

## Mindfulness and Meditation to Support Resilience after Mass Violence



The present moment is the only moment available to us, and it is the door to all moments.

- Thich Nhat Hanh -

*“In practicing meditation...We’re just being with our experience, whatever it is.” – Pema Chödrön*

*“Sometimes we can see our intense emotions coming, and sometimes we can’t. Emotions can build up, increasing in strength slowly. At other times, they crash down on us all at once. We can get lost in our emotions, swept up in a feeling. They can be beautiful and they can be scary. In all of these ways, emotions are like storms.*

*The good news is that storms pass, and so do emotions. With mindfulness, we can practice taking the role of observer to our strong feelings. When we put that space between ourselves and the whirlwinds, we can find stability and cultivate resilience.”*

Scott Rogers, Allow the Storm to Pass

(image from <https://tamarakulish.com/>)

**Mindfulness** has been described by Jon Kabat-Zinn as “paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally.” It is being aware of what you're sensing and feeling in the moment, without interpretation or judgment.

When there has been a life-changing event like mass violence, it is common to relive experiences from the past and to worry about the future. After a traumatic event, your mind may return over and over to what happened, how you could have done something differently, or wishing somehow it had turned out differently. This focus on the past can distract you from what you can do, today, toward recovery. This preoccupation can become stressful and can lead to:

- Difficulty concentrating
- Always on the lookout for danger
- Flashbacks, intrusive thoughts, or distractibility
- Tension, jumpiness, and sleeplessness
- Fatigue and exhaustion
- Strong emotions such as sadness, grief, anger, and anxiety
- Numbness

**Restore calm with mindfulness.** Being able to find mental and physical calm is an important part of resilience. While there are many ways to restore calm – spending time with supportive people or doing something that gives you a sense of purpose and meaning – mindfulness can help you direct your mind toward calm even under difficult situations. Accepting a thought or feeling does not mean you like it, just that you recognize that it is happening. Pausing to observe allows us to soften negative emotions and to be less caught up in the past or the future.

## What does it mean to pay attention, be aware on purpose, without judgment?

Here are some examples:

- Awareness of the world: deliberately pause to become aware of the colors and sounds around you, as pure sensation. There is blue, or green or traffic sounds. Just colors and sounds.
- Body awareness: take a moment to feel gravity on your body or to feel your toes, and notice any tingling, warmth or pressure, without judging it as good or bad. It just is.
- Awareness of your own mind: notice your reactions and thoughts, with gentleness and compassion. There is no need to judge your reactions; they are what they are.
- Awareness of emotion: notice the sensations of sadness, anger or panic without judging them. This helps you ride waves of feeling while being gentle with yourself.
- Awareness of others: listen attentively to what someone is saying to you, without judgments or opinions.

This takes practice.

The good news is that you do not necessarily have to spend extra time in your day to practice mindfulness. You can get better at being present in the moment by doing one simple activity with purpose and without judgment. Several areas you can consider incorporating mindfulness into everyday life include:

- Listen to music fully, without thinking about other things.
- Make a cup of tea or coffee and slowly enjoy it.
- Exercise with intention and focus.
- Walk to your car and notice the world around you.
- Eat mindfully and really taste the food.
- Step outside for several minutes and “be” with the outdoors/nature.
- Listen and reflect in a conversation with someone else.
- Shower while engaging all of your senses (smell of soap, sensation of water, sounds of water, etc.).
- Take a meditation or yoga class.

An example of how you can practice mindfulness in everyday living is to shower mindfully. We all usually take showers or baths, so you do not need to carve out additional time to practice. Next time you take a shower, do it with intention.

Focus your attention on the shower.

Let your thoughts and emotions from your past or about your future go gently as you tend to your shower.

Smell your soap or shampoo before using it.

Notice the water as it hits your back. Is it cold? Is it hot?

Try not to judge but notice and describe.

Notice the sensations when you rub your shampoo in your hair.

Close your eyes. Does that change the experience any?

Just be in this shower. Again, you are not creating an experience but rather being present and awake in an activity that you often do on autopilot.

How does showering mindfully change the experience? If done daily, you may notice a sense of grounding and calm during this time.

## **Meditation is setting time aside to practice**

Meditation is the deliberate setting aside of time to focus and practice the skill of mindfulness, in particular observing the mind and directing your attention. It is used in many cultures to develop inner peace and insight. Over time with regular practice, a core of calm inner strength grows within you and is carried into everyday life through present moment mindfulness.

You begin to notice how you're feeling with curiosity, instead of needing to change or fight anything. You can slow down your reactions and be a bit more in control, more present and mindful. You can get in touch with your thoughts and feelings in a defused and accepting way that quiets the mind.

## **Benefits of Meditation**

Some benefits naturally occur with continued practice:

- More relaxation and better sleep
- Better health and increased sensitivity to the body's needs
- Increased awareness of surroundings and sensitivity to the world around you
- Increased ability to focus and complete tasks at work and at home
- Reduced stress from within – comparisons and judgments fade
- Greater compassion for others and more compassion toward yourself
- Better understanding of yourself and your reactions
- Increased ability to return to a calm perspective and reduce conflict with others
- Increased ability to cope with trauma reactions.

## **Meditation can help cope with trauma reactions**

Meditation by itself isn't a treatment for trauma reactions or posttraumatic stress disorder, but when used along with a treatment program or as a practice to manage stress once you've gone through treatment, it can be very helpful. You may increase your ability to:

- let disturbing images and thoughts come and go
- turn the mind to the present moment rather than relive the trauma
- be compassionate towards yourself

## **Basic Guidelines for Meditation**

*Set a timer or bell for the amount of time you plan to meditate, about 10 to 20 minutes or more. However, even three minutes can be a start.*

*It helps to sit in the same place at about the same time each day.*

*Find a comfortable position – sitting on a floor cushion, in a chair or lying down. Pick a position you can comfortably be in for a few minutes. Sitting with your back straight and head balanced is recommended. Lying down sometimes leads to sleep so it is less recommended.*

*Begin with your eyes open, being aware of the space around you. Take several slow deep breaths in through the nose and out through the mouth. After several breaths, return to normal breathing and let your eyes close. If you prefer, you can keep them open with a soft gaze about three feet in front.*

*Take a moment to be aware of any sounds or other sensations around you, and then let your awareness move to your breath.*

*Focus your attention on the sensation of breathing, cool air as it comes in, warmer as it goes out. Notice the rising and falling of your abdomen. Notice the turning of the breath between in and out again. You may quietly say to yourself, “Breathing in, I am aware of breathing in.” “Breathing out, I am aware of breathing out.”*

*Become aware of gravity, noticing the pressure against the chair or your seat. Take a moment to be aware of any other body sensations, beginning at the top of your head and slowly moving down to your toes.*

*Return your awareness to the breath and keep the focus on the breath for several minutes. You may notice that thoughts come and go or that you become distracted by images, memories, judgments about the meditation, or your “to do” list. This is normal. As soon as you notice that you are “thinking,” return your focus of awareness to the breath and the sensations of heaviness in the body. Like clouds in the sky or leaves on a stream, let thoughts fade or slowly drift away on the “stream of consciousness.”*

*When the timer rings, slowly become aware of the room, take a few more deep breaths and open your eyes.*

This basic meditation has many variations that come from different traditions, religions or personal preference. There is much overlap in actual practice. Most start with taking long deep breaths and centering awareness in the body.

## **Types of Meditation**

### **Good for Beginners**

**Muscle Relaxation**— This is a good beginning practice. Become aware of the tension and relaxation of all the muscles in the body by first making each muscle group tight and then relaxed. This is helpful for muscular headaches, tight muscles and overall tension. This is often combined with slow breathing and visualization of a favorite relaxing place, the blue sky or infinite peace.

**Body Scan** – This helps to understand your body better. Let your awareness move slowly from the top of the head down through each part of the body, all the way to the fingertips and toes. Notice any sensations of heaviness, lightness, warmth, tightness or discomfort. Let your attention pause on any area of the body that is of concern to you. During this meditation, let your body speak to you.

**Calming Meditation** – The idea is to become still inside. You cultivate a quieter, more peaceful state of mind and improve concentration by focusing on a particular object — your breath, a mantra, a visualization, a physical object, even physical sensations within your body. Return to that object whenever you get distracted or notice your mind starting to wander.

**Mindfulness Meditation** – This is a combination of staying aware of the breath, physical sensations such as gravity, touch, sounds or color while staying as much as possible in the present moment, in the here and now. The intent is to increase your ability to be aware.

### **Guided, Solo or Group Meditation**

**Guided Meditation** - A teacher guides you through the steps of the practice, either in person or through a meditation video or app. The teacher explains how the mind behaves during meditation, leads you through a particular meditation technique, and then suggests how to integrate this technique into your everyday life. This is helpful for beginners.

**Unguided or Solo Meditation**- You sit quietly and do your preferred meditation for a set period of time.

**Group Meditation** – Meditate with others to enhance your concentration and dedication. You also receive support if you have questions or concerns.

### **Variations**

**Loving-Kindness Meditation** – This meditation focuses on expanding compassion towards ourselves, those around us, or the greater community. Start by imaging the feeling of love and compassion for someone close to you. When that loving feeling is clear, add the feeling of loving others, yourself and even those who are difficult to love.

**Insight Meditation** – With this method, you practice self-observation by focusing on your inner self in a nonjudgmental way. You take note of thoughts that arise and which thoughts are present and persistent, and study your emotions as they come and go. You get to know yourself better. You may also set an intention to invite a special quality such as gratitude, compassion, or loving kindness of which you would like to be mindful.

**Moving Meditation** – This is a good alternative if sitting still is difficult. The basic walking meditation involves moving slowly while noticing each foot as it touches the ground, and noticing sounds, colors, light, or air quality. Keep thoughts to a minimum by returning the focus of attention to the sensations of walking. Yoga, Qigong, Tai Chi, and dance are forms of moving meditation.

**Sound Meditation** – This involves listening with full attention to a bell, sound bowl or certain kinds of music or drumming. Keep the focus on the sound. Notice any distractions or thoughts and return awareness to your focus.

**Gazing Meditation** – This involves keeping the eyes open and fixed on a point such as a candle, a flower, a spiritual image or just a spot on the floor. Let the gaze soften and blur but stay fixed on the one spot.

**Visualization** – Hold an image rather than focusing just on the breath. This could be a connection to the earth, a spiritual being, your supportive loved ones or a special safe place. Again, as the mind wanders, return attention to the chosen image. Sometimes the visualization leads to other images that may offer insight, similar to dreams. In that case, you may want to note and remember any insights from the images.

**Reflection on a Question** – Ask yourself a question such as “What are you grateful for?” or “What options do you have for dealing with this concern?” “What are you really so upset about?” Then notice any thoughts, images or possibilities that arise.

**Verse or Passage Meditation** – Read a short passage from a sacred text, poem or verse followed by contemplation of the reading

**Mantras or Chanting** – Repeat a word or chant throughout the meditation, returning the mind to the word or chant if distracted. This is often done in groups or religious settings.

**Mindfulness through Action** - Complex, creative activities like knitting, gardening, cake decorating, pottery or carpentry require concentration, and dexterity. Doing something that brings you joy as well as focus is another kind of mindfulness practice. Do the activity with the deliberate intention of meditation.

### **Make a Commitment to Practice**

Mindfulness improves with practice. Like learning to knit, catch a pass, cook, or play an instrument, practice focusing the mind to yield greater and greater benefits.

*Make it an everyday practice, if only a few minutes.* Five or ten minutes once or twice a day helps build this mental focus.

*Occasional day-long or weekend retreats* with a teacher can strengthen your practice. You have the opportunity to ask questions and share experiences.

*Community support* from a meditation group offers more information, selected readings and in person or on-line meditation with others.

*Online support* can be found through your faith community, a yoga center, a search-engine query of “meditation near me” or ask around. When you contact a possible group meditation center, ask as many questions as you need so you can understand their approach, tradition, cost if any, and expectations. Ask if you can talk with other attendees as well.

### **Coping with Common Challenges in Meditation**

*Discomfort:* Adjust your seat or your body to increase your physical comfort.

*Sleepiness:* Open your eyes and move around.

*Distractions:* These are your best meditation teachers as they make you practice focusing and concentration. Notice what distracted you and bring your attention back to your focus.

*Judgments:* You may think you are failing to “do meditation right” and feel worse. Or think, “This is a great meditation day!” A positive or negative judgment leads to the same place of evaluation. Stay neutral and accept all sensations, emotions, and thoughts. This is hard as our world is full of evaluation. Build the habit of a neutral acceptance of “this too is here”. Especially do not judge “performance” of the meditation. Let it be whatever it turns out to be.

*Failure:* This is similar to judging performance. If you cut a meditation short, skip meditation for a day or a month, do not scold yourself. Return to the practice whenever you can, even for a few minutes. In learning any new skill, there are ups and downs.

*Wanting to change what happens:* Wishing things to be different is a kind of struggle with an experience, rather than simple acceptance. As we try to make things different, we are involved in the emotion or thought, rather than observing it. Instead, be at ease with what is happening inside and let any changes happen naturally.

### **What if I have strong feelings during meditation?**

You may experience flashbacks or difficult memories. You have the choice to sit with these thoughts or to open your eyes and move around.

Why just observe your emotions instead of trying to make them go away? Many people just want the emotion to end and try to avoid feeling upset. This can be a temporary solution, but feelings and physical reactions have a way of coming back over and over in unexpected ways.

Strong feelings during meditation are normal, just like distractions. It shows that you are getting in touch with your emotions. Welcome tears and all other emotions yet try to avoid getting caught up in them. Observe them like you observe the breath, sounds or other sensations. Whether you are feeling anxiety, frustration, sadness, or anger, let the emotions flow. Let time pass. Do not hurry to get rid of feelings. Like other thoughts and sensations, they will change as you observe them.

Invite and observe any and all feelings that arise:

- Sadness and loss
- Rage or resentment
- Concern about changes in your life
- Anxiety/worry/vulnerability
- Frustration or “feeling stuck”
- Lost or unsure
- Deep emptiness or loneliness
- Excitement
- Happiness

If you can, allow the feeling to be there without trying to push it away or change it. You may ask yourself, “What unmet need is here?” “What is so hard about feeling this?” “Am I afraid or ashamed of this thought or

feeling?” You may choose to observe how it feels in your body, what thoughts are there, without getting caught up in the storm. This is where you “ride the waves” of emotion, staying aware through it. Nurture yourself with tenderness about whatever it is you have discovered. If it becomes too difficult, open your eyes, move around and then return to meditation if you can.

### **Trauma-sensitive Meditation:**

#### **Additional tips about meditation for individuals who may have experienced a traumatic event**

If you have a history of dissociation or severe trauma, you may want to meditate only with guidance from a trauma-informed teacher or counselor.

- During a body scan, awareness of increased heart rate or other body sensations may be reminders of a frightening time.
- Traumatic events can change our ability to comfort ourselves and to control our emotions. It is important during meditation practice that you feel safe and supported.
- You always have the choice to stop until you are better able to bear the difficult emotions or intrusive thoughts. There is no need to feel bad about stopping at any time.
- When you pay close attention to your internal experience, you may come into contact with thoughts, images, memories, and physical sensations that may relate to a traumatic experience.
- If you are able to observe your reactions in a neutral way, continue with the meditation. The sensations may become stronger as you observe them. Decide if you are willing to sit and observe the discomfort or decide to open your eyes to look at a color, listen to sounds or feel your feet on the floor.
- Identify which focus of attention is most stabilizing for you. Is it returning awareness to the breath, looking around the room, a safe place image, an important person in your life, a passage of scripture or a favorite poem, or a comforting phrase?
- Find a way to ground yourself when emotions run high. (See [Managing Distress: Grounding Tips](#))
- You may have been pushing away memories and trying to avoid certain feelings. If they reappear during meditation, try to stay calm and not react, such as thinking, “Oh, no! I can’t stand that grief again! Please go away!” Instead, say to yourself, “This too is here. I went through grief before. I can do it again with awareness of and patience for myself.”
- Practice compassion for any reactions that you have. You may say to yourself: “I am so sorry you are hurting so.”
- It’s okay to meditate at a later time. This may not be the right time for you. You may need more support from a teacher or therapist. Or you may need to be reminded of grounding skills to help you deal with these feelings.



## Learn More

### Books about Mindfulness

Thich Naht Hahn: *You Are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment; The Miracle of Mindfulness*

Jon Kabat-Zinn: *Wherever You Go, There You Are*

Andy Puddicombe: *Get Some Headspace*

Tara Brach: *Radical Acceptance*

Jack Kornfield: *No Time like the Present; A Path with Heart*

Desmond, T. (2019): *How to Stay Human in a F\*cked-up World: Mindfulness Practices for Real Life*. New York: HarperOne.

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2012). *Mindfulness for Beginners*. Boulder, CO: Soundstrue.

**Online videos** number in the thousands. A search of “meditation videos” will get you started. Here are a few from recommended teachers:

- Tara Brach on using RAIN for self-compassion: <https://www.tarabrach.com/meditation-rain-self-compassion/>
- Headspace <https://www.headspace.com/meditation/meditation-for-beginners>
- UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center: <https://www.uclahealth.org/marc>
- UC San Diego Center for Mindfulness: <http://www.mindfulness.ucsd.edu>

**Apps** are another good way to learn and practice meditation. Several are totally free and others have free content about the basics with advanced lessons for a monthly enrollment cost. Explore the many options to find what is right for you. Here are some recommendations:

Healthy Minds Program was developed at the University of Wisconsin by Dr. Richard Davidson and his team. This free step-by-step guide focuses on four areas of training your brain: awareness, insight, connection and purpose. Additional information about the science of mindfulness is included.

<https://hminnovations.org/meditation-app>

Smiling Mind is a free app developed by psychologists and educators for the whole family with specific exercises for stress, sleep, focus, relationships, sport performance, or mindful eating. It is especially designed to support children’s positive mental health. <https://www.smilingmind.com.au/>

Oak is a free app with a simple approach. Users appreciate its minimalist look and feel. It has both guided and unguided meditations, breathing exercises, and a variety of background tracks including silence. Oak offers a 10-day Mantra Meditation course to help you deepen your practice.

<https://www.oakmeditation.com/>

Insight Timer has a large free library of meditations and music tracks, with well-known teachers of meditation. For beginners, Insight Timer has a seven-day free course that will teach you everything you need to know about how to meditate. <https://insighttimer.com/>

Headspace has a full catalogue and beginner-friendly options with fun animations. It has specific meditations for stress relief and mindfulness, overcoming challenges like grief, body image, and fear or parenting struggles. The Move Mode pairs exercise with meditation. <https://www.headspace.com/mindfulness>

Calm is an all-around solid guided meditation app for beginners and pros alike with nature sounds, music, and beautiful images. It includes “sleep stories” to help you fall asleep. <https://www.calm.com/>

Ten Percent Happier is dedicated to teaching fidgety skeptics how to meditate. Many of its teachers are well-known practitioners with unique styles and approaches to meditations. <https://www.tenpercent.com/>

Transcend NMVC is a free, self-help app created by the NMVVC. The app was created to help those who have been affected by mass violence but it also includes guided meditations. The app is available on the [Apple App Store](#) and the [Google Play Store](#).

Shine is a Black-owned app that features inclusive and diverse content and teachers. The free download opens some content with an option for membership. Its offerings include gratitude check-ins, bedtime stories, self-care exercises, and access to the Shine Squad, the app’s digital community where you can connect to other users. <https://www.theshineapp.com/>

Sowlmate is a LGBTQ+ focused self-help app with a unique library of courses and meditations specific to a variety of LGBTQ+ experiences, such as dealing with family rejection or going through a breakup. Sowlmate also has a mood tracker and diary, self-care exercises, and non-meditation educational courses. <https://apps.apple.com/us/app/sowlmate-self-care-lgbtq/id1506576652>