

Mindfulness Common Challenges (FAQs)

I was bored during the practice

- Boredom is a common and natural feeling that many people encounter during mindfulness practice. There's no right or wrong way to feel. The practice of mindfulness is about noticing whatever arises with a sense of curiosity and openness, and to “be with” or allow whatever is present as best you can.
- When you notice boredom, can you take a moment to gently explore it? What does boredom feel like in your body? Are there particular thoughts or sensations associated with it? Sometimes, boredom can teach us about our expectations or our desire for constant stimulation.
- Instead of trying to push the boredom away, try to make space for it. Practice staying present with boredom by allowing yourself to fully experience it without resistance. Simply be with it, offering kind and gentle attention.
- Mindfulness is about observing our experience just as it is, with kindness and without trying to change it. Boredom is an opportunity to practice “being with” an experience which can deepen your mindfulness practice,

I don't like this practice

- It's completely normal to have a range of reactions to mindfulness practices, including not liking some practices. Some practices may bring up discomfort or resistance, which can be important aspects to explore.
- You may take a moment to notice what specifically it is that you don't like. Are there particular thoughts, emotions, or sensations that arise when you think about or engage in the practice?
- Mindfulness is about observing our experiences with kindness, just as they are without trying to change them, including the ones we don't like. It may be helpful to bring a sense of curiosity to these feelings. What does 'not liking' feel like in your body? What feelings accompany it? Is it possible to make space for the experience of 'not liking'? You might experiment with noticing and allowing your experience rather than trying to push it away
- By exploring these reactions, we can learn a lot about ourselves and our habitual patterns to experiences of 'not liking'
- **Please note that 'not liking' is different from a distressing or overwhelming experience. If you are experiencing overwhelm or distress, use some of the tools described in group and outlined elsewhere in the resource document*

I don't feel like meditating

- It's quite common to not feel like meditating, especially when we're just starting or if we're going through a challenging time.
- Take a moment to notice what it feels like to not want to meditate. What thoughts come up? Are there any particular emotions or bodily sensations that accompany this feeling?
- Sometimes, simply observing and acknowledging our resistance without judgment can be helpful
- You might try to bring mindful awareness to this feeling of not wanting to meditate. Get curious about it and explore what it feels like in the body and the mind. See what you notice. Often, resistance itself can become a powerful object of mindfulness.

- It can also be helpful to connect with a meaningful reason to practice mindfulness. Remind yourself of why mindfulness matters to you and how it has been helpful
- It is often helpful to meditate with other people - consider joining a community or starting something yourself, even with one other person

Sleepiness

- Falling asleep during mindfulness practice is quite common, especially if you're tired or if the practice is very relaxing.
- Sleepiness may be a signal that your body needs rest, and you may wish to honor that need.
- If you find yourself falling asleep often, you might try to practice earlier in the day when you are more alert, a practice that involves more movement, such as mindful walking, or keeping your eyes open during the meditation.
- You can also bring a sense of curiosity to the feeling of sleepiness. What does it feel like in your body and mind? Are there particular sensations, thoughts, or emotions that accompany it? Increased awareness can help you understand your body's signals better and adjust your practice accordingly
- Notice if you react with self-criticism or with compassion. As best you can, be mindful of judgments that may arise about sleepiness and practice relating to your experience with kindness

"I can't sit still for that long" or "It's hard to sit still"

- Many people find it challenging to sit still, especially at first. It's important to listen to your body and find a position that feels comfortable for you, whether that's sitting, standing, or even lying down.
- You might also explore what it feels like to notice the urge to move without acting on it immediately. What sensations arise in your body? What thoughts or emotions come up? If you need to reposition yourself, see if you can notice the urge to move before you move and then move with awareness of the movement.
- It may be helpful to go on a brisk walk or engage in other forms of movement other before moving into stillness
- The exploration of restlessness can become part of mindfulness practice. It can be helpful to remember that mindfulness is not about forcing stillness but about being present with whatever arises without judgment and with kindness, including restlessness or discomfort.

Finding time to practice or "Lack of Time" as a Barrier

- This challenge will always come up. It is human nature to have difficulty changing habits, and introducing mindfulness practice for most of us represents a significant shift in how we

habitually go about our days, and inevitably some people will find it very hard to find time to do the meditation practice.

- Finding time for practice can be challenging, especially with a busy schedule. Mindfulness doesn't always require long periods of sitting meditation. In addition to formal practices, you can integrate mindfulness into your daily activities, such as mindfulness of routine activities like hand washing.
- The key is to bring awareness to whatever you're doing. You might start with very small, manageable practices, like taking a few mindful breaths before starting your day or being fully present while brushing your teeth.
- These small moments of mindfulness can add up and make a significant difference. Over time, you may find it easier to make more space for your practice
- Mindfulness is an experiential practice and we get out what we put in; in this approach we learn by doing, and in order to learn we need to do.

Starting any new habit can be difficult. Here are some strategies that might help make it easier.

- It helps to find a **regular time each day** for meditation practice; in doing it at the same time each day, meditation practice will itself become a habit, and a healthy one! (Think about when might be a good time of day for you.)
- **Habit stacking.** This means adding your mindfulness practice to an existing habit. For example, you might practice mindfulness right after brushing your teeth in the morning or before going to bed at night. By linking it to something you already do regularly, you're more likely to remember and make it a part of your routine.
- **Plan for it.** Set a specific time each day for your mindfulness practice and mark it on your calendar. Treat it like any other important appointment you have.
- Try to **make it easy.** This could involve setting up a dedicated space for your practice, having any materials you need readily available, like a recording if you're using guided audio, or setting up a comfortable spot where you won't be disturbed. It's similar to how you might prepare for going to the gym—having your workout clothes and gear ready to go makes it easier to follow through.
- **Accountability** can also be very powerful. Find a friend, family member, or community that can support you. Maybe you can practice together or check in with each other regularly about your progress. Having someone else involved can provide motivation and encouragement.
- **Meaning.** Link your practice to something personally meaningful. Reflect on why practicing mindfulness matters to you. What benefits are you hoping to gain? How do you see it impacting your life positively? Connecting with your personal reasons for practicing can provide a strong motivation to keep going.
- **The best practice is the one you do.** Start with a short practice that feels manageable. It's often better to do shorter practices more frequently than longer practices less frequently. If a 5-minute practice is what's most possible for you right now, that's a great place to start. You will gain benefits from even a short practice, although longer practices can offer more depth and benefit over time.

- And if from time to time you still find yourself battling with your alarm clock, and the warmth of a comfortable bed is seductively winning out over getting up to meditate, why not just meditate in bed? You are lying there observing your mental dialogue anyway: "I need to get up and meditate, but I am so tired and ooooh it is so nice just lying here . . . but I should get up..." So why not shift that experience ever so slightly and bring to that a quality of mindfulness and practice on the spot? There is nothing special about practicing on a mat, meditation cushion, or in a certain location.

Dealing with Distractions (noisy/busy environments)

- Noise can certainly be a challenge when trying to practice mindfulness, but it can also be an opportunity to deepen your practice.
- As best you can, try to acknowledge the noise without judgment. The principles of mindfulness invite us to be present with whatever arises, even if it's not what we prefer. Can you bring a sense of curiosity to the sounds you hear? Instead of seeing them as distractions, try to observe them as part of your present experience.
- You might even include the noise in your practice. Notice the sounds as they come and go, without labeling them as good or bad. Pay attention to how your mind and body react to the noise. Does it create tension or frustration? Can you observe these reactions with a sense of curiosity and acceptance?
- Additionally, finding small adjustments might help. If possible, you could experiment with different times or places for your practice, such as early morning or a different room. Using earplugs or noise-canceling headphones with a gentle guided meditation may also be beneficial.
- Remember, mindfulness is about learning to be with whatever is present, including noise. In this way, there is the possibility of transforming a seemingly disruptive experience into a rich part of your practice. Embracing the noise as part of the mindfulness journey can help cultivate greater acceptance and equanimity in everyday life.
- Ultimately, the best practice is the one you do, regardless of the conditions. Each moment of mindfulness, even in a noisy environment, can contribute to your overall well-being.

No "Ideal" Place to Practice

- Many of us have an image in our mind of what meditation "should" be - quiet, calm, uninterrupted by external noises, events, or circumstances. However, such ideals are usually not compatible with our actual experience and if we keep waiting for these ideal circumstances then this typically turns into a barrier to regular practice.
- It is natural that we have a sense of what an "ideal" environment for meditation might look like: quiet, comfortable temperature, no other place we need to be... And then the phone rings, our partner yells out our name looking for us, someone knocks at the door, the thought: "Did I remember to turn the oven off?" This may upset us or have an impact on us in some way or another.

- Unexpected distractions and imperfect circumstances make for a great opportunity to see what we do when things don't go as planned. When conditions are not what we want them to be, an experiment you might try to bring a sense of curiosity to what happens next? Do thoughts spin out of control? Do you prematurely end the practice? Do you persist practicing but then hold onto a grudge after the practice ends? **All this can happen because we have an idea of what and how things should be.** We can use this experience itself as a part of the exercise of mindfulness. Distractions can be noted as a part of our experience - "Ah, there is a dog barking across the street" or the need for conditions to be other than they - and then we can return to our anchor... over and over again.

Chronic Pain

- Chronic pain is a significant and often overwhelming experience. It is easy to see pain as the enemy and understandably resist pain through physical tension, emotional reactivity, judgments, catastrophizing or avoidance. Unfortunately, resisting the pain can amplify suffering as outlined in the equation: **Pain x Resistance = Suffering.**
- Bringing a kind mindful attention to the pain, and the resistance to the pain, can help reduce suffering.
- The saying "**pain is inevitable but suffering is optional**" illustrates how we all experience pain in various forms and how we respond to the pain is what creates suffering.
- **Mindfulness supports us to meet our experience as it is, with a sense of curiosity and openness and without judgment.** When pain arises, instead of trying to push it away, can you bring a gentle awareness to it? What does it feel like in your body? It can be helpful to move beyond the label of "pain" and to describe the experience in more detail - is it sharp, dull, throbbing, stabbing? Does it change over time? Is it constant or intermittent? Where are the sensations in the body? Do they move? With kind, curious attention, people often notice the sensations change and move and are not as constant as previously believed.
- It is also helpful to **notice patterns of thought** that arise in response to the pain, such as "*pain has ruined my life*".
- Bring awareness to the **feelings** that may arise like anger, fear or sadness. What body sensations are associated with these feelings? Can you soften towards them? Breathe into them? Make space for them? This will support allowing the emotions to pass.
- As best you can, acknowledge the entirety of your experience (sensations, emotions, thoughts, urges) in the moment without judgment and with a sense of compassion. It's hard to experience chronic pain.
- When pain is higher, it can be harder to explore the sensations. Sometimes it's a balancing act between going into or exploring the pain, and getting completely overwhelmed by it. **Pendulating** awareness between an area of pain and an area with less pain or another anchor (like sights, sounds or the ground), can be a practical way to incorporate kindness. Having a certain lightness of touch, touching in with pain, working at that edge, and then shifting to another object of meditation (like the breath, or sounds, or sights) may provide a way to steady yourself and not be "blown away" by the pain.

- **Holding the pain in a larger field of awareness** can also be helpful. To broaden awareness beyond the pain, notice other parts of the body that are not in pain, or sights and sounds in the surrounding space, in addition to the painful sensations. This creates awareness of the pain *and* the entirety of the body and the space you are in. This helps to **broaden the field of awareness** around the pain and supports not getting completely overwhelmed by the pain.
- **Self-compassion is one of the most helpful tools for working with pain.** Acknowledge that it's hard to have the experience of pain at any given moment. You might wish to place a hand on your heart or the area of pain as a way of providing warmth and compassion. Silently offer oneself kind words, like 'May I be kind to myself in this moment' or 'May I find peace and ease despite the pain.'
- If you find sitting practices too painful, you might try other positions like standing or lying down, or other forms of practice, such as mindful walking or yoga, which can be adapted to your comfort level.
- The **goal of mindfulness is not to eliminate pain, but to change our relationship to it** and respond more skillfully. By approaching pain with a kind and compassionate awareness, we can reduce the additional suffering that comes from resisting or resenting it and have the opportunity to experience freedom.

Mind Wandering or “I can’t stop my thoughts”

- Mind wandering or having lots of thoughts is no problem: it is what minds do, whether during or outside of meditation practice.
- **The goal of mindfulness is not to stop thoughts.** Our minds naturally produce thoughts, just as our hearts beat and our lungs breathe. **Trying to stop your thoughts can actually create more tension and frustration.** Instead, mindfulness invites us to observe our thoughts without getting caught up in them.
- When starting to practice mindfulness, it is common to become more aware of just how busy the mind is. **This increased awareness of thoughts is mindfulness itself.** It is a sign that the observer quality of the mind is developing, so being aware of thinking in meditation is good news! Without awareness, thoughts can quickly build momentum and worsen reactivity.
- It's very common to feel like we're not doing mindfulness 'right,' especially when it comes to thoughts. One of the key principles of mindfulness is recognizing that there is no right or wrong way to practice—it's about bringing a kind and non judgmental awareness to whatever arises in the present moment, including a busy mind. The practice is to notice when the mind wanders, and with gentleness and kindness toward ourselves, return, over and over again, back to the object of meditation. And if the experience is "struggling" to maintain this awareness, we can notice this sense of struggle as simply another experience with a kind and gentle awareness, and return back to the object of meditation.
- When thoughts arise during your practice, try to **notice** them with a sense of curiosity and without judgment. For some, metaphors are helpful such as imagining thoughts as clouds passing through the sky or leaves floating down a stream. You don't need to chase them away or hold onto them—just let them come and go.

- You might also practice gently **labeling** your thoughts as 'thinking' or 'planning' when you notice them. This can help create a bit of distance between you and your thoughts, making it easier to return to the present moment.
- **Noticing your thoughts means you are being mindful.** Even long-term meditators report having thoughts passing through their minds much of the time; the difference is they get "hooked" by the content of the thoughts far less often and are able to notice thoughts and get distance from them. Over time, with gentle persistence, you may find it easier to rest your attention and experience moments of quiet. But even if your mind remains active, you're still benefiting from the practice.

“I’m not doing it right, I’m a bad meditator”

- Most of us have some idea of what meditation “should” look like—ideas such as emptying the mind, switching it off, or achieving some special state— and when we have a meditation period where we are just thinking, thinking, thinking ... lost in thought the whole time, a common response is to think "I blew it!"
- Noticing thoughts like “I am a bad meditator” is awareness of present moment experience. We all have painful or difficult thoughts. Mindfulness helps to develop the capacity to notice or observe painful thoughts without judgment or trying to change them or make them go away, and with a sense of curiosity, interest and kindness.
- Mindfulness is awareness training. So as best you can, notice thoughts about "success" or "failure" or "doing it right" with a kind, nonjudgmental attitude and continue practicing. As long as you are practicing the mindfulness exercises regularly, with an attitude of curiosity and openness to your experiences, you are doing it “right”.