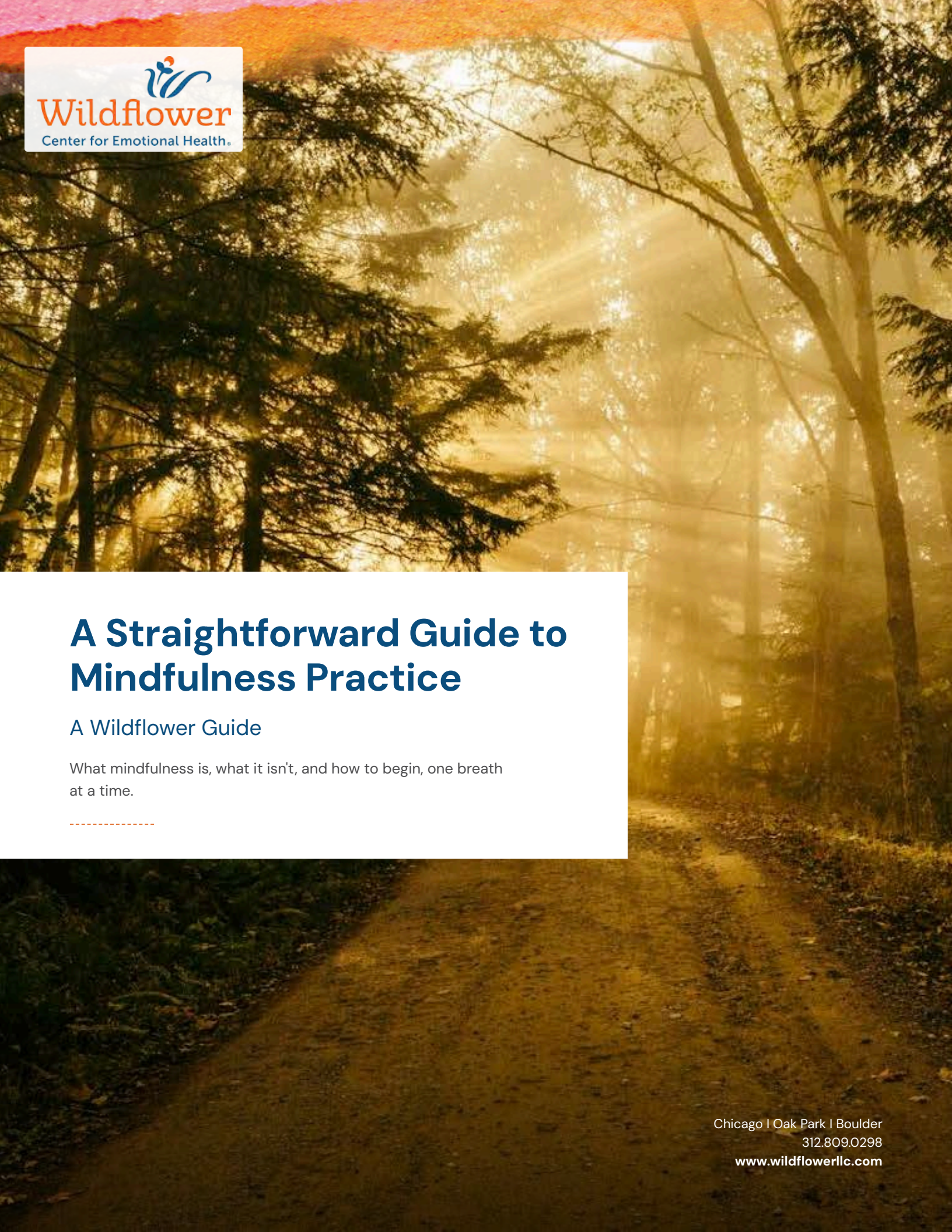

Wildflower
Center for Emotional Health

A Straightforward Guide to Mindfulness Practice

A Wildflower Guide

What mindfulness is, what it isn't, and how to begin, one breath at a time.

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A Straightforward Guide to Mindfulness Practice

by Wildflower Center for Emotional Health

Mindfulness gets talked about everywhere, and it is still widely misunderstood.

You don't need to empty your mind. You don't need an hour, a cushion, or a quiet house. You need a moment, a bit of curiosity, and a willingness to come back when you drift. We'll show you how.

Introduction

Simply put, mindfulness is the practice of bringing intentional attention to the present moment, and doing so with curiosity and without judgment. We can bring mindful awareness to almost anything: our breath, a conversation with a friend, the dishes, leaves moving in the wind.

We also like to think of mindfulness as an invitation to engage with ourselves and our surroundings a little differently than usual. It means slowing down and stepping out of automatic thoughts and habits long enough to notice what is actually here. For many people this is harder than it sounds, and sometimes a little scary.

Our minds will judge, plan, and wander. That's what minds do. The task is not to push anything out. We notice whatever shows up, allow it to be there, and gently choose to place our attention back on what we've decided to focus on. Then we do it again. And again.

This guide is meant to be practical. Read it in order or skip to the exercises. Try what fits, leave what doesn't, and feel free to make the practices your own.

Mindfulness and Mental Health

Anxiety and depression both distort our experience of the present moment. Anxiety drags us into an imagined future. Depression and trauma can pull us back into the past. Either way, we lose touch with what is actually happening here and now.

Without mindfulness, we also tend to treat our thoughts as facts. "No one loves me." "I'll never get this right." Repeated often enough, painful thoughts like these start to feel as fixed as eye color or height, and they shape our mood and our choices. Mindfulness helps us see a thought as a thought, an event in the mind, rather than the truth about who we are.

The research is encouraging. A major review of 47 trials found that mindfulness programs led to modest but real improvements in anxiety, depression, and pain.[1] For people with recurrent depression, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy lowered the risk of relapse by about 31% compared with those who did not receive it.[2] And in a 2023 trial, an eight-week mindfulness course worked about as well as a common antidepressant for adults with anxiety disorders.[3]

Try it right now

Before you turn the page, take one breath on purpose. Feel the air come in, notice the pause at the top, and follow the exhale all the way out. Notice where your body meets the chair. That's it. You just practiced mindfulness.

Why It's Such an Important Practice

Many of us feel overwhelmed by constant demands, nonstop connectivity, and the pressure to multitask. We can forget that we are human *beings* and not human *doings*. We sense that something is off, that the feeling of being behind or not "enough" is getting in the way of living. So we try to work harder at being happy, and that self-improvement project often becomes its own source of unhappiness.

Mindfulness offers something different. It doesn't make painful thoughts and feelings disappear. What it builds is a little space between what happens inside us and what we do next. In that space, we get to choose our response, which is the one thing we fully get to control.

> "The ability to greet experiences with presence and acceptance creates a sense of choice that enables us to make meaningful changes in our lives."
>
> Aga Grabowski, LCSW, PMH-C, CST

There is no destination, just the path

People who are new to mindfulness often say: "I didn't do a good job." "I couldn't quiet down." "It was uncomfortable." It's understandable. Our culture is focused on outcomes, so it's natural to treat mindfulness as a technique to master.

But we don't practice to get somewhere. We practice to meet each moment with openness, whatever it brings. A restless sit where you came back to your breath fifty times isn't a failed practice. It may be the most useful kind.

Over time, people often notice

- A little more room between a trigger and a reaction
- Less time lost to rumination and worry spirals
- Better ability to tolerate hard emotions without being swept away
- Earlier awareness of tension, fatigue, and stress in the body
- Kinder, more curious self-talk, and more presence with the people they love

Mindfulness Myths & Facts

A lot of what people believe about mindfulness gets in the way of actually practicing it. Here are some of the most common misconceptions.

Myth #1: Mindfulness means clearing your mind.
The truth: Minds think. That's their job. Mindfulness is noticing that your mind has wandered and kindly bringing it back. Every return is a repetition, like lifting a weight.

Myth #2: The goal is to relax.
The truth: Calm is a welcome side effect, but it isn't the point. Expecting stress to melt away leads to disappointment, and many people give up too soon. The point is awareness, and the freedom to choose that comes with it.

Myth #3: You need a lot of time, or a special place.
The truth: One intentional breath counts. A few minutes at the edges of your day can do more than an occasional long session.

Myth #4: Acceptance means giving up.
The truth: Mindful acceptance is active. It means acknowledging what is here, right now, so we can respond wisely. It has nothing to do with resignation or approving of what's happening.

Myth #5: Mindfulness is a religious practice.
The truth: Mindfulness has deep roots in Buddhist contemplative traditions, and the secular forms used in therapy teach it as a skill of attention. It can sit alongside any faith, or none.

Myth #6: If it feels uncomfortable, I'm doing it wrong.
The truth: Discomfort is often just what shows up when we stop staying busy. If it feels like too much, especially with a trauma history, open your eyes, move, shorten the practice, or explore it with a therapist.

How to Start Practicing

The hardest part of mindfulness is often just beginning, and then beginning again after you've stopped. A few principles make it much easier.

1. Practice on the edges of the day

Rather than finding new time, tuck practice into the moments that already bookend your day. Before you reach for your phone in the morning. The first few sips of coffee. Sitting in the car for one minute before you walk in the door. The last few breaths before sleep. Transitions are natural doorways, and habits stick better when they're attached to something you already do.

2. Start small. Smaller than you think.

One to three minutes is a real practice. So is a single breath taken on purpose. Starting small keeps the bar low enough that you'll actually show up, and showing up regularly matters far more than how long you sit. You can always add time later, once the habit has roots.

3. Set a timer

A timer takes the clock-watching out of practice. Without one, part of the mind keeps checking: "How long has it been? Is it time yet?" Choose a gentle sound, set it for a few minutes, and let the timer hold the time for you. When it goes off, take one more breath before you move on.

4. Expect your mind to wander

It will, many times. Noticing that you've drifted *is* the moment of mindfulness. Each time, acknowledge where you went ("ah, planning") and come back without scolding yourself.

A one-minute starter: S.T.O.P.

- **S** **Stop** what you're doing, just for a moment.
- **T** **Take a breath.** One slow breath, in and out.
- **O** **Observe** what's here: thoughts, feelings, sensations, sounds.
- **P** **Proceed** with whatever you were doing, a little more awake.

Keep it in your back pocket for the edges of the day, and for everything in between.

Pragmatic Tips

- **Practice informally, too.** Wash a dish, brush your teeth, or walk to the train with full attention. Notice temperature, texture, sound. Everyday life is the practice ground.
- **Label what pulls you away.** A soft mental note like "worrying," "remembering," or "itching" helps you step back from the content without arguing with it.
- **Practice when you're okay, not only when you're not.** Skills built in calmer moments are much easier to reach for in hard ones.
- **Use guided recordings.** A voice to follow can help a lot at the start. Free options include Insight Timer, the Healthy Minds Program, and UCLA Mindful.
- **Eyes open is fine.** Let your gaze rest softly on the floor a few feet ahead. Many people, especially those with trauma histories, feel safer this way.
- **Move if sitting is too much.** Walking, stretching, and mindful movement all count. When you feel stuck or overwhelmed, movement reminds the brain that you aren't trapped.
- **Don't judge a practice by how it felt.** Restless, sleepy, bored, emotional: all of it is data, not failure.
- **Make it yours.** Rename the steps, change the order, do just a portion of an exercise. Any of the practices in this guide can be a template.
- **Missed a day? Or a month?** Just begin again. Beginning again is the practice.
- **Bring self-compassion along.** Talk to yourself the way you'd encourage a friend who is learning something new.

Mindfulness Exercises to Try

Approach each of these with curiosity, an intention of non-judgment, a deep breath in, and a deep breath out. Most take between one and ten minutes.

OBSERVE YOUR THOUGHTS · 5–10 MINUTES

Leaves on a Stream

A classic ACT practice for watching thoughts come and go without getting caught up in them.

1. Sit comfortably and let your eyes close, or rest your gaze on one spot. Take a few slow breaths.
2. Imagine you're sitting beside a gently flowing stream. Leaves float by on the surface of the water. Picture it however you like.
3. For the next few minutes, each time a thought shows up, place it on a leaf and let it float away. Words, images, worries, plans: each gets its own leaf.
4. Do this with every thought, pleasant, painful, or neutral. Even "this is silly" goes on a leaf. If the stream slows or speeds up, let it set its own pace.
5. You'll get hooked by a thought and drift away from the stream. That's normal. When you notice, gently come back and place the next thought on a leaf.
6. When you're ready, let the image fade, notice the surface beneath you, and open your eyes.

What you're practicing: seeing thoughts as passing events, not commands or facts.

CREATE SPACE · 2–4 MINUTES

Square Breathing

An oldie but a goodie. Inhale for a count of 4. Hold at the top for 4. Exhale for 4. Hold with your belly empty for 4. Repeat a few rounds, and if it feels comfortable, lengthen the count to 5 or 6. When you're done, let your body return to its natural rhythm. Let the body breathe by itself.

If holds feel uncomfortable, skip them and just lengthen the exhale.

GROUND · 2–3 MINUTES

5-4-3-2-1: Coming Back Through the Senses

Grounding means coming back to earth, back to yourself, back to the present. Start with your feet. Put both feet on the floor, wiggle your toes, and notice your socks, shoes, or the ground under you. Press down a little more firmly and imagine the ground holding and supporting you. Then, slowly, notice:

5 things you can see, including something you don't usually pay attention to · 4 things you can feel (texture, temperature, shape) · 3 things you can hear · 2 things you can smell · 1 thing you can taste, even just a sip of water.

Finish with one or two deep breaths. It's a great one to use on the go.

CREATE SPACE · 3–5 MINUTES

Three-Dimensional Breathing

Even when external space feels limited, we can create internal space through the breath. Imagine your torso as a box that can expand up and down, side to side, and front to back.

1. **Up and down.** As you inhale, imagine the top and bottom of the box moving away from each other. As you exhale, they come closer. A few breaths here.
2. **Side to side.** Inhale and imagine the sides of the box widening; exhale and let them return.
3. **Front and back.** Inhale and feel the front and back expand away from each other; exhale and soften.
4. **All three.** Inhale and lengthen, widen, and expand all at once. Exhale and let every side come closer together.

Then let your breath return to its natural home in your torso.

SETTLE THE BODY · 1–2 MINUTES

Hand Acupressure

While breathing slowly and steadily, gently massage the fleshy muscle between your thumb and index finger. You may feel a slightly tender spot. Stay with the pressure and the breath until you notice yourself starting to settle. It's discreet enough for a meeting or a waiting room.

SHIFT · 1–3 MINUTES

Move Out of Stuckness

Stuckness can look like looping thoughts, muscle tension, or feeling trapped, depleted, or disconnected. Gentle movement tells the brain that we aren't immobile. Pick a verb (shake, wiggle, roll, sway, stretch, open, close) and a body part (fingers, toes, wrists, shoulders, neck) and put them together. Then try **WHOMMP**, a quick reset for mood and focus:

- W **Water:** take a sip of water.
- H **Head/Tail:** move your spine from the top of your head to your tailbone. Arch, round, reach, or twist.
- O **Oxygen:** take a deep breath in, and out.
- M **Midline:** reach an arm or leg across the center line of your body, on both sides.
- M **March:** march in place a few times, standing or seated. You can "march" with your arms too.
- P **Pretzel:** give yourself a bear hug, then switch which arm is on top.

ALLOW · 1–3 MINUTES

Free Write or Free Scribble

What we resist persists. A boundaried time with hard feelings can make them more workable. Set a timer for 1 to 3 minutes. Grab a pen (or a color that matches your mood) and either free write without lifting the pen, or scribble across the page as hard or as lightly as feels right. If nothing comes, write exactly that. When time's up, take a few breaths and notice what you notice. Keep it, toss it, or tear it up. And remember: it's hard to sit with hard things, and you can do hard things.

RECONNECT WITH THE BODY · 5–15 MINUTES

Body Scan

Lying down or seated, slowly move your attention from the toes up to the top of the head. Pause on each area and notice whatever is there: warmth, pressure, tingling, tension, or nothing at all. Nothing needs to change. Guided recordings help a lot here.

Observer Mind

Learning to witness your experience

There is the part of you that thinks, feels, and remembers, and there is the part of you that *notices* thinking, feeling, and remembering. Mindfulness strengthens that noticing part, sometimes called the observing self.

Self as content

Identifying with the stories, labels, and roles our minds hand us: "I'm a failure." "I'm an anxious person." "I'm the one who holds it all together." When we fuse with these, they feel like the whole truth about us.

Self as context

The stable perspective from which all of that is observed. Thoughts, feelings, and roles come and go; the one who notices them stays. You are the space in which experience happens, not any single piece of it.

One image we love: thoughts and feelings are the weather of the mind, clouds passing through. **You are the sky.** Storms move through and the sky is never damaged by them. Grasping this frees us, not from the thoughts themselves, but from the meanings we may have been giving them for years.

Try it

- Notice what you're thinking right now. Then notice *who* is noticing.
- Add a frame: "I'm having the thought that I'm not good enough." Then: "I notice I'm having the thought that…" Feel the small step back.
- Recall a moment from childhood. The you who noticed things then is the same you noticing now. Thoughts, bodies, and roles have changed; the observer has been there all along.

Mindfulness in Therapy at Wildflower

In many of the most effective therapy approaches, mindfulness is central to what happens between therapist and client. In therapy we gently examine how our minds interpret everything and how the stories we tell ourselves shape our lives. We learn to tolerate difficult emotions and memories, and as we do, flexibility and resilience grow. None of this happens without mindfulness. In many ways, psychotherapy *is* mindfulness. Here are some of the approaches our clinicians use.

DBT

DIALECTICAL BEHAVIOR THERAPY

Developed by Dr. Marsha Linehan, DBT treats mindfulness as the core skill that all the others rest on. Clients learn the "what" skills (observe, describe, participate) and the "how" skills (non-judgmentally, one thing at a time, effectively), along with **Wise Mind**, the place where emotion and reason meet. It's especially helpful for intense emotions and impulsive urges.

ACT

ACCEPTANCE AND COMMITMENT THERAPY

ACT builds psychological flexibility: the ability to be present, open up to difficult experience, and do what matters. Its mindfulness processes include present-moment awareness, acceptance, defusion (stepping back from thoughts), and self-as-context. These are paired with clarifying your values and taking committed action toward them. Leaves on a Stream and the Observer Mind both come from ACT.

MBCT

MINDFULNESS-BASED COGNITIVE THERAPY

MBCT combines mindfulness training with elements of cognitive therapy. It was designed for people with recurrent depression, to help them recognize early warning signs and step out of the rumination that can pull mood down. Usually taught as an eight-week program, it has strong research support for preventing depressive relapse.

MBSR

MINDFULNESS-BASED STRESS REDUCTION

Created by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979, MBSR is the program that brought mindfulness into mainstream health care. Over eight weeks, participants practice the body scan, sitting meditation, and gentle mindful movement. It's widely used for stress, anxiety, and chronic pain.

ERP

EXPOSURE AND RESPONSE PREVENTION

ERP is the gold-standard treatment for OCD. Clients gradually approach feared thoughts and situations while resisting compulsions, and learn that anxiety and uncertainty can be tolerated. Mindfulness supports this work: noticing intrusive thoughts as mental events, making room for discomfort, and watching urges rise and fall without acting on them. Our clinicians often weave mindfulness and acceptance skills into ERP.

How Therapy Can Help

Practicing on your own is valuable. A therapist can help you tailor practices to your history and needs, work through what comes up when you slow down, and connect mindfulness to the changes you want in your life. If practice brings up memories or feelings that are hard to manage alone, that's a good reason to reach out.

Three ACT Images to Carry With You

The Struggle Switch

Painful feelings will come. When our inner "struggle switch" is on, we stack frustration, fear, and argument on top of them, and a wave becomes a flood. We can't switch off the feeling, but we can notice the switch and ease it back off.

Quicksand

In quicksand, thrashing pulls you under faster. The counterintuitive move is to lie back, spread out, and let the surface hold you. With hard emotions, softening around the feeling often changes the whole moment.

Passengers on the Bus

You're driving toward what matters, and fear and self-doubt shout from the back seat. The passengers don't have to go quiet or get off for you to keep both hands on the wheel and stay on your route.

My Mindfulness Practice Plan

This page is fillable. Type right into it on your computer, or print it and write by hand. Keep it somewhere you'll see it.

My edge-of-the-day moment

When will I practice? e.g., before I check my phone, in the car before work

Where

How long (start small)

The practice I'll start with

e.g., Square Breathing, Leaves on a Stream, 5-4-3-2-1

What might get in the way, and what I'll do about it

When my mind wanders, I'll remind myself...

My Practice Log

Day	Practice	Minutes	What I noticed
Mon			
Tue			
Wed			
Thu			
Fri			
Sat			
Sun			

Looking back on the week

What did I learn about my mind? What do I want to keep, or change?

Helpful Resources

Books

Wherever You Go, There You Are by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD. A warm, accessible introduction to mindfulness in everyday life.

Full Catastrophe Living by Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD. The foundational MBSR text, with full practice instructions.

Radical Acceptance and **True Refuge** by Tara Brach, PhD. On meeting painful emotions with compassion.

The Mindful Way Through Depression by Mark Williams, John Teasdale, Zindel Segal, and Jon Kabat-Zinn. The MBCT approach, written for readers.

The Happiness Trap by Russ Harris. A practical, friendly guide to ACT skills.

Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life by Steven C. Hayes, PhD. An ACT workbook from the approach's founder.

Apps & Websites

Insight Timer. A large library of free guided meditations and a simple practice timer.

Healthy Minds Program. Free, research-based app from the Center for Healthy Minds at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

UCLA Mindful. Free guided meditations in English and Spanish from the UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center.

Mindful.org. Articles, practices, and guided audio for beginners and experienced practitioners.

Crisis Support

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: call or text 988

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