

Mindfulness and Meditation

*The Mindful Twenty-Something: Life Skills to Handle
Stress...and Everything Else* 1st Edition by Holly Rogers

What is resilience?

When faced with a tragedy, natural disaster, health concern, relationship, work, or school problem, resilience is how well a person can adapt to the events in their life.

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What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the act of paying attention to your present moment experience with an attitude of compassionate curiosity. Rather than worrying about the future or rehashing the past, you hold your attention on the moment at hand.

The idea is to be fully engaged with your life as it unfolds, while cultivating, as best you can, an attitude that is kind and compassionate. The ability to be mindful is actually a capacity that is naturally present in all of us, though most of us haven't spent much time developing it.

Mindfulness helps you develop the internal conditions that lead to enduring happiness so that you are not so vulnerable to the constantly changing external conditions of your life experience. Thus, it offers you the opportunity to maintain your peace of mind even on your busiest days.

Weight lifting for your brain.

You can train your brain, just like you train your body. Just as your muscles get stronger if you lift weights, your brain's capacity to develop steady, non-judgmental attention (mindfulness) gets more powerful when you practice meditation.

When we build our muscles, we start with lighter weights and work our way up to the heavy stuff. The same holds true for building your mindfulness muscle. We start out with the light-weight of a few minutes of meditation practice, seated in a quiet place. As our mindfulness muscle gets stronger, we can lift heavier weights, such as staying focused and calm in the middle of an intense disagreement.

We practice with the light weights so we will be ready for the heavy lifting that is sure to come our way.



The river of thought just keeps flowing.

Our minds are like a river, constantly flowing with thoughts. Sometimes the river is crashing along with giant waves of excitement, worry or wanger, and sometimes it is moving more gently, the thoughts coming at a slower pace. But it never stops completely.

When you meditate, you are not trying to stop the river. You are just trying to get out of the stream so you don't drown. You climb out of the river and on to the bank by simply shifting your attention back to the flow of your breath or whatever sensation you are using as your touchstone to the present moment.

During a mediation session, you will find you fall back into the river and climb out over and over. With practice, you'll find it gets easier to both catch yourself when you fall in and to climb back out again.



Be judicious with your judgements.

Most humans have the mental habit of forming judgements about absolutely everything. It is natural to automatically like/dislike/agree/disagree/want/don't want every aspect of your experience.

Additionally, you probably also regularly judge and criticize your own thoughts, feelings and actions.

All of these automatic assessments and assumptions lie at the heart of some of our most unhelpful biases, stereotypes and self-imposed limitations.

Mindfulness practice allows us to start noticing these judgments so that we can stop being controlled by them. Once you see the judgements, you can start to question them, which opens up whole new worlds of possibilities.



Why is the present moment peaceful?

Like the clear skies and smooth water in the eye of a hurricane, the present moment is a safe haven in a tumultuous life. Problems and worries may swirl around you, but when you are anchored in the present, you are less susceptible to being swamped by feelings of stress.

Much of our stress is caused by our minds moving forward to worry about something that might happen in the future, or traveling back in time to rehash something we regret from the past.

When we hold our attention steadily in the present, the pressure created by worry begins to recede. With practice, we can learn to access this peacefulness of the present with ease.

But don't believe it just because we say it is so! Do some meditation practice yourself and see what you notice.

Breath Awareness



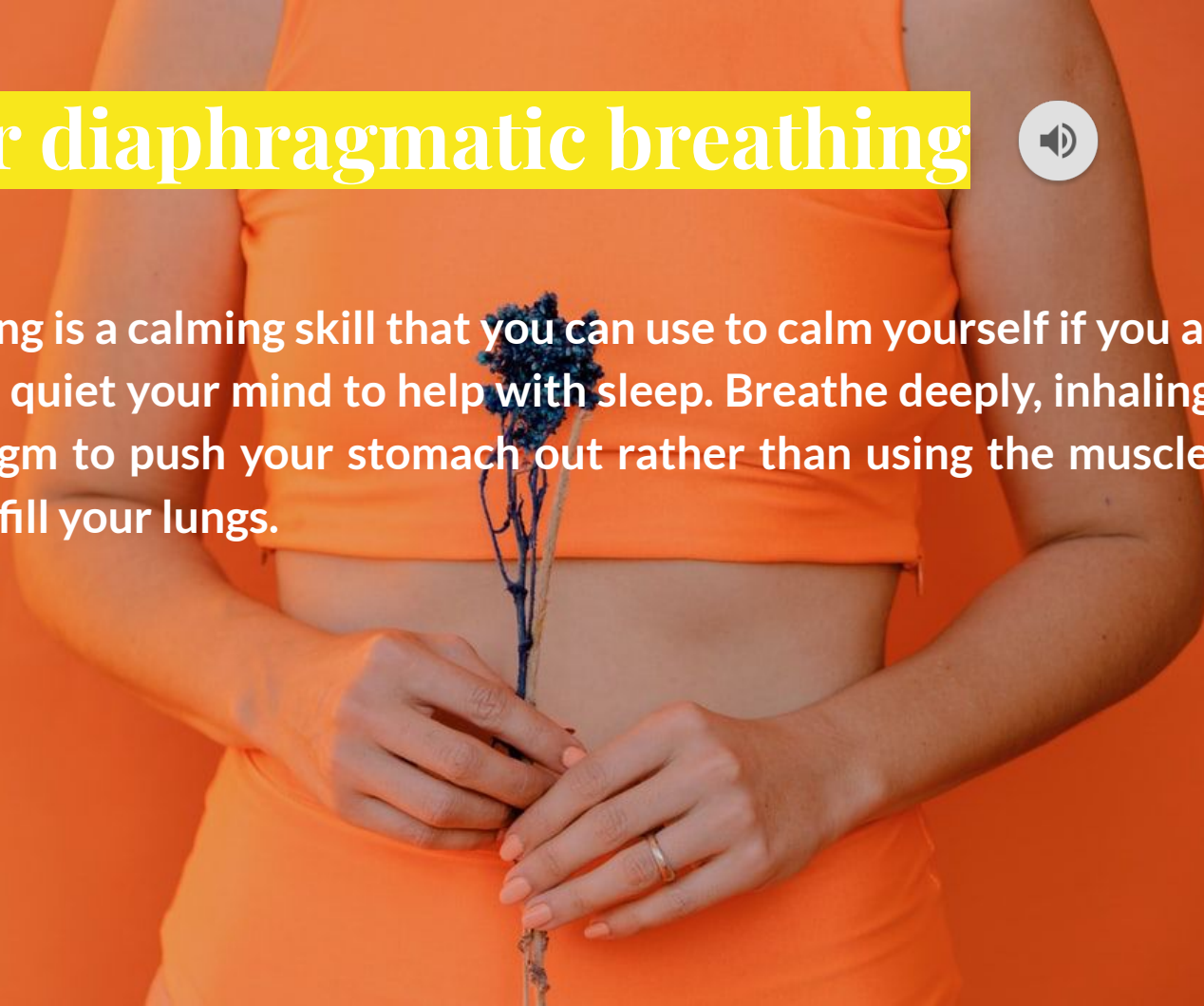
and breathe

Breath awareness is the most common anchor for present moment awareness. Your breath is always there and the sensations associated with breathing are always changing. Any time, any place you can drop your awareness into your breathing and ground yourself in the present moment.

Belly or diaphragmatic breathing

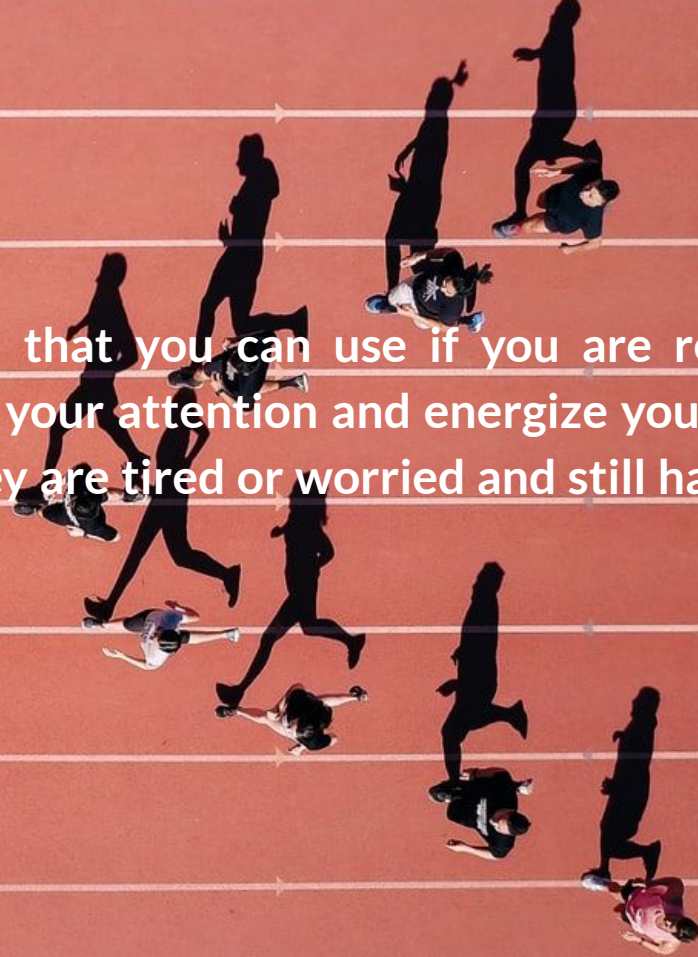


Belly breathing is a calming skill that you can use to calm yourself if you are feeling anxious or to quiet your mind to help with sleep. Breathe deeply, inhaling by using your diaphragm to push your stomach out rather than using the muscles of your chest wall to fill your lungs.



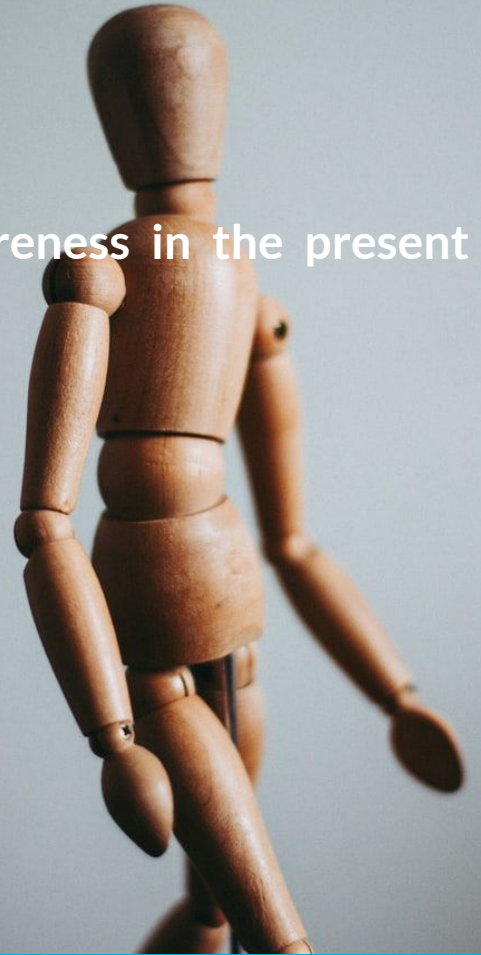
Dynamic Breathing

Dynamic breathing is a very active skill that you can use if you are restless, anxious, or tired and need a way to focus your attention and energize your body. Students use dynamic breathing when they are tired or worried and still have lots of work to finish.



Body Scan

Use physical sensations in the body to anchor your awareness in the present moment.



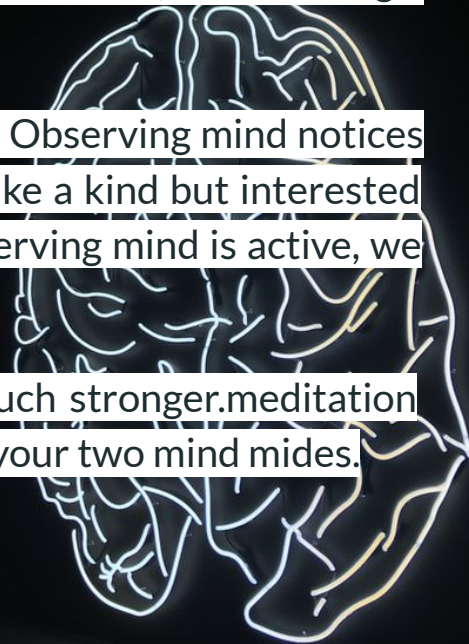
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Observing Mind and Thinking Mind.

For simplicity, we can imagine there are two mind modes: thinking mind and observing mind. Thinking mind is active when you are solving problems, making lists, worrying about your work, or rehashing a past mistake.

Observing mind is the part of your mind that is active when you are mindful. Observing mind notices your thoughts and reactions but doesn't make judgments or criticisms. It's like a kind but interested bystander, patiently taking in all that the present moment offers. When observing mind is active, we tend to be more calm and focused, and and less judgmental.

Usually, our thinking minds get much more exercise, so they tend to be much stronger. meditation develops your observing mind, helping you find a healthier balance between your two mind mides.



Finding balance.



Our minds do a terrific job noticing all the problems and difficulties we face. Yet, they tend to overlook the brighter spots in our day.

This habit is called “negative cognitive bias” and it happens quite naturally and automatically. Unfortunately, it makes it hard to have a balanced or optimistic view of your situation.

You can use mindfulness to intentionally give equal weight to the full range of your experience, including the more positive or even neutral experiences.

So, for example, if you are driving to work and realize your thoughts are all about an argument you had the night before, you could use mindfulness to shift your attention to take in a broader perspective. You might then notice the morning sun coming through the trees, the feel of the steering wheel in your hands, the feel of the breeze from an open window, and the sound of music coming from the radio.

With this broader perspective, the agitation of last night’s argument is balanced by other experiences and less likely to make you feel overwhelmed.

The antidote to chronic dissatisfaction.

The more you practice mindfulness, the more you get familiar with the way your mind works. One pattern you will likely notice is that your mind tends to be good at figuring out how things could be better than they are.

You're happy with your grade until you hear someone else has a better one. Your phone works fine but you really want to upgrade it. No matter how many pairs of shoes you have you need one more. You'll notice this pattern when you meditate and find yourself wishing that your mind was more still or your body more relaxed.

This tendency to compare yourself to others and be aware of how things could be better is the source of chronic dissatisfaction. The antidote is to notice your mind is telling you a story about how things could be better, and then without judging yourself, bring your attention fully into the present, engaging with each moment just as it is.

Acceptance reduces suffering.

We all have to deal sometimes with problems or circumstances we don't like. Our natural tendency is to fight against the problem, but often our struggles just make our situation worse.

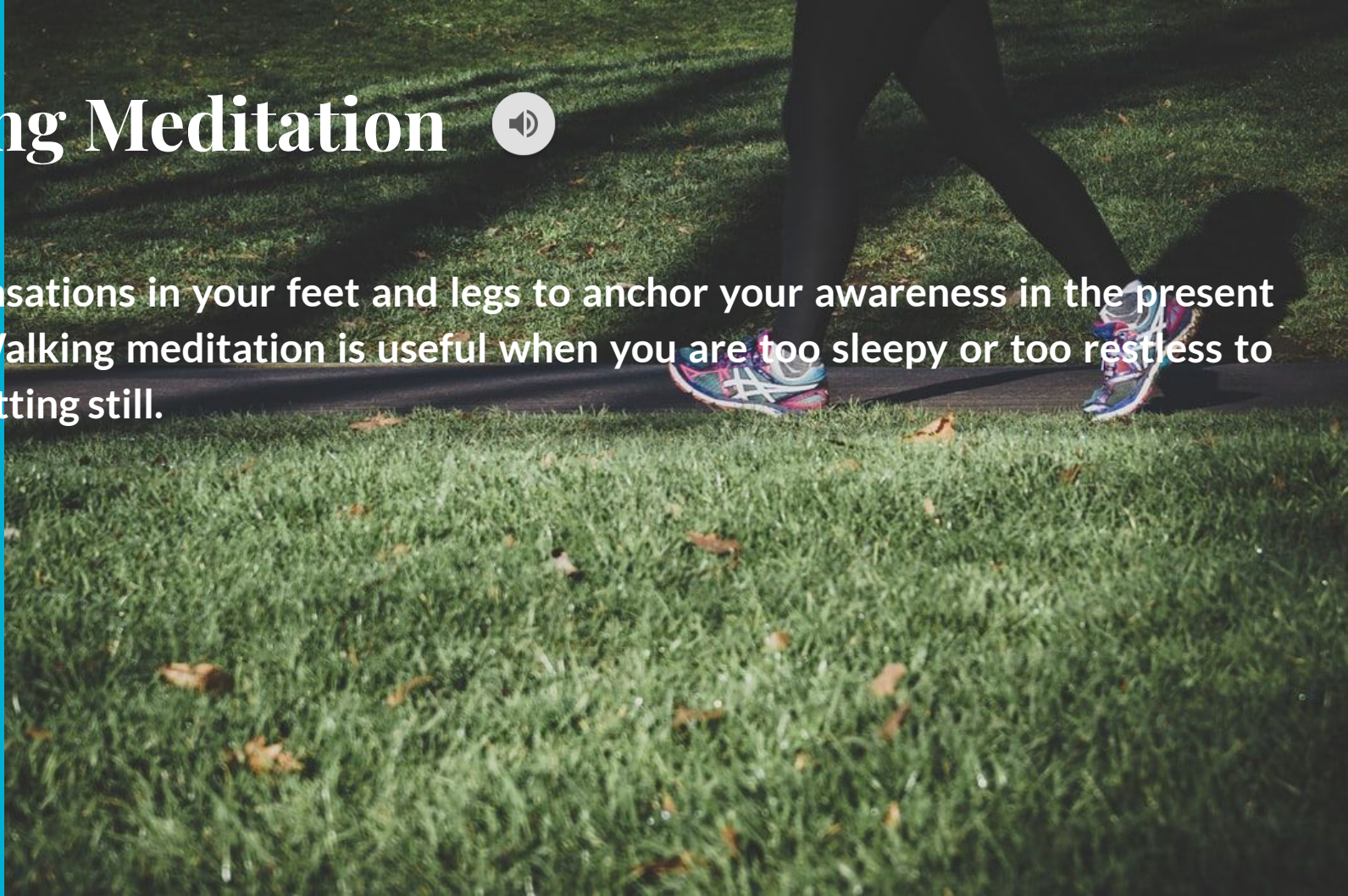
Mindfulness teaches us that in order to find a way through a difficult situation, we have to fully understand and accept it first.

What does acceptance look like? It definitely does not mean liking or agreeing with every situation. It also doesn't mean being passive about changing things. In fact, it is just the opposite. Acceptance is about seeing the full truth of the moment, so you can make wise decisions about the best, next step.

So, if you find yourself stuck in the mud, you can spin your wheels and bang your head on the steering wheel for a long time. Or you can accept that you are stuck, get out of the car, and start walking.

Walking Meditation

Use the sensations in your feet and legs to anchor your awareness in the present moment. Walking meditation is useful when you are too sleepy or too restless to meditate sitting still.

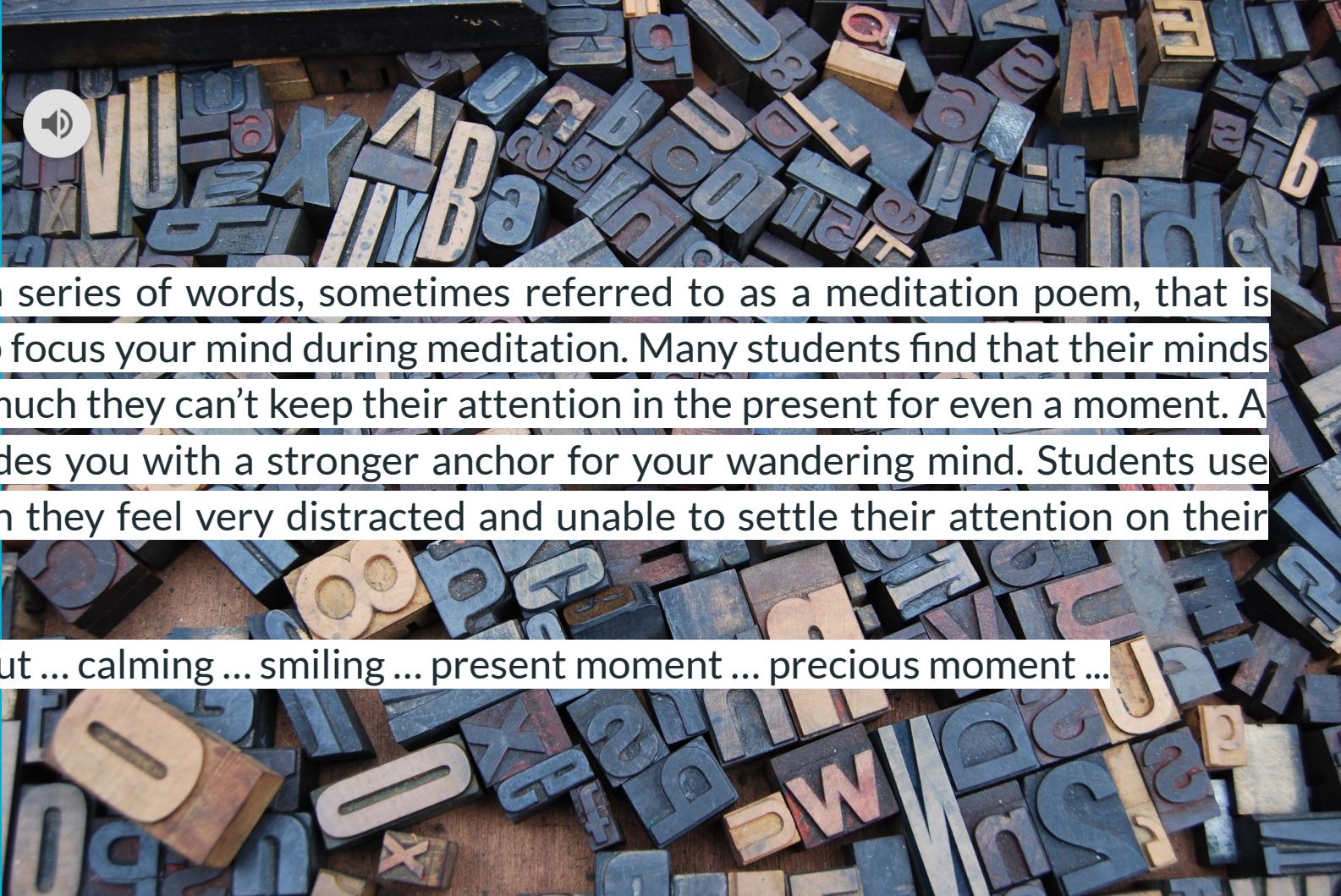


Gatha



A gatha is a series of words, sometimes referred to as a meditation poem, that is used to help focus your mind during meditation. Many students find that their minds wander so much they can't keep their attention in the present for even a moment. A gatha provides you with a stronger anchor for your wandering mind. Students use gathas when they feel very distracted and unable to settle their attention on their breath.

Think: in .. out ... calming ... smiling ... present moment ... precious moment ...



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Change happens.

The only constant is change, right? And change can be hard. It is even harder when we fear it and fight it. An absolute truth of life is that nothing stays the same. Our lives are in constant flux, every moment different from the one before.

Understanding impermanence helps you to hang on when you are struggling with difficult experiences or emotions; you understand that our situation is temporary. And when life is giving you sunshine and roses, your awareness of impermanence helps you get in touch with the beauty and preciousness of each moment, so you enjoy it all the more.

Meditation practice helps us ride more easily the waves of change that make up our lives, trusting we can surf the big ones, and enjoying the calm seas when they come.

You are a human being; not a human doing.

Our culture emphasizes achievements so much that it can feel like you have no value or purpose if you are not achieving something big. This approach to life can make you lose sight of what you truly care about.

To create a life that feels rich, full and meaningful you have to change the questions you organize your life around. Instead of asking, what do i want to accomplish? Ask, what do I want my life to be about? What kind of person do I want to be?

The answers to these questions direct you to a present focused life, organized around your values. maybe you value having solid relationships, making a difference in others' lives, or financial security.

These are values that can be acted on in any moment and don't require grand achievements. In most every moment, there is an opportunity to move in the direction of your most cherished values. Use your growing mindfulness to become more aware of your values and start leaning into them.

Blissed out

Being guided by your values is not the same as following your bliss. Young adults are often advised to follow their bliss by pursuing jobs they feel passionate about. This advice may not be as helpful as it seems.

For one thing, not everyone has a passion that translates into a career. For another, many of the jobs out there are not jobs that necessarily inspire passion, even though they involve important work.

You don't need to follow your bliss into the future; your bliss is right now, right here. Waking up in a warm bed is blissful. Drinking cold water or eating your favorite food is blissful. Being smiled at by a stranger is blissful.

Bliss is nothing special in that it is not rare; it is here, all the time. At the same time, it is the most precious treasure in the world. A treasure all around you, if you just take a moment to find it.

Guided Imagery

A way of calming your body and mind if you are feeling particularly anxious or stressed. Using all of your senses, you imagine yourself in a comfortable and safe space, which allows your body and mind to quiet and calm.

Labeling Thoughts



This skill helps manage strong feelings that may arise during meditation. Sometimes identifying the feelings that are underneath persistent or recurring thoughts can be very helpful, keeping you from getting carried too far away from the present moment.



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Respond more; react less

One of the great benefits of mindfulness is that it allows you to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively when something happens that triggers a quick burst of intense emotion.

Having the capacity to regulate your responses helps curb things like road rage and emotional eating, but it is particularly valuable for navigating rocky moments in your relationships.

Have you ever found yourself reacting impulsively when someone says something that pushes your most sensitive buttons? In that moment of intense emotion, you may do or say something that you later regret.

Mindfulness helps by opening a tiny space between the onset of a wave of emotion and the eruption of words from your mouth. Your observing mind can slip into that space, feel the emotion in your body, see the impulse to react, and create awareness of other choices. All of which allows for a more thoughtful response.

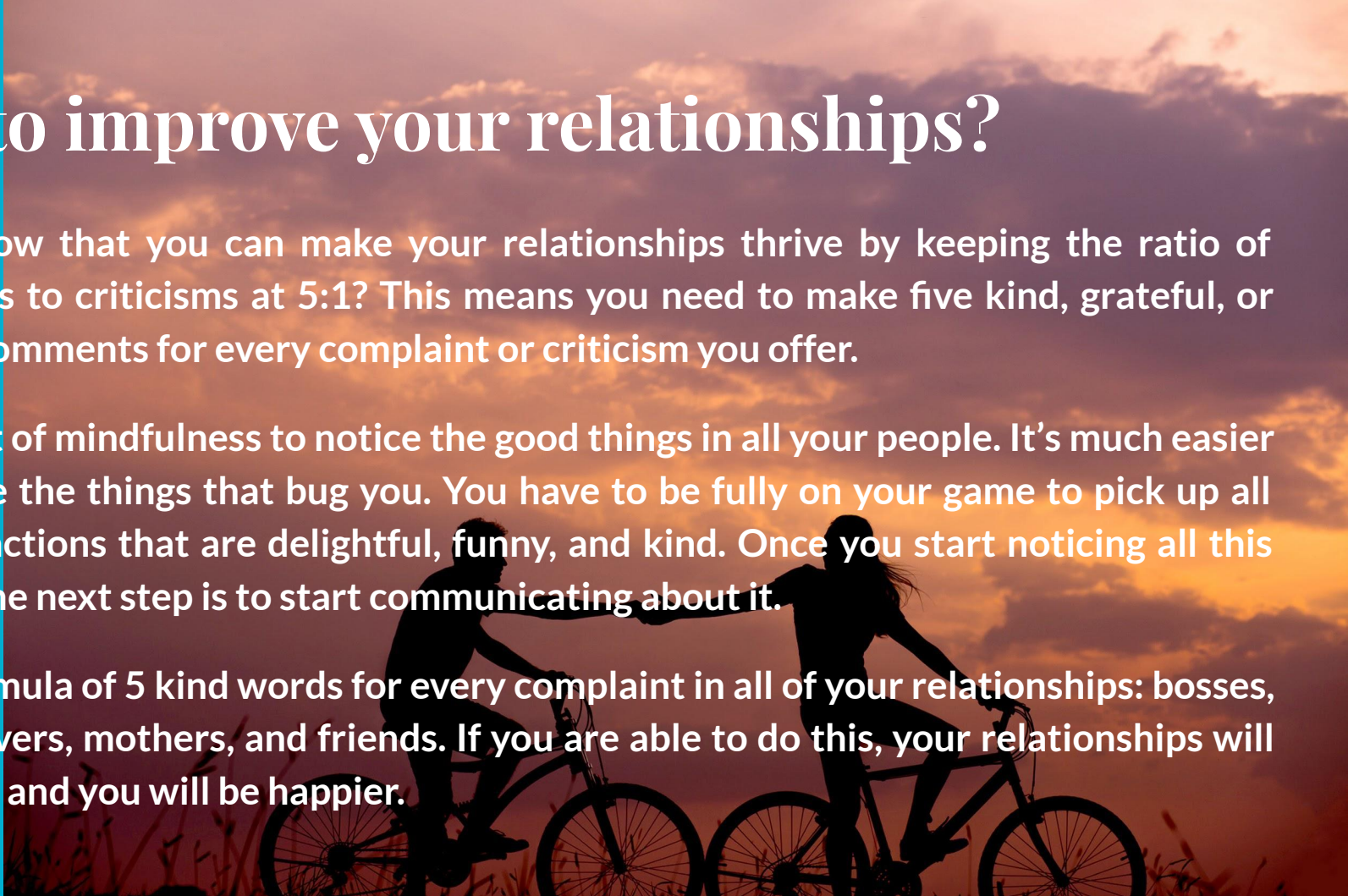
These thoughtful responses feel more comfortable and usually produce better results.

Want to improve your relationships?

Did you know that you can make your relationships thrive by keeping the ratio of compliments to criticisms at 5:1? This means you need to make five kind, grateful, or agreeable comments for every complaint or criticism you offer.

It takes a lot of mindfulness to notice the good things in all your people. It's much easier to recognize the things that bug you. You have to be fully on your game to pick up all those interactions that are delightful, funny, and kind. Once you start noticing all this goodness, the next step is to start communicating about it.

Use this formula of 5 kind words for every complaint in all of your relationships: bosses, teachers, lovers, mothers, and friends. If you are able to do this, your relationships will be healthier and you will be happier.



Small acts of kindness matter.

Most people who practice mindfulness on a regular basis find they get better at seeing the silliness in life, celebrating differences, and forgiving foibles. All of this adds up to greater self-compassion and kindness towards others.

These little changes in ourselves make tiny ripples that flow into the world, making someone else's life a little easier, who in turn makes some else's life a little easier, and so on. And of course, we benefit from these little ripples too, as many of them wash back towards us.

Small changes can produce big impacts, if you are a young adult, you likely have many years ahead of you to watch the results of positive change compound and grow over time. Even small shifts in your twenties can produce profound benefits over the full arc of your life, both for you and for those with whom your life path intersects.

Eating Meditation



Pay very careful attention to all of the sensations involved in eating, as well as the thoughts and feelings you have when you eat. Eating meditation enhances the pleasure in eating and allows you to consume your food in a more healthy way. Listen to the reactions and needs of your body.



Labeling Feelings



This skill helps to manage strong feelings that may arise during meditation. Sometimes identifying the feelings that are underneath persistent or recurring thoughts can be very helpful, keeping you from getting carried too far away from the present moment.



Loving Kindness

If you are in the habit of criticizing yourself or have relationships in your life that are sometimes challenging, this meditation can help. This skill helps you cultivate self-compassion so that you can be a bit easier on yourself, and maybe everyone else, too.

Resources

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