



Good Counsel

Navigating the ‘Full Catastrophe’ With Mindfulness

BY BRENDA FINGOLD

In 1979, scientist Jon Kabat-Zinn created Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), an eight-week evidence-based, experiential program designed to provide participants with systematic training in mindfulness practices, allowing them to access innate capacities and resources for coping and thriving. He described MBSR in his book *Full Catastrophe Living*. The title acknowledges the complex reality of being human—joys, sorrows, health, illness, love, loneliness, fear, comfort, and more, all playing out against the backdrop of our work, relationships, and families.

It feels like we are now living the “full catastrophe” in the most intense way many of us have ever experienced. Mindfulness practice is made for such a time—it can help us to better navigate uncertainty, find clarity, and prioritize well-being. It is being present for the direct experience of the current moment, acknowledging it with curiosity rather

maintain perspective, adapt, and address whatever needs our attention. Our brains are designed to plan for the future based on the information they have—they do not cope well with uncertainty, causing us to worry and ruminate.

Mindfulness helps us notice when our minds have wandered into unhelpful territory and be able to return to the present moment, where there is the certainty of things being just as they are. Pick something to focus on—the sensations of your breath, feet, hands, body in the chair or even just observe the natural world. See if you can maintain that focus for even a few minutes. Each time you notice that you are thinking about something else, return your focus to your chosen object.

You likely will need to do this over and over as you strengthen your capacity to notice when you have become distracted and redirect your mind back to your object of focus when it wanders. Think of mindfulness practice

“Check in regularly with an intentional pause when you turn your focus inward and explore: ‘What’s it like to be me right now?’”

than being lost in judgments and worry or on autopilot. This is especially critical for lawyers. We have been trained to spot problems, imagine all possible negative outcomes, and look for fault. This deeply wired negativity bias may help us professionally, but when these habits are applied to living with a pandemic, they are likely to cause mental and physical distress.

Mindfulness has three essential elements: intention, attention, and attitude. Here are some suggestions for how mindfulness can support you during this time.

Practice being in the present moment. Focus is a superpower for keeping anxiety and troublesome thoughts at bay, or at least not losing ourselves in them, so we can

like resistance training in the gym. It won’t always be comfortable, but if you never get out of your comfort zone, will anything change?

Cultivate the attitude of mindfulness. Along with the *intention* to pay *attention* to the present moment,

More Resources on Mindfulness

- For more on getting started with mindfulness, see Brenda Fingold, *Mindfulness and Well-Being*, Trial 22 (Mar. 2018).
- Access AAJ Education’s complimentary webinar on “Mindfulness, Resilience, and Productivity During COVID-19” at www.justice.org/memberwebinars.
- Brown University’s Mindfulness Center is offering free, daily online mindfulness sessions. Learn more at <https://tinyurl.com/y8oymvll>.

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mindfulness asks us to relate to the moment with a particular *attitude*—one that is purposeful, curious, and available to meet whatever is happening, however it is. This doesn't mean that we have to like what is happening or that we don't take steps to change it. It means that we choose not to wage a war with reality by judging it, fighting with it, and getting lost in the need for it to be different than it is right now.

When we practice mindfulness on a regular basis, we get used to thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, sounds, and other experiences continuously moving in and out of our awareness, and we learn to notice and name them for what they are, without getting so caught up in them. The phrase many of my lawyer mindfulness students say helped them the most is “Ah, so this is how it is now.” Being available to meet the truth of the moment is often called equanimity—calmness even in the face of difficulty.

Check in with yourself regularly.

One of the core practices I teach is the “Mindful Check-In,” an intentional pause when you turn your focus inward and explore: “What’s it like to be me right now? What thoughts are on my mind? What emotions are present? What sensations are present in my body (places that are tense or painful, neutral, or pleasant)?”

Perhaps the check-in reveals an aching back that needs to be rested or anxiety that needs to be acknowledged so it doesn't manifest in other, more unpleasant ways. Or you might find once you dig deeper that you are actually OK or even fine—at least in this one moment. Recognizing and responding to what we need the most in each moment, as best we can, is essential to health and well-being.

Embrace pleasant moments.

Practice becoming more aware of

The Attitude of Mindfulness



I can't find my keys!

“I can't believe this happened again. I'm such an idiot. I'll never find them. Now I'll be late, and people will be angry. I bet someone took them. I'm so tired of everyone moving my things. What a nightmare!”

Common automatic and habitual reactions to not wanting what's happening now. Choosing to wage a war with reality.



“Ugh. My body just got really tight, and I feel frustrated. OK, I guess this is just how it is. Let's see what choices I have.”

Mindfulness: curious and present for the reality of the moment, however it is. (Note: This takes practice.)

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the direct experience of a pleasant moment. You can practice this right now by bringing to mind a pleasant moment that you have experienced, even something as small as tasting delicious food or seeing a friend smiling at you. Then, see if you can notice what emotions were there at the time (or even now as you remember it); what thoughts were going through your mind; and where you felt (or feel now) that moment in your body.

Here is an example of how I embraced the direct experience of a pleasant moment recently: I looked up as I carried groceries from my car into the house and noticed a bright, full moon. I chose to stop and fully take in the moment. I noticed emotions of happiness and gratitude. The thoughts going through my mind were: “I'm

so glad I didn't miss this” and “Wow, nature is amazing.” I felt a smile on my face and a spaciousness in my chest, and my body relaxed a bit.

While this is an artificial exercise, practicing it allows you to more fully receive the pleasant moment and even “imprint” it on your brain, making it more likely that at the end of a long day or in the middle of something very difficult, you will remember and feel that there is also pleasure. The more we can rewire our minds' habits to look for what is going right rather than noticing only what is going wrong, the better.

These four suggestions are the tip of the iceberg of ways mindfulness can improve our well-being, even in the midst of unprecedented challenges. Pick one, and give it a try. 