

2015

The Mindful Journey: Using the Extraordinary Power of Paying Attention to Heal the Wounds of Sexual Trauma

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The Mindful Journey:
Using the Extraordinary Power of Paying Attention
to Heal the Wounds of Sexual Trauma

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The Breath

*Turn to the breath.
Tune in
to its swing,
its ever present rhythm.
The breath
is an anchor
to life.
Giving occasion for
mindfulness
at any moment
in which you are
alive.*

Table of contents

Preface.....	4
The Breath.....	11
Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation.....	14
The Body: Posture and Movement.....	17
The Body Scan.....	19
Standing and Walking Meditations.....	21
Beginner's Mind.....	25
The Raisin Meditation.....	28
Non-judging, Non-striving, and Acceptance.....	31
Mindfulness of Sounds and Thoughts Meditation.....	34
Loving-kindness.....	37
Loving-kindness Meditation.....	39
Mindfulness in Relationships and Communication.....	44
Mindful Speaking and Listening Exercise.....	47
Afterward.....	51
Glossary.....	54
References.....	56

Preface

When I was 14 years old, I was raped by two young men at a high school party. I didn't realize it that night – in fact, like many victims of sexual assault, I felt very isolated – but right then I became a statistic. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) (2005), a biannual national high school survey, almost 11% of high school girls have been forced to have sexual intercourse, and the National College Women Victimization Study reports 25% of college women experience rape or attempted rape. In fact, the Department of Justice claims 83% of rape victims are under the age of 25, which means the vast majority of victims are traumatized during the time when their brains and bodies are still developing.

Though I felt very alone in my trauma, I am a part of a very large number of women who have experienced sexual assault in their lifetime. One in six American women, according to the Department of Justice's National Violence Against Women Survey (NVAWS), have lived through a sexual assault. And this type of trauma does not only affect girls and women. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (2005), of the 191,670 reported cases of sexual assault, 15,130 of these victims were male (these findings were higher than the NVAWS national average of 1 in 33 men). However, male sexual assault victims are thought to be less likely than their female counterparts to report, likely due to societal pressures on men and boys not to appear vulnerable (Abdullah-Khan, 2008). Truly, the scale of trauma suffered is unknown.¹

In fact, complete and accurate statistics of the prevalence of sexual violence and

¹ It is important to note that some minority populations are affected by sexual victimization at a higher rate, such as those in racial or ethnic minorities (Murphy, 2015) and those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT) (Gemberling, 2015).

its effects are unattainable. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (2006) only 41% of rapes are reported to the police. Many factors prevent victims from reporting sexual assaults. Feelings of embarrassment and shame, fear of retaliation, and feelings of loyalty toward the perpetrator – especially if they are an intimate partner, friend/acquaintance or family member, which make up 73% of sexual assaults (Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, 2005) – are all very common reasons why victims fail to report (Henry, 2010). Sexual violence and attitudes towards reporting also differ greatly across populations, making it even harder to get an accurate scale of the actual occurrences. What is known is that many of the victims, whether they have come forward about their assault or not, may suffer many, and sometimes lifelong, consequences.

The physical and psychological consequences of sexual assault (collectively called *sexual trauma*) are numerous and well documented (Craner, et. al., 2015). Physical symptoms include chronic pelvic pain, premenstrual syndrome, gastrointestinal disorders, chronic pain disorders, sexually transmitted infections, and unwanted pregnancies (Henry, 2010; Demaris & Kaukinen, 2005). The psychological repercussions are numerous and can be similar to other forms of trauma (such as from exposure to war or natural disasters), including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), disassociation, anxiety disorders, guilt, phobias, substance abuse, sleep disturbance, depression, rumination (*see* pg. 32), relationship difficulties, and suicide (Bryan, Bryan, & Clemans, 2015; Langmuir & Kirsh, 2011; Henry, 2010; Aspelmeier, Elliott, & Smith, 2007). Other psychological outcomes are specific to sexual trauma, such as sexual dysfunction (Leonard & Follette, 2002) and revictimization (Fortier, et. al., 2009).

As well as physical and psychological repercussions, there are social

consequences which sexual assault victims suffer. These type of crimes are *stigmatized*, meaning that society often places the burden of shame or disgrace on the victim (Henry, 2010). Many times, victims are treated differently by friends and family, compounding feelings of guilt and increasing trauma (Anderson & Doherty, 2008). It is common for the community to attribute some kind of provocation to the victim, and, in turn, victims internalize blame (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011). The social stigma surrounding sexual assault may also be one of the reasons many victims are afraid to report attacks or abuse.

I chronically suffered from many of the aforementioned after-effects of my sexual assault for over a decade, even without being fully aware of my symptoms. About ten years after my incident, I attempted to begin my healing process. I began sessions of psychotherapy and hypnotherapy, and enrolled in school to study psychology. This helped to free me from the worst of my symptoms, but I didn't feel that the therapy sessions got to the core of my suffering, nor did they help me to maintain that progress in the face of severe stressors. Indeed, mental health professionals have noted the limitations of psychotherapy alone for treating trauma survivors (e.g., Bernard, 2014; Duros & Crowley, 2014). Talking about my experiences and becoming informed about my responses helped me to identify my problems and allowed me the space and understanding to move forward. However, I didn't feel that this mode of treatment truly worked to heal my being.

Several years into my healing journey, I came across a study looking for participants for a mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) intervention for female survivors of interpersonal violence (IPV). This represented a new modification to the MBSR model: Trauma Informed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (TIMBSR) (Kelly,

2015). The concept of this class was modeled on the classic MBSR course (Kabat-Zinn, 1991), which utilizes mindfulness meditation and yoga to address a variety of chronic disorders and diseases, but with components specifically developed for female IPV (including rape and other forms of sexual violence) survivors. As a survivor of IPV, I was lucky to be able to participate in this eight week study. I believe the work done in and around these sessions was the grass-roots of a change in perspective of myself, my trauma, and my relationship with life.

There was an intensive practice component of *mindfulness meditation* during each weekly TIMBSR class, with daily mindfulness practices assigned to do at home throughout the following week. This included formal meditations, in which the state of the body and mind are acknowledged and observed nonjudgmentally, and informal exercises, in which you fully attend to present moment, both designed to cultivate the state and trait of mindfulness.^{2 3}

So, what exactly is *mindfulness*? First, I believe it is important to understand that all people are capable of mindfulness – it is part of what makes us human! Let’s look at it like this: we can break down *mindfulness* to mean *mindful awareness*, which is *being aware of awareness*, or the *awareness of self and the capacity to reflect* (Smalley & Winston, 2010). I believe a good working definition of mindfulness could be *an awareness of and attention to your present experience*. Executive Director of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society, Saki Santorelli, has defined

² Since mindfulness is both a state and a trait, this means some people are characterized as being more mindful, but that it can also be cultivated through practice.

³ Meditation practice has been seen as a “scaffolding” (a developmental psychology term for a source of support used temporarily until the skill is mastered) used to develop the state of mindfulness (Shapiro, et al 2006).

mindfulness as “our capacity to pay attention, moment to moment, on purpose” (1999, pg. 31). Authors Susan Smalley, PhD, founder and director of UCLA's Mindful Awareness Research Center (MARC), and Diana Winston, director of Mindfulness Education at MARC, inform us in their book, *Fully Present*, that “mindfulness has become a secular tool for investigating the modern mind” (2010, pg xv). And, in fact, mindfulness-based programs, such as MBSR, have evolved into a common form of complementary and alternative medicines (CAM), and mindfulness as a lifestyle is becoming quite popular.

Today's secular mindfulness meditation practice has its roots in ancient Zen Buddhism. Along with secular interest in other forms of Eastern practices, such as yoga, the recent enthusiasm towards mindfulness as a lifestyle choice is picking up momentum in the West. Mindfulness has also been given a lot of consideration as a therapeutic approach in the last couple of decades. There are now thousands of published studies and articles in peer reviewed journals on the subject of mindfulness, and even a journal specifically publishing peer-reviewed articles on the latest research and best practices in mindfulness (Springer's *Mindfulness*). Mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) are being used both in conjunction with traditional psychotherapies and as stand-alone therapies. And there are several mindfulness research bodies in operation currently, including the American Mindfulness Research Association (AMRA) and MARC, which are conducting research, including meta-analytic reviews, and compiling comprehensive lists of practitioners, resources, and bibliographies.

MBIs have been shown to provide relief from symptoms associated with many physical, psychosomatic (*see* pg.16), and psychological disorders (e.g., Shonin, van

Gordo, & Griffiths, 2013; Grossman, et. al., 2004), such as stress (Shapiro, et al 2006), PTSD (King, et. al., 2013), anxiety, and depression (Vollestad, et al 2011). However, few studies have been conducted on MBIs specifically for trauma survivors, much less survivors of sexual trauma (e.g., Gallegos, et. al., 2015; Kelly, 2015). Though more research in this area is warranted, the outcome of the TIMBSR study I participated in yielded promising results. Findings included statistically and clinically significant reductions in symptoms of PTSD, depression, and anxious attachment for our group, and, like me, many of the women experienced a positive shift in how they viewed themselves (Kelly, 2015).

I spent years trying to escape myself, the present moment, and memories that haunted me - held in both my body and mind. I was in a constant state of “doing” and “going.” I was never still. I was never just with myself. Mindfulness has helped to bring me back into myself. The simple act of paying attention, of being present, changed my life. I believe that bringing mindfulness into your daily life can change your relationship with life itself. Mindfulness meditation is a tool which can be used to examine what is inside of you. Sometimes what's inside is scary and hard to be with. But, through cultivating a regular mindfulness practice, I was able to understand and make peace with some of the trauma that I held and to calm some of the turbulence it had caused.

With all of this in mind, what follows is a collection of research and anecdotal evidence aimed at demonstrating the efficacy of mindfulness as a tool to improve quality of life. I undertook a six week exploration into the core aspects of mindfulness, utilizing various meditations and activities that I believed would be particularly helpful for sexual trauma survivors. For each week during this exploration, I delved into different facets of

mindfulness, implemented daily practices, and journaled on my experiences. I hope you will now join me with an open heart and open mind on my mindful journey.

“We are sick with fascination for the useful tools of names and numbers, of symbols, signs, conceptions and ideas. Meditation is therefore the art of suspending verbal and symbolic thinking for a time, somewhat as a courteous audience will stop talking when a concert is about to begin.”

–Alan Watts

The Breath



“Zen is not some kind of excitement, but concentration on our usual everyday routine.”

–Master Suzuki

To kick off my six week exploration into mindfulness, I chose to connect to my breath throughout the day, every day, for an entire week. Connecting with the breath is at the core of mindfulness meditation practice. Sometimes in mindfulness courses and literature, the breath is called an “anchor.” This is because no matter where you are or what you are doing, the breath is always there anchoring you to the present moment. The breath is always available to you as a tool to tap in to what is happening with the body and mind, here and now. You may be on rough seas, rocking back and forth on a tide of emotions, but using the breath as an anchor, you may be able to steady yourself. With this in mind, throughout the day, but especially every time I noticed stress anywhere in my body or mind, I took a moment to take notice of my breathing, or what is known as the *quality of the breath*. This means to observe whether the breath is shallow or deep, fast or slow, choppy or soft. The quality of your breath can tell you a lot about what is going on in your body and mind. Tuning in to this can be a wonderful resource for combating stress throughout the day.

Our breath is what connects us to our life. Yet, most of us barely register that we are breathing until it is interrupted in some way. It is this automatic nature of breathing which makes it difficult to pay attention to. Effort is required to *attune* to (to make aware or bring into harmony) the breath. But, this is what makes it an excellent teaching tool. It is through this effort that you learn to become more aware of what is happening in the body, and to bring other automatic responses into your awareness. This is a skill that can be particularly useful for trauma survivors, who many times develop automatic defensive reactions (such as avoidance) that they are unaware of and that do not necessarily serve them well (Kelly, 2015).

The breath is tied to our emotional regulation system. When our “fight or flight” sympathetic nervous system kicks in, our breathing becomes fast and shallow. Consciously slowing and deepening the breath tells the body that there is no real threat, activating the parasympathetic nervous system and bringing us back to homeostasis (Smalley & Winston, 2010). When we are experiencing stress in the form of intrusive thoughts, upsetting memories, or anxieties about the future, this fight or flight reaction is activated even though there is no real threat in the present moment. Many survivors of sexual violence are plagued by *hyperarousal* (McCall-Hosenfeld, et. Al, 2014), meaning they exist in a chronic state of fight or flight. With hyperarousal, one may feel stress and tension most of the time, even though, objectively, they are safe.

The original mindfulness program, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979, was developed specifically to address stress and the stress-related illnesses that our minds create. Mindfulness works so well for dealing with stress because it invites you to not only examine your outer life, with all of its stressors, but what is going inside of you in response. Paying attention to our breath can be a window into these cause-and-effect relationships, illuminating certain habitual reactions that may be greatly affecting us without our awareness of it.

The breath makes a wonderful instrument for mindfulness meditation practice for many reasons: it is free and always present, it is intimately linked to our self-awareness, it reflects an outward, measurable sign of well-being, and, because of its automatic nature, it provides a repeating lesson in focusing, losing, and re-focusing our attention (Smalley & Winston, 2010).

Mindfulness of Breathing Meditation

To begin with, you may only want to do this practice for just a few minutes. But, if you expand your practice, you will want to increase the amount of time you meditate incrementally. It is helpful to use an alarm or timer that has a light, pleasant tone to let you know when your meditation time is up.

Start by finding a comfortable seat. This could be on a cushion, cross-legged on the floor, or in a chair with your feet on the floor. What is important is to find a sitting position that you can comfortably maintain for several minutes. Rest your hands on your knees and close your eyes. Your spine should be comfortably erect and your shoulders relaxed. Take a moment to notice sensations in your body and adjust your posture to allow yourself to be comfortable and relaxed, without slouching, as this restricts breathing.

Turn your attention to your breathing. Try to really feel your breath, rather than imagining or analyzing it. Observe the quality of breath (see pg. 11), without trying to change it. Notice the sensations in your body as you breathe in and out. Notice your breath in your abdomen. You may feel it inflate like a balloon and then contract. Notice it in your chest. You may feel your ribs expand and then relax. Can you feel your breath in your sinuses? How about in your nose? Does it feel cool as it rushes in and warmer as it flows back out? Tune in to the ebb and flow of the breath. Feel how your body moves with the in-out, in-out rhythm of the breath.

As you meditate, you will notice thoughts and emotions arise. The goal is not to banish these thoughts and feelings – this is not possible. When thoughts or feelings arise, simply notice them, without analyzing them or getting caught up in them, and then turn your attention back to the breath. This will happen again and again. But, that's okay – this is the core of the practice! Every time you notice your mind has wandered, as minds tend to do, simply turn your attention back to your breathing.

One study has shown that practicing just 15 minutes of a sitting meditation, such as the one above, can significantly reduce perceived stress, heart rate, respiration, and blood pressure (Melville, et al., 2012). Tuning in to the breath is not only excellent for practicing formal meditation, but is also the perfect resource for cultivating mindfulness and combatting stress in your daily life. Throughout the week, as I noticed difficult emotions arise – such as irritation, frustration, anger, and helplessness – I would pause, close my eyes and just follow my breathing. Just this simple act of noticing an automatic function that was already happening in my body was enough to derail much of my perceived stress. And when I found my quality of breath to be directly linked to feelings of anxiety, I would make a conscious effort to slow and deepen the breath, calming and centering myself.

"The practice is simply this: keep coming back to your breath during the day. Just take a moment. This will give your mind a steadiness and your breath a gracefulness...There's

so much to let go of, isn't there? Your nostalgia and your regrets. Your fantasies and your fears. What you think you want instead of what is happening right now. Breathe."

–Rodney Yee, yogi

I am sitting cross-legged, tummy tucked in, spine tall and straight, chin tucked slightly, and hands resting lightly on my knees. My eyes are closed. First, I notice my breathing. I follow the rhythm: in and out, in and out. I remember a quote I read of Zen Master Shunryo Suzuki: "What we call "I" is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale." So, I breathe, in and out, and I am a swinging door. This is to say that in that moment all there is is that moment; the breath – in, out, in, out.

–Reflections during a meditation class

The Body: Posture and Movement



“To keep the body in good health is a duty, otherwise we shall not be able to keep our mind strong and clear.”

–Buddha

The second aspect of mindfulness-meditation that I explored was the *somatic* (body) and *psychosomatic* (mind-body interaction), including the various postures and movements implemented for meditation and how they affect both the body and mind. I spent the week trying out different postures, including sitting, standing, and walking meditations, and meditative movement (e.g., yoga, qigong, and tai chi). (Indeed, there are enough variations on meditative postures and movements that I was easily able to try a new one each day!) While most formal meditations implement a comfortable seated posture, there are various benefits achieved through the other postures and movements that cannot be achieved while sitting, such as greater facilitation of the mind-body connection. And, as traumatic memories are not only stored in the mind, but in the body, as well, I felt that the exploration of the body and mind-body connection through meditative practice could be very useful for those dealing with trauma.

Trauma affects the body by disrupting normal physiological responses, which can lead to a broad range of trauma-related symptoms (Langmuir & Kirsh, 2011). In fact, the theory is that when a crisis is experienced, the trauma that occurs is not caused by the event itself, but rather by the failure of the body and mind to process the event (Kelly, 2015; Langmuir & Kirsh, 2011). This lack of integration can lead to somatic re-experiencing of the event, even while the mind may disassociate (van der Kolk & Fisler, 1995). Loss of connection and control over what is happening in the body may lead trauma survivors to feel that “any sensations in the body can feel dangerous and threatening” (Duros & Crowley, 2014, pg. 238). Sexual trauma survivors sometimes describe somatic disassociation as “numb zones” in the body, described as places where trauma has been stored in the body that are now “unreceptive” (Hammers, 2014, pg. 78).

Because trauma is stored in the brain and the body, science is now recognizing that treatments that integrate psychosomatic, or mind-body, medicines, such as yoga and meditation, may be the most effective approach for trauma survivors (Duros & Crowley, 2014).

Psychosomatic medicines focus on the interactions among the brain, mind, body, and behavior, recognizing the importance thoughts, feelings, and beliefs have on health – and vice versa. In one study (Langmuir & Kirsh, 2011), trauma survivors were lead in mindfulness exercises, they checked in with their bodies and named sensations they were currently experiencing, and were lead in somatic exercises, such as stretching. The aim of this was to help trauma survivors connect with their bodies as a source of information. This resulted in significant improvements in both body awareness and dissociation.

When an awareness of the body and bodily sensations is accompanied by acceptance and an open curiosity, a healthier relationship with the body may be experienced. This is true for the mind, as well. How we relate to our thoughts and sensations can be improved through mindfulness practice.

The Body Scan

This meditation many times induces a state of deep relaxation. Especially if done in bed, you may find yourself drifting off to sleep before the meditation is completed. While this can be very pleasant, mindfulness meditation is designed to cultivate insight, not induce sleep – so try to remain in the present!

Find a comfortable place to lie down. Lie flat on your back with your feet slightly separated and falling away from each other, and your arms away from your sides, palms facing up. If this position causes any discomfort in your lower back, you may want to try bending your knees and placing the bottoms of your feet flat on the surface you are lying on.

Begin by closing your eyes and taking a few moments to attune to the breath.

Shift your focus to your feet. Notice any sensations that are happening in the feet. Greet these sensations with a kind, open curiosity. Try to avoid creating a narrative about them, and rather just observe what is there. If thoughts do enter the mind, note them, let go of them, and turn your attention back to the direct experience.

When you breathe in, imagine breathing all the way down to the bottoms of your feet. When the breath reaches your feet, begin your outbreath, following it all the way back up and out through your nose. Take several breaths this way, breathing in through your nose and out from your feet.

Allow the feet to "soften," or relax. It may be helpful to imagine the feet as dissolving or melting away.

Move your attention up to your ankles. What sensations do you notice here? Accept whatever you may feel here, breathing into it, then breathing out of it. Breathe down into your ankles for several breaths, then allow your ankles to soften and melt away, relaxing down into the floor or bed.

Move your attention, in turn, taking several breaths at each point along

the way, up to your lower legs, knees, upper legs, pelvis, abdomen, chest, then out to your hands, up your arms, to your shoulders, neck, face, and finally, head. When you reach your head, you may want to try breathing in and out through your “third eye,” the place in the middle of your forehead, just above the eyebrows.

As you move your attention up through your body, you may find places of tension or even pain. Try not to shy away from these experiences. Breathe into these places, and as you breathe out, imagine releasing that pain or tension.

You may also find places in which you register no sensation. That is fine, too. Notice the lack of sensation. Breathe into and out of this place.

Finally, bring your awareness to your whole body. Feel yourself melt into the floor or bed. Breathe in deep, and then out long, releasing all tension in the body. Release the body from striving, from doing – just allow the body to be held by the surface it is resting on. Perfect and whole, right where it is.

As you end this meditation, you may want to begin by wiggling your fingers and toes. Allow your body to move as it naturally desires to. You may want to roll over on your side for a few moments before opening your eyes and getting up.

Standing and Walking Meditations

Standing meditation can be done anytime, anywhere. For the walking

meditation, find a place either indoors or outdoors where you can travel at least ten steps without interruption. Map your route out before you begin. (If the weather permits, when you do this exercise outdoors in your yard or in a park, there is the added benefit of being in nature.) Try these meditations with your shoes off, if you feel comfortable doing so.

Both meditations begin by standing up straight and tall with your feet slightly apart and underneath your hips. Your arms should hang loosely at your sides. Close your eyes and tune in to your breath. Take a few moments just to breathe here in this standing posture.

Notice the sensations of your feet on the floor. Can you feel grounded through them? Notice the minute adjustments your feet make to keep you standing and balanced there.

Notice sensations in the rest of your body. The strength in your legs, the erectness of your spine.

If you are practicing the standing meditation, stay here for several minutes taking note of what is happening in your body.

For the walking meditation, begin traveling your route, taking slow but natural steps.

Notice with every step how your feet meet the floor or ground. As you walk, try to stay connected to the sensations in your feet and legs.

If you are walking a straight path, when you get to the end, take a moment to reconnect with standing and then turn around and travel back to your starting place. If your path is circular, you may still want to pause for a

moment when you return to start.

Be mindful that the walking meditation does not turn into pacing. When pacing, our minds wander or ruminate (see pg. 32). If you find your mind doing this, gently, but firmly, bring your attention back to the sensations of walking.

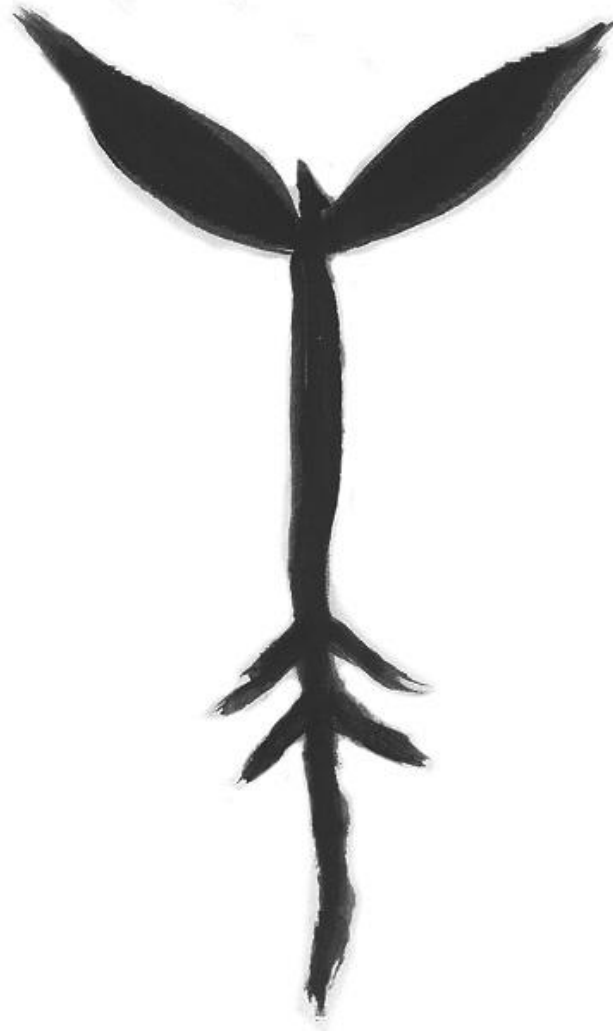
Walking meditation may be done for several minutes, ten minutes, or even thirty minutes or more. As with any meditation, though, it is smart to start out with a few minutes practice and build up.

When taking on any new somatic practice, it is important to understand that each body has its own set of capabilities and limitations. I will allow that I have had many years of formal practice with yoga, so it was no stretch (pun intended) for me to undertake a week's examination in meditative movement. However, I will not include specific instructions here for these type of meditations, as I feel it is important to learn proper form so as to not hurt yourself. I highly recommend yoga and other meditative movement for both body and mind, but I recommend seeking out an instructor to guide you in proper form.

That being said, meditative movement appears to offer a framework for cultivating the body-awareness that trauma survivors both lack and fear (Duros & Crowley, 2014). Meditative movements have the components of movement or body positioning, a focus on breathing, and the goals of a calm state of mind and deep relaxation (Larkey, et. al., 2009). As a practitioner of yoga and a trauma survivor, I

believe these components not only serve to help mitigate trauma symptoms, but to bring about a higher quality of life (with regular practice). Yoga has been referred to as the “original body-inclusive psychotherapy,” touted as being as “good as any drug we’ve studied when it comes to calming down the nervous systems of our trauma survivors” (Duros & Crowley, 2014, pg. 241), and has been found to be positively correlated with wellbeing (Ivtzan & Papantoniou, 2014). So, I recommend you get out there, find a professional offering classes that fit your experience level, and move your beautiful body!

Beginner's Mind



“In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few.”

–Master Suzuki

In my third week, I picked a daily task and brought a *beginner's mind* to the task every time it was performed during the entire week. The idea of beginner's mind is taken from the Zen Buddhist concept of Shoshin, and is defined by bringing the attitude of a beginner to any activity you engage in, no matter how many times you have performed it in the past. A beginner's mind is characterized by openness, eagerness, and a lack of preconceptions. Having a beginner's mind is about leaving your knowledge of something behind and seeing it just as it is in this moment, as if for the first time. Theologian Mitsuo Aoki (Mits) has been quoted saying, “‘I don't know’ is the warrior's wisdom.” It is this attitude that is at the heart of the concept of beginner's mind. With this attitude, we are always students of life and can learn something from every experience we have. The goal is not to let what you think you *know* stop you from experiencing what *is*.

In order to practice cultivating this attitude, I chose as my daily mindful task washing the dishes. I chose washing dishes because it is something I do not enjoy doing (with the hope to improve my feelings about it), but you could choose anything you do on a daily basis, such as drinking your morning tea, brushing your teeth, or taking a shower. I brought an open, curious awareness to something that I would otherwise view as a chore. And, rather than thinking about other things, I paid close attention to what was happening in front of me. Mindfully bringing my awareness to the task at hand, like that, reminded me of how my children engage with their environment – so connected to the activity that it appears they do not even register the outside world. While I watched and felt the warm tap water pouring down my fingers and running down my hands, heard it splattering against the dishes in the sink, and smelled the scent of lavender from the dish soap, I was fully engaged and free from the usual narrative running through my mind:

obsessive worries about things that have already passed, things yet to pass, and other things entirely out of my control.

So, why is it that we are so wired to think about things that have already happened or have not yet happened rather than what is happening right now? Our brains have evolved to remember key experiences from the past. If we live through a dangerous experience, we need to have ready access to that memory so that we do not make the same mistake again. This is one way that our brains protect us. But, sometimes this protective mechanism limits us from engaging in activities that may be good for us or that we may enjoy now because we have experienced a negative outcome with that activity in the past. This is especially true for trauma survivors, whose brains become more hardwired to resiliently scan for danger. Barring any true danger in an activity or situation, using the concept of beginner's mind can be helpful in approaching it when you are confronted with feelings of trepidation.

The goal of bringing a beginner's mind to your meditation practice is to treat every meditation like it is your first, and go into your experience with an open mind. The idea is to leave behind your past experiences and expectations. Just because you have done something before, doesn't mean that this outcome will be the same as the last time. If the last time you sat down to meditate, your mind was noisy and prone to wandering, leave behind the worry that it will be this time as well. And if the last time you sat down to meditate, your mind was clear and focused, leave that expectation behind, too. If you go in to each meditation (or each and every experience) with a beginner's mind, you are open to all possible outcomes rather than limiting yourself by past successes and failures.

The Raisin Meditation

In this meditation, you will bring the concept of beginner's mind to the task of eating one simple raisin.

Begin by sitting comfortably, closing your eyes and taking a minute or two to focus on your breath. When you are feeling relaxed, yet focused, open your eyes and take one raisin and place it in your palm.

Look closely at this raisin, as if it something you have never seen before.

What is its shape? What is its color? How does the light reflect off of it?

Turn you palm at different angles and really take in the whole raisin.

Touch the raisin. Feel its texture. Pick it up between your index finger and thumb. Roll it around a little bit. Is it plump? Is it dry? Do you enjoy squeezing it between your fingers? Maybe you feel like a scientist. Or maybe you feel a bit silly. That is okay. Just notice these feelings and let them pass.

Bring the raisin up to your nose and smell it. Take in a deep inhalation and see what you notice about the smell of this particular raisin. Does it have a strong smell? Is it sweet? Notice if smelling the raisin causes you to feel like eating it. Maybe your mouth will already begin watering. Or, maybe you do not like raisins. Maybe the smell causes you a bit of anxiety about having to eat it. Notice those feelings your olfactory memories may bring about, but try to treat this raisin as if it is your first. Let go of expectations.

Place the raisin between your lips. Explore the raisin with your mouth,

without chewing it. Hold it in your lips, hold it between your teeth, hold it on your tongue. What does it feel like in your mouth? Can you taste it already before even biting into it? Notice if your mouth has begun to salivate in anticipation of chewing it.

Taste the raisin. Bite into it one time, really noticing the burst of flavor in your mouth. Do not chew it, take your time fully exploring its flavor. Take inventory of your thoughts and emotions when you are biting into this raisin. Do you enjoy it, or not? Does it bring back memories of childhood? Now, bite into it again. Has the flavor subtly changed? Have your feelings about the raisin changed? Notice if feelings of impatience arise – it is difficult to not follow the old program of bite, chew, swallow! When you are ready, slowly chew the raisin until it is fully masticated.

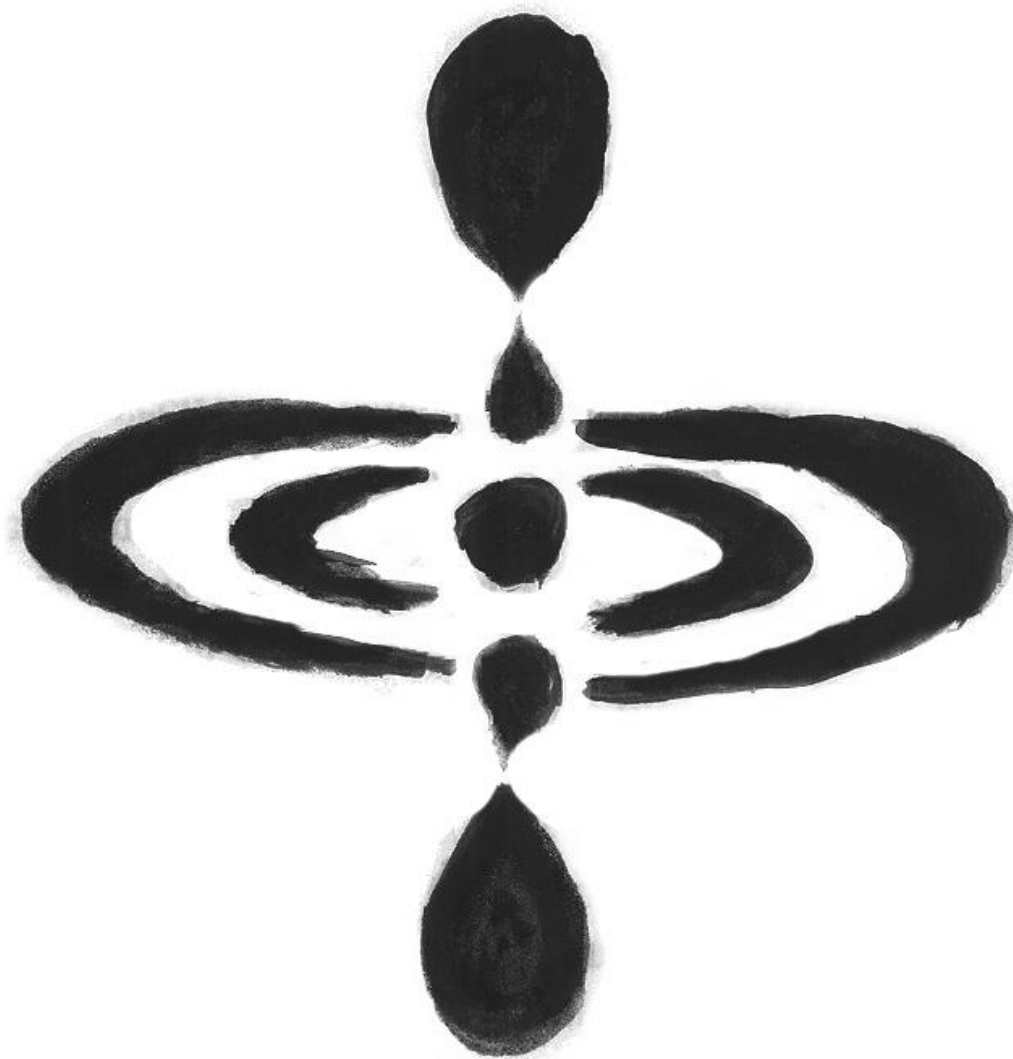
Swallow the raisin, but see if you can follow it going down your throat and to your stomach. Are there any subtle digestive functions you can detect? Take a few moments to reflect on your experience with this one raisin. Try to expand your idea of the raisin to include where it came from. It once was a grape, grown on a farm. Who took care of it? How was it taken care of? It was picked and dried and packaged. Who or what performed these jobs? It was shipped to your grocer. How far has it traveled? Do you feel a bit in awe at all that it takes to get this one raisin to your mouth?

It would be pretty impractical to try to make every meal into a formal meditation, such as the one above. But, I have found it very rewarding to try and bring the concept of beginner's mind to the dinner table. Eating provides a wonderful time each day to practice cultivating mindfulness. Beyond the immediate benefits of enhanced mindfulness, eating mindfully brings awareness to one of the most important aspects of your health: the fuel you are putting in your body. When you eat mindfully, it is much more difficult to eat foods which are unhealthy for you or the environment (i.e., produced using unsustainable or unethical practices). Whether you are noticing subtle textures or flavors, or expanding your awareness to include where the food came from, it is much harder to continue putting food into your mouth if you come to the conclusion that it is unhealthy in some way. It is also much easier to pick up on the body's cues that it is full and to not over-eat. When we eat *mindlessly*, it is easy to gorge ourselves on unhealthy snacks without realizing we have over-eaten or consumed something we maybe will regret eating later. This idea could be applied to any activity. If we are living mindfully, we are apt to make better choices all around.

“When you do something, if you fix your mind on the activity with some confidence, the quality of your state of mind is the activity itself.”

–Master Suzuki

Non-Judging, Non-Striving, and Acceptance



“The true purpose is to see things as they are, to observe things as they are, and to let everything go as it goes.”

–Master Suzuki

One of the basic principles of science is to observe and record data without preconceived determinations as to what it will show you and without trying to make it show something. In this way, mindfulness is akin to scientific observation. For week four, I put on my scientist hat and practiced just observing things as they are – or, in mindfulness terms, *non-judging*, *non-striving*, and *acceptance*.⁴

Non-Striving is similar to the non-doing that you practice in meditation. It is *trying* less and *being* more. It's having no goal – just being with the unfolding of your life, moment to moment. In this sense, the best way to achieve any goal is not to strive for it, but instead focus on seeing and accepting things as they are. For example, when you are running a marathon, the goal is to finish running 26 miles. If you focus on those 26 miles, or on the distance you have left to go, you may make it or you may not, but you most certainly will be bogged down with the tremendous weight of that distance. It is better to focus on the present moment, picking up one foot and putting the other down. That's how you achieve your goal – one single step at a time – rather than by worrying about the goal itself. Once you get on with it, forget the goal, and just be in the moment. Whatever is happening in the moment is fine – even if it isn't pleasant.

Non-Judging is taking the stance of an impartial witness to your own experience. It is noticing the thoughts that arise in your mind, not trying to stop or change them, but just being aware of them. It is not getting caught up in labeling things as “good” or “bad,” but rather just noting what is. I have noticed that when I judge something (such as an

⁴ Non-judging, non-striving, and acceptance are three of the seven “attitudinal foundations” of mindfulness proposed by MBSR founder Jon Kabat-Zinn. All of these definitions are adapted from his book *Full catastrophe living: using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness* (1991).

emotion, feeling in my body, or a memory) as either “good” or “bad,” I am usually also attaching a narrative to it. At some point during meditation, I almost always find a personal narrative that goes something like this: “Right now I am feeling uncomfortable sitting up so straight. It is *bad* to feel this way. I shouldn't feel this way. Maybe I should move. But, I'm not supposed to be moving, I am supposed to be meditating... Oh, wait!” *Here is the chance to be mindful.* I can simply notice the discomfort in my body without the judgment and without needing to do anything about it. Just notice it.

In mindfulness, acceptance is acknowledging things as they truly are in the present moment. For example, if you are feeling uncomfortable during your meditation, accept that you are feeling uncomfortable. When you are willing to see things as they are, you are much more likely to have a clear picture of what is happening both inside and outside of yourself. I've often noticed myself denying what *is*, or trying to force a situation to be what I think it *should* be. And in the end, non-acceptance is just a lot of wasted time and energy. That doesn't mean that you should become passive, apathetic, or indifferent. It doesn't mean that you should become resigned to the state of your life as it is now if your goal is self-improvement. Rather, it means that in order to truly change, you must first accept yourself as you are now – even the parts you wish to improve.

One way to cultivate a state of non-striving, non-judging, and acceptance is to sit and meditate on the *impermanence* of the sounds around you. The concept of impermanence is that all things are continually changing, evolving, and unfolding on their own. Just allowing things to come into our awareness, without the need to label them, judge them, or try to change them, and then allowing them to pass along.

Mindfulness of Sounds and Thoughts

Find a comfortable, seated posture. Close your eyes. Take a moment to attune to the breath.

Bring your awareness to the sound of your breathing. Hear the air enter and leave your body as you inhale and exhale.

When you are ready, shift your awareness to the other sounds that are present in this moment.

Without searching for sounds, or listening out for particular sounds, allow the sounds around you to come into your awareness. Notice how these sounds arise and then pass away.

Notice the sounds that are near you. These may be sounds in your very own body, or in the room around you. See if you can simply have a direct awareness of the sounds you hear, noting their qualities (like pattern, pitch, or tone), rather than labeling them.

Notice sounds that are far away. Try to just hear what you can hear, rather than thinking about what you are hearing. If you notice your mind is making up a story about the sounds you are hearing, simply shift your attention back to listening to the sound itself.

Bring awareness to the sounds around you as sensations which come and go naturally. New sounds around you will arise and eventually pass, because this is the nature of sounds.

Shift your attention from the sounds around you to your thoughts. Bring

awareness to your thoughts as sensations in your mind that come and go naturally, just like sounds. And just like sounds, notice that your thoughts will arise and then pass away.

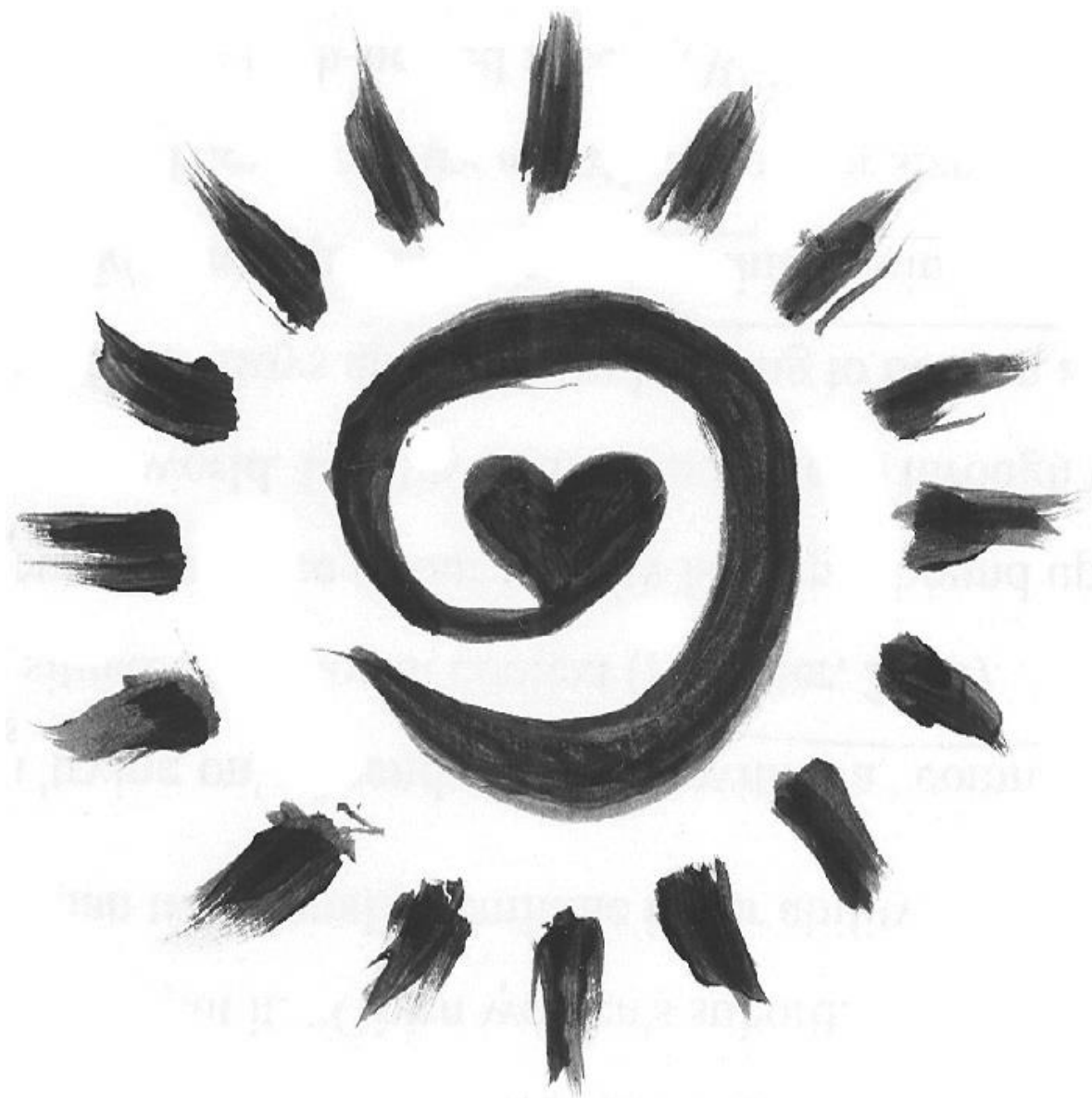
Just as you did with the sounds around you, notice the thoughts that come into your mind. There is no need to judge them, or label them, or to try to change them or make them go away. Witness them, and then allow them to pass away.

Stay in this space for several minutes, watching your thoughts as they arise and pass. Observing your thoughts as sensations in the mind.

Master Suzuki says, “To give your sheep or cow a large, spacious meadow is the way to control him.” I believe this is to say, the only way you can really “control” anything is to give it total freedom – including your mind. I believe this is the heart of the concept of observing your thoughts as sensations in the mind. I’ve notice many times that my mind becomes stuck in the past, reliving hurts, injustices or embarrassments, or it is jumping ahead to the future, worrying about what might or might not happen. This obsessive worry about the past and future is called *ruminatio*n. Rumination is a maladaptive emotional regulation strategy, and is characterized by “repetitive, recurrent, intrusive, and uncontrollable thoughts” (Odou & Brinker 2014, pg 449), and is very common in trauma survivors. But, I have noticed, as well, that mindfulness of my thoughts as events brings me into the present and out of negative and destructive thought patterns. I think this exercise is a very powerful antidote to rumination. It seems that

when I bring mindful attention to my recursive thought patterns, a light is shined on them. When they are illuminated, I can accept them for what they truly are – pointless and destructive – and then I can choose to break the cycle. And, if the present moment is challenging, I've found that mindfulness of what is going on in the mind as arising and then falling away, like sound, is also helpful in dealing with difficult emotions or experiences.

Loving-kindness



“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

—His Holiness the Dalai Lama

For the fifth week of my mindfulness meditation exploration, I practiced *loving-kindness*. Loving-kindness is an authentic wish for happiness and well-being directed at ourselves and/or others. Loving-kindness meditation (LKM) is used to develop compassion and *self-compassion*, which is characterized by “self-kindness, a sense of a common-humanity, and mindfulness” (Oudou & Brinker, 2014, pg 450). LKM is another Buddhist-derived practice that is quite complementary to mindfulness meditation, and is many times included in mindfulness courses and literature. Because LKM works to systematically develop a loving acceptance toward yourself and others, I believe it is a noteworthy practice for trauma survivors. And, because I have suffered with a strong habit of self-criticism (which is the opposite of self-compassion) for most of my life, I believe this practice is especially helpful for me, personally. It is exactly this habit of self-criticism that LKM works to combat.

LKM has been shown to bring about many positive attitudinal changes and changes in habituated negative patterns of thinking. A recent meta-analysis of 20 studies (with a total of 1,312 participants) on LKM and compassion meditation (a sister meditation of LKM) interventions yielded evidence of significant improvements across five trauma-relevant outcome domains: positive and negative affect, psychological distress, positive thinking, interpersonal relations, and empathic accuracy (Shonin, 2015). Studies have also shown LKM to hone compassion and increase compassionate behavior (Bankard, 2015) and kindness toward others (Hutcherson, 2008). But not only does it increase compassion and kindness toward others, it increases self-compassion, which has been shown to help moderate negative emotions, increasing overall happiness (Leary, 2007). Studies have also shown that psychological interventions which increase self-

compassion are linked to mood improvements and are therapeutically beneficial (Odou & Brinker, 2014). I believe increases in self-compassion can be seen as an antidote to the guilt and self-blame that so many trauma survivors feel.

Loving-kindness is a natural quality that is always present in us. Right now, if you bring to mind someone that you love – and with whom you do not have a complicated relationship (babies and pets work well for this) – notice how thinking of them or bringing a picture of them into your mind makes you feel. Common feelings reported are relaxation and feelings of warmth and expansion in the chest (Smalley & Winston, 2010). Many times a smile will automatically form on the lips. This warm and happy feeling is loving-kindness, and it is the state cultivated by LKM. There are three ways to arouse feelings of loving-kindness: visualization (bringing up a mental picture of yourself or others), reflection (thinking of positive attributes or memories about yourself or others), and auditory (repeating a phrase of well-wishes for yourself or others, either out-loud or in your head).

Loving-kindness Meditation:

Begin by finding a comfortable, seated position. Close your eyes and take a few moments to attune to your breath. Then, bring your awareness to your heart. Feel the beating of your heart, its presence in your chest.

Notice that with every inhalation, your breath brings life to your heart. It may be helpful to imagine breathing “through” your heart.

Bring to mind a positive image of yourself. This could be an image of yourself as you are now, as a child, or as you aspire to be. Try to cultivate

warm feelings toward this imagined self. Reflect on your own positive attributes, or a memory of when you have done something that you are proud of. Try to hold a loving idea of self in your heart.

Send yourself well-wishes. Find several phrases that resonate with you (or use the traditional phrases) and repeat them to yourself in your mind, or you may say them aloud if that works better for you. Traditional phrases are: “May I be safe. May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be free from suffering.”

You can tailor your phrases to fit your life's situation or issues that you are currently facing. For those suffering from trauma-related issues, this may be phrases such as, “May I feel safe. May I feel healthy. May I feel at ease. May I feel whole.” Sometimes, a more specific phrase may work for this day or this moment: “May I be forgiving” or “May I learn to let go.”

Repeat this set of phrases three times, pausing between each to notice your heart-sensations.

When you have finished sending well-wishes to yourself, expand out to another individual. To begin with, this should be someone who is close to you, someone who you can easily imagine sending love and good wishes to, such as a parent or child. Repeat the visualization, reflection, and auditory exercises from above for this individual. You may use the traditional phrases, or tailor them to that person: “May you be safe. May you be happy. May you be peaceful. May you be free from suffering.”

When you have repeated three rounds of well-wishes to one person, try

extending these wishes out to a group of people (for example, your co-workers, friends and relatives, or even all people you know). Try to hold a loving image of all of these people in your heart and repeat the phrases for them: “May you all be safe. May you all be happy. May you all be peaceful. May you all be free from suffering.”

Finally, you may want to widen your circle to include all people on the Earth: “May all be safe. May all be happy. May all be peaceful. May all be free from suffering.”

Variations on this practice include sending well-wishes to someone or a group who specifically needs them this day, such as an ill friend or survivors of a natural disaster. In this case, you would send loving-kindness targeted at their specific circumstances: “May you be at peace with your diagnosis” or “May you find refuge and sanctuary.”

Another variation is to send loving-kindness out to all beings – humans, animals, plants, or even all of nature: “May all beings on this Earth be free from suffering.”

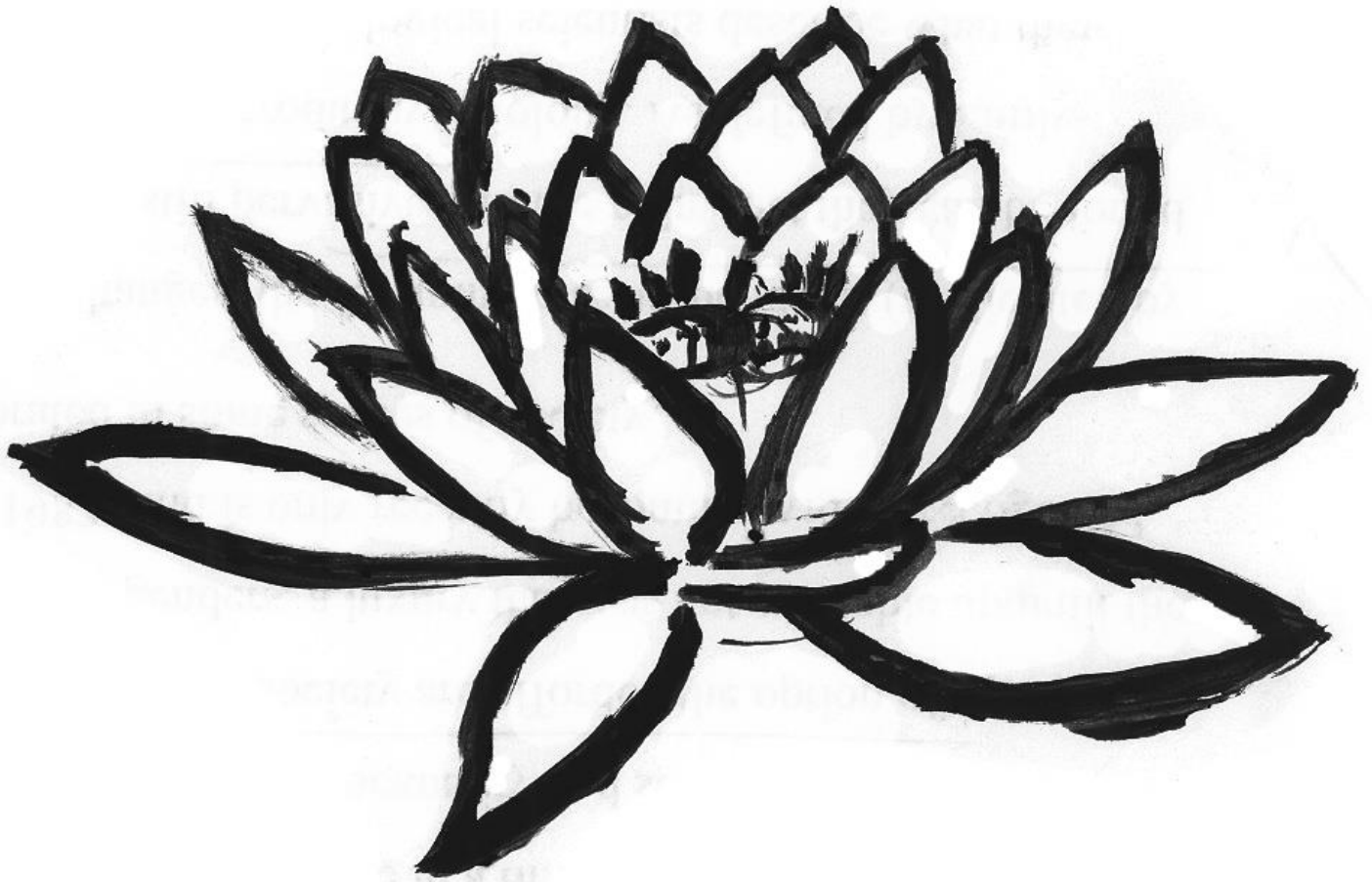
Yet another variation is to send loving-kindness out in all directions – North, then South, then East, then West: “May all beings to the North feel peace and happiness,” etc.

When I began my LKM practice, I found it difficult to cultivate feelings of loving-kindness for myself. I found it very easy to arouse this feeling when I sent loving-kindness to my children and my parents, and even much easier when I sent it to all other people than to myself. I recognized this as the result of an old, habituated, negative pattern of thinking that I carry: I am undeserving of these well-wishes. Luckily, I had learned through my research that these feelings are common not only for trauma survivors, but are common when most people begin practicing loving-kindness. From my perspective, it appears that there may be an ideology in Western culture which makes it difficult for many of us to recognize our own innate capacity and need for loving-kindness. I see this as an epidemic of self-criticism – but now I know there is an antidote! After only a few days of practicing LKM, I began to feel more accepting and, later, deserving of these wishes for myself. I actually felt the self-criticism begin to dissipate and be replaced by self-compassion.

If it is at first difficult to arouse feelings of loving-kindness for yourself or others, try to remain mindful of the feelings that *do* come up, and recognize them as things that need your acceptance and compassion. These may be the things that are impeding your development of loving-kindness, and they can be good reminders that there is always work to be done! For me, they were feelings of unworthiness. There were narratives attached to these feelings, too, of course. Things like: “I’m broken,” “There’s something wrong with me,” and “It’s all my fault.” Using the tools learned in mindfulness practice, you can observe these thoughts and feelings without getting wrapped up in them, and then turn your attention back to your LKM practice. When you are having an especially difficult time with intrusive thoughts, it may be helpful to practice your phrases out loud.

Even if you do not feel compassion or self-compassion in the moment, practice the phrases. Even if saying the words feels mechanical or disingenuous, practice the phrases. After some days or weeks, you may find your subconscious has assimilated these ideas and a new view of yourself and others is beginning to emerge.

Mindfulness in Relationships and Communication



“Sitting quietly, doing nothing, Spring comes, and the grass grows, by itself.”

–Matsuo Basho

I believe that being kind to ourselves is the first step in breaking negative patterns in our relationships with others. So, after five weeks of exploring how to be kinder to myself, I wanted to end my endeavor by looking at how mindfulness affects our relationships and communication. To this end, I spent the week trying to listen and speak mindfully. In order to communicate mindfully, it is important to implement these *mindful communication traits*: information seeking, reasoning from a positive perspective, considering multiple perspectives, describing thoughts and feelings, acknowledging the other's communication, using participative language, and taking turns (Smalley & Winston, 2010). I found this is actually quite hard! In this competitive world that we live in, most of us seem to be wired to jump in and say our piece. Or, we are trying to solve the other's problems as if they were our own, and our perspective were the only valid perspective.

I have found that participating in mindful communication is helped by the cultivation of two of the attitudinal foundations of mindfulness: *patience* and *trust*. To sit and meditate requires tremendous patience. To be completely in the moment and to allow things to unfold in their own time is to be mindfully patient, and to practice this type of patience is extremely helpful when mindfully listening to someone else speak. Trust, in terms of mindfulness, is to honor your own experiences, feelings, and intuitions, and to take responsibility for your own wellbeing. When communicating with others, it helps to honor yourself and not allow others to dictate your experiences. Most people are not habituated to communicating mindfully, and it is important not to be dragged down into a negative pattern of communication by your partner's communication style. Just cultivating a non-judging awareness about difficulties in our communication and

relationships with others may be enough to begin to change negative patterns. When you can bring mindfulness to the interaction, your partner may respond in turn.

Sexual trauma always occurs in relation to others. This can lead to disruptions in attachment style and difficulties in relationships. Trauma survivors may feel stuck in a victim/victimizer/bystander template (Kelly, 2015), projecting these roles onto themselves and those around them. This dynamic can be very damaging to relationships, especially with intimate partners. For example, adult survivors of childhood sexual abuse (CSA)⁵ have been found to have more negative perspectives and less trust of romantic partners, such as seeing them as more controlling and less caring (Gemberling, 2015). People who have experienced sexual trauma, whether as children or in adulthood, may develop unhealthy attachment styles (Yumbul, Cavusoglu, & Geyimci, 2010) or attachment anxieties (Gemberling, 2015), either pushing partners away or obsessively worrying about abandonment. These dynamics make it especially difficult for survivors to maintain healthy romantic relationships.

Studies are showing mindfulness to have a positive influence on romantic relationships. Two studies investigating the role of mindfulness in romantic relationships (Barnes, et. al., 2007) have found that higher trait mindfulness predicted higher relationship satisfaction, greater capacities to respond constructively to relationship stress, lower emotional stress responses and positive pre- and post-conflict changes in perception of the relationship. They also found that state mindfulness was related to better communication. The investigators felt that “the receptive attentiveness that defines mindfulness may promote a greater ability or willingness to take interest in the partner’s

⁵ There are noted differences in symptomology in survivors of CSA and those of sexual assault, but for the purpose of this paper they are not examined.

thoughts, emotions, and welfare” (Barnes, et. al., 2007, pg. 482). A third study (Carson, et. al., 2004) found that a mindfulness-based relationship enhancement course elevated couples' levels of relationship satisfaction, and that at a 3-month follow up, those who practiced mindfulness more had better outcomes.

It has been suggested that mindfulness promotes attunement in relationships (Barnes, et. al., 2007). In the same way you can attune to your breath during meditation, you can attune to your partner during communication. Mindful speaking and listening can facilitate this attunement.

Mindful Speaking and Listening Exercise

This exercise requires a partner.

Sit across from your partner. Each of you start by taking a minute to close your eyes and tune in to your own breath. Each partner, in turn, will then spend three minutes talking or listening. It may be helpful to use a stopwatch or timer.

When you are the speaker, you may talk about anything you would like. It does not have to be something deep or serious. At first it may be helpful to avoid subjects that are controversial. Remember to implement the mindful communication traits (see pg. 40), such as reasoning from a positive perspective and using participative language. Spend no more than three minutes speaking. But, if you run out of things to say, you may end your session naturally by thanking your partner for listening.

When you are the listener, just listen. The urge may arise to interject, but

just notice this urge and let it pass, without interruption. You may use non-verbal communication to signal you are listening, such as nodding your head, but do not answer or engage in conversation.

After the speaker has finished, take a few moments to sit quietly, close your eyes and attune to the breath again, and then switch roles.

Pay close attention to the bodily sensations that arise during this practice. Occasionally check in with the quality of your breath. It may be helpful to deliberately slow and deepen the breath. But, remember that the focus of this exercise is mindful speaking and listening. When you listen, try your best to give the speaker your full attention. And when you speak, try to speak from the heart.

When you are the listener, notice if you feel the desire to interject, to try to solve the speaker's problems, or if your mind wanders. If you find these things happening, gently, but firmly, turn your attention back to the speaker.

When you are the speaker, notice how it feels to speak for several minutes uninterrupted. You may find yourself feeling anxious or exposed. Or maybe you find a sense of relief or contentment in just being heard. It can be rare to get three minutes of uninterrupted time to speak from your heart!

For an adaptation on this exercise, when the speaker is done, the listener may summarize for them what they have just heard. Then, the listener

indicates as to whether they feel understood. If the speaker does feel understood, after a brief pause to attune to the breath, switch roles. If they do not feel understood, they may then take another turn as speaker in order to try and reiterate their message, keeping in mind the principles of mindful communication. The listener again will summarize what they have heard. Once the first speaker feels understood, take a moment and then switch roles.

This adaptation works well for communicating more difficult feelings, wants or needs. However, it may be better to practice the first communication exercise with a neutral subject a few times before attempting the adaptation.

When I was raped, I lost control of my body, my safety, my sense of self and of my future. This loss of control manifested itself as an oscillation between a strong need to control things and a complete resignation of *agency* (defined as “the power and freedom to act for oneself” [Kossak, et. Al., 2009]). This has had many negative effects on my relationships. For example, I have found myself many times trying to pin down other people as a means of putting them under my control – trying to know where they are and what they are doing there, or when and where they are going and why. And when someone has done something unexpected and deviated from what I believed to be the plan, I would become very anxious. When I felt my (perceived) control slipping, I would usually clamp down even harder on someone, or I would become depressed and just give up. Trauma-informed mindfulness has helped me to understand why I have behaved like

that in the past, and that this is not a healthy way to be in relation to others. I now know it does no good to try to pin people down, lock them up, or mold them in to something that suits you. They will probably reject or resist you – or they will conform and then resent you. And I now understand this is not a healthy way to be in relation to myself – I do not need to try and control my external world any longer.

With regular mindfulness practice, I have been able to take myself out of the “auto pilot” mode of communication and view my negative communication patterns from an outside perspective. When I am able to do this, and to implement the mindful communication traits, I see that my communication is much more effective and authentic. I feel that by using mindful communication and by cultivating a non-judging awareness about places of difficulty within my relationships, my relationships have improved tremendously. The proof is in that my relationships with others in the present are more and more healthy than they ever were in the past.

Afterward

I credit the mindfulness-based intervention (TIMBSR) I participated in, mindfulness meditation (done both at home and in a group setting with an instructor), and adopting a more mindful lifestyle to contributing to a reduction in *all* of the trauma-induced symptoms I have experienced. This is an amazing thing to say about an intervention! But, it is not to say that mindfulness is a “cure-all” or that mindfulness alone will heal all of the wounds inflicted after sexual victimization. Along with mindfulness, I have participated in psychotherapy on and off (when needed) throughout the last 15 years, I have engaged in regular exercise (particularly yoga, dance, and running), and I have increasingly improved my diet, finally (since the inception of this thesis) eliminating all foods that contain chemical additives or are highly processed, and severely limiting other foods which wreak havoc on our moods (such as coffee and alcohol).

The director of the TIMBSR study that I participated in directly states that TIMBSR is a “Phase I” intervention and “is not meant to be a standalone therapy for survivors of interpersonal trauma” (Kelly, 2015, pg. 202). I believe it is also important to note that it has been suggested that mindfulness meditation may be unwise for some who are experiencing sexual trauma:

“When introducing mindfulness, especially to trauma clients, one must be careful to let them know that this does not mean meditation. This is not to suggest that having a mindfulness meditation practice is not a recommended or powerful selfcare tool for many individuals. For

traumatized clients, however, a seated, silent meditative practice (especially if they are in Stage I) may be experienced as a threat and could lead to hyperarousal and dissociation. Instead, clients are invited to experiment with just noticing their inner experience by paying attention, in the present, and on purpose while engaged in activities such as yoga or walking or simple tasks such as washing the dishes. For some clients, mindfulness is a tool that they use to help themselves feel grounded and safe. Paying attention to objects in the outer world, when they are experiencing inner turmoil, orients them to the present, and reminds them that the external world can be safe.”

–Duros & Crowley, 2014, pg. 242

I also believe that when you begin any new practice, it is always wise to first seek the guidance of a professional. There are numerous sources for group mindfulness mediation classes and MBSR programs, which can easily be discovered through a quick internet search for what is available in your area. Or you may want to utilize online classes available from a trusted, research-based source, such as the online mindfulness courses available from MARC, which can be found at <http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=112>.

It is also very helpful when beginning meditation practice at home to utilize guided meditations. There are many free audio guided meditations available online from many different sources. However, I will recommend guided meditations available from MARC, as they are a trusted, research-based source. These meditations can be found at

<http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22>.

This project has truly been a "labor of love," and not an easy labor, either. As the authors before caution, examining the hurt inside can be quite difficult for trauma survivors. However, I am grateful to have traversed this inner landscape. Thank you for accompanying me on my mindful journey.

Glossary

Acceptance: acknowledging things as they truly are in the present moment, pg. 33

Agency: the power and freedom to act for oneself, pg. 49

Attune: to make aware of or bring into harmony with, pg. 12

Beginner's mind: bringing the attitude of a beginner to any activity you engage in, no matter how many times you have performed it in the past, pg. 26

Hyperarousal: a chronic state of fight or flight, pg. 13

Impermanence: the idea that all things are continually changing, evolving, and unfolding on their own, pg. 33

Loving-kindness: an authentic wish for happiness and well-being directed at ourselves and/or others, pg. 38

Mindfulness meditation: a form of meditation in which the state of the body and mind are acknowledged and observed nonjudgmentally, and you fully attend to the present moment, pg. 7

Mindfulness: an awareness of and attention to your present experience, pg. 7

Non-Judging: taking the stance of an impartial witness to your own experience, pg. 32

Non-Striving: non-doing; trying less and being more, pg. 32

Patience: to be completely in the moment and to allow things to unfold in their own time, pg. 45

Psychosomatic: mind-body interaction, pg. 18

Quality of the breath: the way you are breathing, e.g., shallow or deep, pg. 12

Rumination: a maladaptive emotional regulation strategy that is characterized by

repetitive, recurrent, intrusive, and uncontrollable thoughts, pg. 35

Self-compassion: a feeling about oneself which is characterized by self-kindness, a sense of a common-humanity, and mindfulness, pg. 38

Sexual trauma: the physical and psychological consequences of sexual assault, pg. 5

Somatic: of the body, pg. 18

Stigmatized: when society places the burden of shame or disgrace on the victim of a crime, pg. 6

Trust: to honor your own experiences, feelings, and intuitions, and to take responsibility for your own wellbeing, pg. 45

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