

What Can Mindfulness Training Do For You?

A Resource for Self-Represented Litigants

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Part One: Considering Mindfulness Training

- | | | |
|----|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. | How to use this resource | 3 |
| 2. | What – and who – this resource is for | 3 |
| 3. | Reducing your stress | 5 |
| 4. | How can Mindfulness help? | 6 |
| 5. | What is Mindfulness? | 6 |

Part Two: Three Mindfulness Practices

- | | | |
|----|---|-----------|
| 1. | Mindfulness Practice One: Focus Training | 7 |
| | <i>a. Attitude – NACK</i> | <i>8</i> |
| | <i>b. Body posture</i> | <i>9</i> |
| | <i>c. Breath</i> | <i>10</i> |
| | <i>d. Counting.....</i> | <i>11</i> |
| | <i>e. Distractions</i> | <i>11</i> |
| 2. | Mindfulness Practice Two: Body Scan | 12 |
| 3. | Mindfulness Practice Three: Magic Breaths | 13 |

Part Three: What Next?

- | | | |
|----|--------------------------|----|
| 1. | Mindfulness Works! | 13 |
| 2. | Continuing your Practice | 13 |

*“We are in desperate need of a new way of being –
in ourselves”*

Dan Siegel

Part One: Considering Mindfulness Training

1. How to use this resource

You may begin by reading through this brief introduction to Mindfulness practice. There is an accompanying video that explains these practices (<https://youtu.be/WOux9rha9YM>).

2. What - and who - this resource is for

This resource is designed to support you through the experience of representing yourself in a legal process. Perhaps you are experiencing a painful separation, or other upsetting conflict. You may be confronted with intense emotions; you might also feel pressured intellectually, and you may experience intense time pressures as well.

This is likely to mean that you are experiencing stress. Stress takes its toll. Research shows that Mindfulness is a powerful way to reduce stress.



Are you experiencing any of these stress factors?

- sleep difficulties
- loss of appetite or over eating
- poor concentration or poor memory retention
- performance dip
- uncharacteristic errors
- missed deadlines
- anger or tantrums
- violent or antisocial behaviour
- emotional outbursts
- alcohol or drug abuse
- nervous habits
- high level of irritation
- low sense of empathy
- being inconsiderate
- sadness/ hopelessness

The stressed state is not the body's intended home base and is therefore not healthy for us as a prolonged state.

For the sake of our bodies, relationships, performance, and quality of life, we cannot afford to function in a stressed state for an extended period of time.

Stress is really a perception of threat. This threat is the gap between the present moment and where we feel we want, should, or ought to be; mixed with a sense that we might not be able manage the gap.

Stress increases the levels of cortisol and adrenaline in our bodies. This does not just affect the body, but also the way our brain functions, and especially the operation of the prefrontal cortex – the region of the brain that orchestrates our thoughts and actions. Stress has a direct impact on the functions of the prefrontal cortex which include:

- Body regulation (heart rate, digestion)
- Attuned communication
- Emotional balance
- Response flexibility
- Fear modulation
- Empathy
- Insight (perspectives)
- Moral awareness (social good)
- Intuition (wisdom of the body)

You are probably thinking that these are all essential ingredients to effectively representing yourself in a legal case –as well as to functioning well in general - and you would be correct.



When the body and the brain perceive that we are under threat, everything becomes about just surviving. This means that empathy drops and we become very prone to rumination about the perceived threat.

3. Reducing your stress

The two most important things to do in order to reduce your stress are:

- ✓ Move your body – through movement the level of the stress hormone cortisol is lowered and endorphins are released, so if you are not moving much, see how you can make movement part of your day.
- ✓ Engage in Mindfulness training, using the mind to change the brain.

Sleep is also, of course, extremely important and you might already



be finding that a little challenging. The good news is that both Mindfulness training and exercising will help the body find a healthier sleeping pattern.

4. How can Mindfulness help?

Recent research in neuroscience demonstrates conclusively that Mindfulness:

- Increases focus and attention
- Improves quality of sleep
- Reduces stress significantly
- Reduces cellular aging
- Keeps the brain 'agile'
- Reduces blood pressure
- Improves memory
- Promotes emotional regulation
- Increases our experience of joy

5. What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is mind-training with attitude! It is the process of intentionally using our mind to change our brain.

Mindfulness is also about paying careful attention to reality, to what we are experiencing through our senses, our body, our emotions and our thoughts.

This is how Mindfulness training works:

- We start by training the brain to increase the ability to focus and to manage our attention. Attention management is key not only to shaping our brain in a positive way over the long term, but also for reducing stress and anxiety. What we pay attention to determines our mental state and gives us our experience and so, for example, if we are ruminating over a painful situation, this generates more stress and anxiety.
- We train the brain for *presence* as this improves all aspects of our lives, as well as reduces stress. We are present when we are aware of *this moment*, rather than being preoccupied with what we have to get done, or what is coming up next.

One of the most powerful ways to bring ourselves into the moment is to shift our focus to the body, as the body is only experienced in the present moment. We can pay attention to the breath, or how the body is experiencing the seat we are sitting on, or our feet on the floor, or our hands in our lap.

- We train the brain for *emotional regulation* so that we become less reactive and more proactive. This increasingly saves us from inner anguish and unnecessary strife in relationships.
- We train the brain for *kindness* as this is good for us physically, emotionally and mentally, and improves our relationships. An attitude of kindness is known to reduce stress and enhance mental flexibility.
- We train the brain for mental agility, for example, the ability to zoom out of our predicament and to access other perspectives, because this reduces the chances of staying stuck in conflict.

And finally, we train the brain for integration. Mindfulness training has been shown to do just that. An “integrated brain” is now considered a “healthy brain” and is the opposite of a rigid or chaotic mental experience. An integrated brain correlates with more empathy, emotional regulation and kindness.

Part Two: Three Mindfulness Practices

The three Mindfulness practices described below – and in my accompanying audio (<https://youtu.be/WOux9rha9YM>) - can help you to reduce your stress and be able to take better care of yourself while you go through the difficult process of representing yourself in a legal process. Pick one or more to try for just ten minutes a day.

You may begin by clicking on the link to the audio. If you would like to learn a little more first, read on....

1. Mindfulness Practice One: Focus Training

Attitude, Body Posture, Breath, Counting, Distractions

Being able to focus is a very powerful life skill. Imagine if you could switch off ruminating and worrying, and instead switch on gratitude and compassion.

The starting point of focus training is cultivating a mindful and focused attitude.

a. *Attitude – NACK*



Adopting the attitudes of Mindfulness training is essential. The attitudes themselves are all stress antidotes and they are interdependent - when we cultivate one we naturally enhance them all. The core attitudes are Non-judging, Acceptance, Curiosity and Kindness. A useful acronym to remember them by is NACK.

Non-judging: The mind tends to categorize experiences into: like, dislike and indifferent. Likes and dislikes come in the form of good/bad, wrong/right, fair/unfair, stupid/clever, thoughtful/ignorant etc. Non-judging is impossible, so the art is to recognize when we are judging and then to consider our thoughts 'interesting.'

Acceptance: This means accepting sensations, feelings or thoughts without distraction, engagement, justification, explanation or a story.

Acceptance allows us to relax and stay open to the facts before us. Acceptance is the first step after awareness or recognition.

Acceptance is not passivity. It is a courageous and essential step in the process of transformation.

Curiosity: Also described as “beginner’s mind”, or seeing things from a child’s perspective. Curiosity and openness of mind means we are not preoccupied with our past. When we are truly curious, we experience life in the present and move beyond the labels and constructions imposed on reality by the thinking mind. According to Siegel (2007), curiosity creates flexibility in self-regulation and may enable individuals to shift from their habitual ways of adapting and reacting.¹

Kindness: Kindness is the neurological antidote to negative mind states like envy, hatred, anger, miserliness, stress and so on. Kindness not only weakens negative tendencies, it uproots them. Kindness has scientifically proven positive effects on your psychological and physical well-being. The first step in cultivating kindness is to be kind *to yourself*. When you do Mindfulness training with kindness, you hold all that you notice: your thoughts, feelings and body sensations in an attitude of kindness and tenderness. Remind yourself that millions of others have had similar thoughts and feelings, and that these feelings will pass.

b. Body posture

It is very important to find a body posture that is conducive to Mindfulness training. This means a posture that keeps you calm and yet alert.

- ✓ **Ground yourself.** Make sure you have a firm connection with the ground beneath you. If you sit on a chair, place both feet on the floor. If you sit on the ground, sit cross-legged or in any other balanced and comfortable posture.
- ✓ **Maintain a straight back,** sit with a straight and yet relaxed back.

¹ Siegel Dan, “The Mindful Brain” 2007 134-163

- ✓ **Relax the shoulders, arms and neck:** it can be helpful to start by rolling your shoulders up and backwards to become aware of the possible tension held there.
- ✓ **Rest the hands:** you can place them in your lap and keep them open.
- ✓ **Close your eyes:** we minimize distraction when we gently close our eyes.



c. Breath

Start by noticing where you feel your breath. This may be the nostrils, the chest, the abdomen, or the gentle movement of the body as it is moving.

You can focus on the breath in so many ways. One way is to be curious around the sensations of the breath around your torso. Another way is to listen to the sound of the breath. An additional way is to notice the time between the outbreath and the in breath. You can focus on the breath in so many ways, one is to be curious around the sensations of the breath within the torso noticing, another can be the sound of the breath and another again can be noticing the space between the outbreath and the in breath.

The breath is a marker of our emotional state and by making the outbreath longer than the inbreath or by ensuring that the breath takes place in our lower abdomen, we can become more relaxed.

d. Counting

Counting helps to further focus on the breath. Count after each outbreath.

Where you start counting depends on the length of the Mindfulness training. For a 20 -minute session you can start from the number 60, count down to 0 and then count back up to 50. If you want a 10-minute session, then start counting at 30.



e. Distractions

Are you finding yourself distracted as you try this exercise? This is completely natural and normal. The point of the exercise is to strengthen your attention muscle and that happens when you catch your attention when it is wandering and then bring it back to focussing on the breath or the body.

Distractions come from six sources; eyes, ears, nose, mouth, body and mind. The mind tends to be preoccupied with the past, the future, or commentary. It also at times offers completely seemingly random thoughts. A distraction can also be a tickle or a noise or a body sensation.

It is useful to remember that the mind thinks just like the eyes see. The mind just pumps out thoughts. The attentive, trained mind starts to catch itself “straying”, and brings attention back to the breath.

The easiest way to get started is through listening to the audio download, so place these exercises on your iPad, phone or laptop.

You can download a video to help you further with focus training here: <https://soundcloud.com/the-mindfulness-clinic/sets/audio-downloads/s-2PWtN>



Know that you cannot do this incorrectly, just do it with an attitude of NACK

2. Mindfulness Practice Two: The Body Scan

You can also develop a Mindfulness practice by beginning with a body awareness training called The Body Scan. This is another exercise that is very powerful in bringing you “to your senses” and into the present moment, and out of anxiety and pointless rumination. This exercise is like going for a little wander through the body, being curious of any sensations that may be present within the body, and noticing these without judgment.

Bring attention first to the feet and be curious around what the feet are experiencing. What sensations can you notice in the feet? Then shift to the body in the seat, and now be curious around how the body is experiencing the chair and finally shift attention to the hands in the lap. Notice the warmth that is generated between the hands and the lap, first on the left-hand side and then on the right side.

Download The Body Scan here: <https://soundcloud.com/the-mindfulness-clinic/11-minute-body-scan?in=the-mindfulness-clinic/sets/audio-downloads>

3. Mindfulness Practice Three: Magic Breaths

Start by noticing the breath where it is most noticeable. Then gradually focus your attention on it around the belly button area.

You do the Magic Breath by simply counting alongside your in breath (inhalation) and then counting twice as long for the outbreath (exhalation), really allowing the breath to sink deeply into the body. Repeat this at least 5 times, where each outbreath is twice as long as the in breath. Now come back to just observing the breath while breathing naturally, just as you normally would.

Try to take just Five *Magic Breaths* – intentional, deep, conscious breaths - as often as you can. The magic in this breathing method is that it can change your physiology, taking you from a stressed state to a rest state.

Part Three: What's Next?

1. Mindfulness works!

It seems so obvious that brain function is key to life experience. However, it was relatively recently that research has shown the extent to which the brain can change, and the opportunities we therefore have to strengthen the most beneficial aspects. The brain is shaped by our daily experience and awareness; so the way our brain functions is affected by what is around us. What we pay attention to, and for how long, is crucial to the brain-change process.

2. Continuing your practice

If you devote just 10 minutes each day to each of these three Mindfulness practices – Focus Training, the Body Scan, and Magic Breaths – you will notice the difference.

If you would like to continue your Mindfulness education, click here to sign up for Charlotte Thaarup's regular newsletter:
<https://thefmindfulnessclinic.leadpages.co/mindfulness-for-sr-litigants/>

You are perfect and yet there is room for improvement.

