

This workshop was given on July 6, 2002  
The video of the workshop is available on Aortic Hope's You Tube page

Note: My website is [tombassarear.com](http://tombassarear.com)

I'm glad to be here: glad that I survived and that I able to share something I find helpful

### **My dissection and mindfulness**

Type B dissection Nov 2020 and spent 9 days in ICU during covid lockdown--solitary confinement for 9 days

I had two surgeries in 2021 where six stents were placed in my aorta.

At this point, the aorta has stabilized and I have a CT scan every six months.

Those of you who had dissections before me know that there is still uncertainty, and part of our challenge is learning to live with uncertainty.

Like many people the first months were really hard--lots of fear and anxiety.

I didn't find the aortic survivor's group until 4 months after dissection. It has been very helpful.

I've been practicing mindfulness for 40 years and teaching it for 20 years

I have found it really helpful during the past 1 1/2 years. However, sometimes even mindfulness was no match for some anxiety or fear!

Tough stuff we're dealing with.

Today: We will focus on 5 basic mindfulness practices that can be used by anyone almost anywhere.

I will also give examples of when and how I have used these practices.

To be clear: I don't see mindfulness as a panacea; there are many other practices and resources including medications.

Each person must decide for him/her/themself what helps best.

Let's start with the first practice

### **Mindfulness of breath**

This was one of my go to practices when I was stressed or anxious.

For example, waking up in the middle of the night in the hospital and miserable.

After a few minutes, I asked myself if I could be present for one breath. I could.

What about another? I could do that too.

After a few breaths, I felt much calmer and was able to go back to sleep.

One of my teachers said that how mindfulness works is that when we give the mind something to focus on, there is usually a calming of the mind and body.

Notes:

Different strokes for different folks, vs. one right way

Eyes can be open or closed

Breathing naturally

There are many different places where you can focus your attention in this practice. We will explore three here.

1st one: As you breathe, simply rest your attention on where you feel it most clearly: nostrils, belly, or torso.

2nd one: Say to yourself silently:

Breathing in, I feel life giving oxygen entering my body.

Breathing out, I feel that natural relaxation of the exhale.

3rd: simply think "in" as you breathe in and "out" as you breathe out

Check-in:

If it was calming, what did you notice? what did you like? Questions?

Other questions about mindfulness of breathing?

### **Mindfulness of sounds**

Not everyone immediately finds the breath relaxing. If not, an alternative is mindfulness of sounds.

I did this in the hospital when I woke up in the middle of the night and too tired to meditate. Lots of sounds!

I'll be quiet for 30 seconds. During that time simply pay attention to sounds you are noticing.

Reminder: Different strokes for different folks

You can stay with one sound, like bird song, air conditioner, and how it changes.

Or if there are several sounds you can devote a few seconds to each.

If you liked the mindfulness of breath, you can stay with breathing for the this time.

Check-in: what did you notice? what did you like? questions?

This practices helps us to get outside of our self, because the sounds are external. It's so easy to get self-absorbed.

### **What mindfulness is/isn't**

Wandering mind: When you realize that your mind has wandered, simply smile (everyone's mind wanders at times), and then return your attention to the breath or wherever you are focusing your attention. Mindfulness is not stopping the mind but rather bringing a curious, open-minded attention to what is happening right now.

This enables us to more clearly notice what is happening, which doesn't happen when we are resisting and suppressing. It's like swimming in water that is murky and then clears up.

Victor Frankl, survivor of Nazi and an author and psychologist: "between stimulus and response lies a space. In that space lies our freedom and power to choose a response. In our response lies our growth and our happiness.

Stimulus-response is so often Stimulus-React. More often than not, I remember to breathe between Stimulus and Response. That breath creates enough space for me to remember that I have choices. For example, someone says something that triggers me, I remember that I have other choices that "Please shut up" or "That wasn't helpful." Over time we learn not to reactively suppress what is happening but to acknowledge it.

Mindfulness is paying attention to present moment experience.

Meditation is when you practice mindfulness for a period of time.

Not everyone wants to meditate, but almost everyone I know would like to be mindful more often! There are many things we can do to increase mindfulness besides meditating, for example, yoga, tai chi, drawing, painting, etc.

I remember a Looney Tunes cartoon when a bad guy was chasing Bugs Bunny. Bugs found a barn, rushed inside, slammed the door and quickly nails a bunch of boards to the door. Then he felt a tap on his shoulder. It was the bad guy. He had gotten inside too. That's what it's like when we try to suppress unwanted thoughts and emotions. They're already in! So we learn to have a different relationship with them.

Questions? Comments?

### **Mindfulness of the body**

In the classic body scan, we move our attention from our toes to head by regions of the body, e.g., feet, ankles, shin/calf, knees, thighs, bottom of torso, lower back, upper back, back of shoulders, etc.

It can also be done by paying attention to the strongest sensations. One of the times I used this was on the ride in the ambulance to the hospital when I thought I might die. There were lots of sensations to notice, shock absorbers, freezing, my body ached. This practice helped not to freak out and have moments of calmness on the ride.

A full body scan takes about 20 minutes. Here we will focus on common touch points.

In each case, I will name a part, starting with bottom of your left foot, and ask you to bring curious and open attention to what you're noticing on that part.

Lots of possibilities including tingling, pulsing, warmth/coldness, itching, achiness, pressure, and nothing/blank. It's all OK, really.

We'll stay at each part for about 2 breaths of time, long enough to focus but short enough that the mind doesn't wander as much

Begin: Bottom of left foot, lower left leg (ankle, calf, shin, knee), upper left leg (thigh/hip)  
If mind wanders, just gently bring it back to the part of the body you're examining.

You might feel many sensations or just one or none. Doesn't matter. You're simply becoming aware of what's going on now.

Now focusing on the bottom of torso, maybe feeling the pressure of the chair.

Moving now to the back (sometimes discomfort even pain).

If so, more attention on exhale when the body naturally relaxes

If any discomfort, see if you cannot hate it.

Moving now to the bottom of front of torso...the abdomen...the chest...the neck & throat

Now the left hand (palms, fingers, back of hands)...the arm (wrist, elbow, biceps, shoulder)

Reminder: we are just noticing.

Now the face--jaw, chin, mouth (outside or inside), nose, cheeks, eyes, ears, forehead, back of the head

Top of head

Whole body: noticing the felt sense of your body sitting here in this moment.

Check-in: how do you feel now, compared to before?

what did you notice? what did you like? questions?

Several years ago I did a workshop on mindfulness during which led participants through the body scan. During the body scan I made the comment that I made above about seeing if you can not hate the discomfort or pain. During the discussion after the body scan, one person said that she had gone to the gym for the first time in several months the day before. The next day she woke up and her body ached all over. When we began the body scan she was miserable because of so much achiness in her body. However when I said "can you see if you cannot hate the pain," she suddenly got it and then the pain and misery was gone, she was just sore.

Over time our understanding deepens and the practices become more and more transformative.

### **Loving-kindness/compassion meditation**

This is a heart-centered practice: brings out happiness, joy, gratitude

The intention here is to connect to this energy that is always available.

After my second operation, I was in ICU again because the surgeon was worried I might become paraplegic during the operation. So a spinal drain was done where a needle was inserted into my spine and some of my spinal fluid was drained just in case there was a surge during or after the operation. This meant I couldn't get out of bed for 48 hours and had to remain relatively still. Not fun! The next morning I awoke at 4:30 and was not sleepy. Ugh. So I decided to do a body scan. During the body scan I decide to practice loving kindness toward each part of my body, grateful for all that was working well. When I finished, I felt remarkably at peace, almost blissful. I've

since read stories about people with serious life-threatening illnesses like typhoid who have similar experiences when they stopping fighting and accepted that this is where they were now. Overview: You will focus on someone you care about, then yourself, then a neutral person, then someone who is struggling.

In each case, I will offer three phrases

May you be happy

May you be peaceful

May you be free, free from suffering

You can hear them and apply them to the person or you can repeat them silently to yourself

There will be about one breaths worth of time between each phrase. Each set will be repeated twice.

1. Bring your awareness to someone you care about/love, who makes you smile. Note this can be a pet!

2. Focus on yourself: May I be happy...peaceful...free (from suffering)

3. Focus on someone you hardly know at all: a neighbor, the person delivering mail, someone at work.

The intention here is to get our focus beyond just ourselves and our friends.

Perspective: anyone with chronic disease can become self-absorbed. This can help get us out of just thinking about ourselves and our condition?

4. Focus on someone who is struggling

Alternative phrasing: especially when people are suffering from disease, death of loved one, etc.

May you have moments of happiness each day

May you have moments of peace each day

May you have moments of freedom from suffering each day

Check-in: what did you notice? what did you like? questions?

On the internet you can find all these as guided meditations in many places. These are on one of the handouts that I have made available.

### **Mindfulness of thoughts/emotions**

This meditation is more advanced, not easily practiced when first learning mindfulness.

However, it is powerful, because as I mentioned earlier, we learn not to fight or suppress unwanted thoughts and emotions, but to learn how to coexist with them.

I used this when anxious while waiting for a CT scan or surgery, and all the scary times between the dissection and the operations when every little thing could scare the hell out of me-- night sweats, pains in the chest, fevers, weird sensations in the body

How this meditation works: Begin by focusing on whatever felt most relaxing, calming--breath, body, sounds. Keep your attention there until you realize that a thought has arisen or you realize that your mind has wandered.

When your mind wanders due to a thought, there are two choices:

1. Acknowledge it kindly (hi there) go back to the calming focus
2. Stand back and observe the thought as it continues and sometimes actually leaves.

Do this as if you are watching a movie where you are not the star!

Leonard Cohen: Things became a lot easier I stopped needing to be the hero of my own drama!  
If a close friend has financial problems, we naturally feel compassion. But if it's us, it's much more stressful

Check-in: what did you notice? what did you like? questions?

Something that helps when unwanted thoughts arise:

"it's just a thought, and thoughts are not facts"  
"this thought won't last forever"

When the thought or emotion does dissolve (for now), the next time a mind storm arises, we are more able to weather it (pun intended)

If the thought or emotion is strong, you might use the loving-kindness phrases.

Note that if a thought or emotion is overwhelming you, like a tsunami, move to higher ground: whatever distractions have helped before. I've done it too.

Sometimes it just hurts. For example, 1 night of ICU delirium where I thought I was being held prisoner by the hospital. Terror! I just had to wait until morning when I could call my wife.

On my website, there is a handout called "Strategies for investigating thoughts and emotions." You can find guided meditations on many of the websites listed in my handout "Resources for meditation."

### **Application:**

These mindfulness practices can be used virtually any time of the day or night in any situation: for one or two breaths, a minute, 5 minutes, longer. It's up to you.

In RESOURCES on my website, there is handout " Strategies for mindfulness during the day" These are things you can go during the day to deepen mindfulness to help you remember to be mindful more often. This makes it more likely that you will remember to use mindfulness when you are stressed.

I'll elaborate a few here.

1. Bring mindfulness to something you do every day—shower, brush teeth, the morning coffee/tea ritual, putting on your clothes, feeding your pet, etc. For example, feel the warm

water of the shower, and feel yourself rubbing soap on your body and then rinsing. You might be grateful because so many people in the world do not have access to hot showers.

Note that mindfulness is "embodied awareness" which means that we more of our attention is in and on the body and less in the head. I am seeing more and more research on the value of embodied practices like yoga and meditation for Post-Traumatic Stress, anxiety, and depression.

2. When you sit down at the computer, taking one or more slow breaths before you start.  
When I remember to do this, my body relaxes, and my typing is more accurate.
3. Using everyday occurrences in your environment as reminders to breathe: phone ringing, waiting in line or at a stop light, etc. Suddenly these occurrences which are often stressful can become de-stressors!
4. When choosing passwords on your computer, thinking of ones that might remind you to be here now or make you smile, e.g., Breathe123, Goofball123, etc.
6. Look for opportunities to smile, to notice beauty, to practice gratitude  
Scientists are finding that in these situations, our brains secrete oxytocin and other "happy" chemicals.

### **Resources/ Next steps:**

Online resources on Tom Bassarear's website: [tombassarear.com](http://tombassarear.com)

On the RESOURCES PAGE:

"Resources for mindfulness": includes apps and guided meditations, for example, Calm, Insight Timer, Headspace, and more. Most offer the basics for free.

"STRATEGIES FOR MINDFULNESS DURING THE DAY"

There are other resources on PRACTICES, INSPIRATIONS, and BLOG.

On my home page, you can click to the Monadnock Mindfulness Practice Center which I helped to cofound in 2002. That website has many resources. I lead the Monday night mindfulness session on Zoom. Information about this is on the EVENTS page. The session is open to everyone and free.

I have told Carin I am willing to offer an 8 week Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course later this year if there is sufficient interest. We need at least 8 people because the questions and insights from participants are so important. I have taught this course more than 20 times since 2008 and it will offered free.

### **What can develop over time**

We are each working toward acceptance of this new life with a body that doesn't feel like me. Note that "accept" means you accept that this is what his happening now like accepting that it is snowing or extremely hot

Moving from hating what is happening, to acknowledging, to allowing, to letting it be, and finally to letting go and accepting. When we have moments of pure acceptance, it's pretty cool.

I'm still in process myself and I accept some aspects of this new life better than others.

We are all learning to live and even to thrive with uncertainty

Questions/comments?

Writing this after the workshop, I want to thank those who attended and were so enthusiastic and excited about what mindfulness can offer!

Me at a meditation retreat with lots of back pain. When I paid attention to the **actual** sensations (pressure, heat, throbbing, tightness, electricity), the pain almost dissolved.