. It's not about suppressing thoughts or anything else. Controlling thoughts or being without thoughts, are not goals of mindfulness.*

If I'm Being Mindful, I Should Feel [fill in the blank]

Not all human experiences are pleasant. For this reason, the instruction to be in the present moment is not always an appealing prospect for us.

If people come to a mindfulness class believing they should feel peaceful or blissful, they may miss the truth of their experience, whatever it may be. Thinking there is a "right" experience and then not finding it can be an extremely isolating feeling.

A mindfulness principle that is incumbent on teachers to communicate sooner rather than later is this:

» *Mindfulness will help you find what's true, not necessarily what is comfortable. But it will also show you how be compassionate with yourself no matter what you find.*

This orientation helps those who do get in touch with a difficult state or experience in practice. Students can rest a little easier in the knowledge that the full range of experience is welcome and can ask for a teacher's support in responding mindfully to difficult thoughts or emotions.

Thinking Is My Only Way Of Knowing

The belief that thinking is one's only way of knowing is a more subtle form of misunderstanding and one that many people have, including people with a lot of mindfulness experience.

Many people are deeply attached to their thinking, so much so that they rely on it almost solely to navigate through the daily world of situations, conflicts and decisions.

This is one of the reasons mindfulness is such a potentially transformative practice. Mindfulness puts students in touch with other ways of perceiving and knowing that complement our usual cognitive methods.

A mindfulness teacher has a wonderful opportunity to foster an exploration of and openness to other ways of knowing. Traditional breath practices, body scan practices and others take students into direct contact with their bodies and its ways of knowing which students may never have experienced before.

When introducing these practices to new students, a teacher will need to "read" their students to know what kind of guidance will be best–practical direction on physical sensations or guidance that calls on their imagination?

» *What do you feel in your foot right now? Go deep into the physical sensations, and see what you notice. Or: Sense your foot. Imagine it's talking to you. What do you think it's saying?*

As both teachers and students become more experienced, more poetic or metaphorical language may work well to guide the student into other dimensions of their experience.

I'm Distracted All the Time (I Can't Do This)

Students will feel a great wave of affection when a teacher tells them they're not doing anything wrong if they become distracted. People often feel their unsteady attention is a reason for embarrassment or even guilt.

Letting students know that distraction is one-hundred percent part of the practice, helps students relax and approach the practices with more confidence and curiosity.

During instruction, teachers will do well to remind students of this repeatedly.

» *No matter how many times you wander away, and you will, that's all part of the practice. Just come back to the instruction and start again.*

Mindfulness is Pretty Serious, isn't it?

Many people believe mindfulness is an essentially serious activity. This may be partly due to the fact that people also believe mindfulness is based on a lot of effort and concentration. No fun allowed.

Teachers and students alike benefit from a lighter touch when practicing mindfulness. A regular mindfulness practice is all about opening. Mindfulness opens students to a natural awareness that's already there. Exercising too heavy a hand through effort of concentration actually creates tension, closure and further obscurations, rather than openness.

Again, teachers need to exercise balance. Teachers can guide students to practice with concentration, but also with lightness and curiosity. Often, more insight emerges organically than through force.

Chapter 5 | Create a Consistent Structure

Part of effective mindfulness teaching is using every opportunity to integrate practice into everyday living. The goal of mindfulness is not to be mindful on the meditation seat for 20 minutes a day, but to bring practiced awareness back into relationships, creativity, work and one's way of being in the world.
A dependable structure supports learning and gives each step or instruction a place of importance.

Transitioning Into a Session

A consistently structured introduction to each session creates an intentional segue from the student's day, into a mindful space. Teachers can suggest purposefully moving from doing mode to being mode, creating a type of ritual.

When a teacher gives consistent instructions, this is another way to create structure. For example, always giving the same instructions to help students settle at the start of a class: instructions for posture, letting go of their day, breathing or whatever guidance or grounding practice best suits the teacher's approach.

Transitioning In and Out of a Practice

Guide students to make a gentle transition out of practice, rather than an abrupt one. Practically speaking, let them know when the end of the practice is coming up and allow them to "come out" of the practice slowly and mindfully.

Transitioning Out of a Session

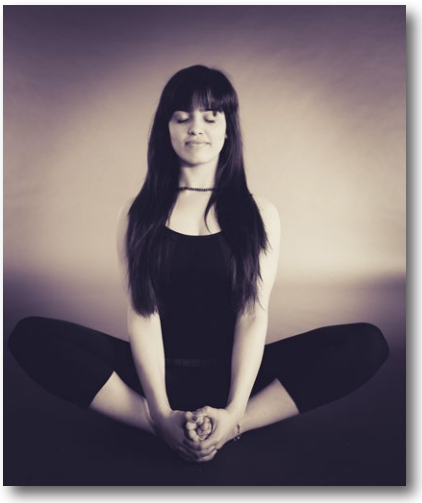
Ending each session in a consistent way is just as important. Students have just spent time learning something that can be variously engaging, challenging or frustrating. It's important to acknowledge their effort and help them to move out of practice in a mindful way.

Teachers should always acknowledge a student's efforts in the session. This can be as simple as recognizing their effort or saying they have done well. Teachers may refer to a student's willingness to meet a specific challenge.

Teachers can also encourage students to reflect on the session by asking if there is anything in particular they will take away from what they learned or experienced. Because mindfulness doesn't end with the exercises, identifying one memorable thing can help students to integrate what they learned in the session.

This can be taken a step further by asking if they would like to take something they learned or experienced with them into their day–to respond to an expected challenge in a different way.

Conclusion



Whether mindfulness is being taught in a formal or informal setting, with individuals or with groups, the essentials for teachers are the same:

- To have their own committed, integrated mindfulness practice, so they will have an experiential base from which to create a mindful learning environment.
- To have their learners' well-being and growth as their goal, rather than any conscious or unconscious bias about the "best results."
- To understand their own instruction, demeanor and skill are at the heart of a student's learning experience.
- To know that while masterful teachers have many skills, teachers do not need to be perfect. They only need to have clear intentions and to be genuine with students.

A teacher's own practice will also help them find the balance that has been discussed throughout this guide.

- Finding a balance between too much instruction and too little.
- Helping students learn the *doing* of attention and the *being* of key mindfulness attitudes.
- Giving guidance on how to relax attention, without drifting into inattention.
- Honoring a student's personal experience, while reflecting the impersonal aspect of those experiences as well; and,
- Always trying to keep learning light and allowing students to go deeper when the practice itself draws them to do so.

Expanding the circle of mindfulness in all spheres of life is an honorable and compassionate vocation. This guide shares some ideas and tools an aspiring teacher can use to begin their journey of sharing mindfulness practice. ■

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Sean Fargo, Founder

mindfulness EXERCISES