

# On Becoming More Compassionate Therapists, Teachers, Students, Parents, Humans: The Path to Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction

*By Anthony Pantaleno, Ph.D.*

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If you haven't already decided to skip past this article which seems to offer some glitzy, one-size-fits-all solution which it may not be able to deliver – please read on and welcome to the journey. To anyone who might have told me thirty years ago that I would be writing a professional article extolling the virtues of meditation, I probably would have offered up one of those really satisfying belly-laughs. After all, my only contact with the subject matter up until that time was the highly publicized fanfare which followed John, Paul, George, Ringo, and their entire entourage as they traveled to India to visit with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1968 at the height of Beatlemania. Not exactly a scientifically valid, evidenced-based research source! After all, I had been trained by one of the world's master cognitive-behavioral therapy legends himself. I can still hear the raspy Bronx-twanged voice of Dr. Albert Ellis as he lectured from his West 65th Street office about how therapists needed to “cherchez le should”, track down and chip away at those pesky but willful irrational beliefs that plagued their clients and uproot them once and for all with a series of rational-behavioral homework assignments.

I will always remain true to the teachings of Big Al, and to all he taught me about the basic human tendency to distort our cognitive universe to the degree that we sometimes get sucked into the black holes of our own irrational alternative realities. Twenty-five years later, just when I thought I had FINALLY learned it all, someone has to come along, upset the apple cart, and make more work for me. The idea is put on my plate that there is another way to deal with the stuff of our minds – our thoughts – and that they, much like our perceptions,

emotions, and memories are just one part of a much larger vessel called simply our “awareness”. Disputing irrational thoughts was certainly a worthwhile and necessary part of enjoying mental health, but there was so much more yet to learn...

Skip to an early Sunday morning in late August about five years ago. I am sitting in the local laundromat with a pile of post-vacation family clothes. I have rationally determined that these could be dealt with much more efficiently by running ten simultaneous loads, rather than hosting a “wash-in” all Sunday long. During that long morning, I am reborn. Not in the Christian sense, mind you, but in the way that a child experiences something new for the first time – her first snowfall, his first taste of an unknown food. While my wash is on its first spin, the ideas in the book I am reading come to life. The author, Jon Kabat-Zinn is speaking to me. He is reaching into my heart. He is resonating in that place in my soul that only rarely is touched, except by profound spiritual or personal human experiences.

Full Catastrophe Living – that's the title of the book before I forget to tell you. It is the story of the beginnings of the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979. I suppose that the title drew me in, since so many of the young people with whom I work would certainly describe their young lives as catastrophic. The clinic was born out of the frustration of UMass medical professionals who had taken their patients through all known treatments for some of life's most serious illnesses – and came up short in helping them to feel better

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They ultimately referred these persons to the stress reduction clinic and to Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn. Keenly aware that these patients are very suspicious about what psychology could offer them when the whole of mainstream American medicine had not been able to fill the bill, this renegade psychologist decides that if he cannot cure, he can at least teach these suffering patients how to suffer less and how to accept their sufferings more gracefully. He invites them to attend an eight-week course in mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), which meets once a week for two hours, with a mandatory daily 45-minute homework practice to boot! The East meets the West and mindfulness as we now know it enters the halls of American culture for the first time.

So what exactly does this term “mindfulness” really mean? It certainly conjures images of swamis and gurus in white robes with long white beards. I KNOW for certain that I never heard the term in graduate school, or from my parents, my friends, or my many esteemed life mentors. Where had this been hiding all my life? The easiest way to begin conceptualizing “mindfulness” is to ask you to recall something that we are all familiar with, the polar opposite of mindfulness – “mindlessness”. It’s time for some good old-fashioned self-analysis. How many of you have ever...

1. Missed your exit while driving on the parkway only to “wake up” somewhere else than where you intended to go?
2. Walked into a room to get something only to forget what you were looking for?
3. Enjoyed a delicious meal with friends yet could not recall exactly what you ate or how the food tasted?
4. Been unable to get to sleep at night because your mind was so busy reviewing yesterday’s stressors or contemplating tomorrow’s “to do” list?

5. In the middle of a shower, forgot whether you already washed your hair?

Ok, come on and fess up. We have all had these experiences of mindlessness, sometimes on a daily basis. Masters of mindlessness like yours truly can have multiple mindlessness attacks in the same hour – knowing that I placed a pen on my desk and then searching frantically for it only to find it stuck behind my ear. Parking my car in one place and then returning to my spot to find that someone had mysteriously moved my car. The list is endless (which explains why I occasionally find my socks in the refrigerator). We are all intimately familiar with these habits of mind – the tendency of our attention to drift momentarily or sometimes for our minds to take longer and more extended vacations all on its own, without notifying us of its plans. We are so easily lost in our past moments or our future moments yet to come that we have forgotten that all we really do have is the present moment. Let us begin there with a more formal definition of mindfulness, courtesy of JKZ (Jon Kabat-Zinn, so I can save some ink and paper.).

Mindfulness is a state of mind which is:

- Friendly, welcoming, nonjudgmental, and
- Focuses on present-moment awareness.
- It fosters an acceptance of WHAT IS
- With the intent of observing and not permitting anything from the past or the future to stick to us (also called “teflon mind”).

Mindfulness meditation asks that we INTENTIONALLY STOP the flow of our habitual unconsciousness, inattention, multitasking, and the 24/7 flow of our thoughts. It is the purposeful shift from the “auto-pilot” mode of our thinking, DOING mind to the non-doing, observational mode of our BEING mind. It is experiential, not cognitive.

If we can learn to be mindful of our present moment, and use our breath as an anchor to

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keep us in this present moment, we are ALL capable of learning how to change our relationship to our physical and emotional pain. We learn how to accept and work with difficult mind states instead of desperately trying to control them, change them, force them to be other than they are, or running to avoid or escape them.

Informal and formal meditation practice does not require you to purchase anything, nor does it ask that you adopt any particular religious or spiritual beliefs. It posts no deadlines for mastery, has no white-robed guru waiting to put us in a trance, nor does it profess that there is only one way to “do it right”.

Mindfulness attempts to open your mind by opening your heart. Its fundamental principle, derived from Buddhist psychology, is that we are passively asleep during most of our waking lives, following routines, schedules, and behavioral patterns, literally without being aware of what we are engaged in at any given moment – ah the wonders of multitasking! Mindfulness practice extends an invitation for us to “fall awake”. As I write this last sentence, I realize that the novice mindfulness student will sense some feelings of discomfort as we travel this path. The world looks very different from here. The ground seems unfamiliar, but the soil is fertile and we need time to gradually come to feel more rooted and like we belong here.

Mindfulness - the notion of “entering the present moment”, on purpose, and with no other agenda than being here does lead to some fascinating and novel realizations, especially for an old CBT-groupie like me. The pioneers in MBST research, who began to examine and then to reconstruct and expand their cognitive training, discovered by first-hand “aha” experience, many of the same principles as have the thousands of folks who have sat in MBST courses in more

than 200 medical centers across the country. They all “awoke” with a new perspective, heavily influenced by 2500 years of Buddhist tradition:

1. My thoughts are not me.
2. My thoughts are an expression of what human minds do.
3. My thoughts do not reflect reality as it really is.
4. My thoughts are created by my “doing mind”, which analyzes, problem-solves, and creates. When I am in a mindful moment, I leave my “doing mind” and enter my “being mind”. Western culture teaches us that our doing mind is where it’s at. It has never taught us to acknowledge or to work with a different mind state, one who’s territory has been explored and cultivated in the East for millennia.
5. I can acknowledge the existence of my thoughts, step back and watch my thoughts, without having to react to them.
6. I can become aware that my 24/7 flow of doing mind keeps me in such a tailspin that I am hardly even aware of my ability to step outside of this flowing cognitive river and STOP MY THINKING ALTOGETHER.
7. I can notice and just be aware WITHOUT JUDGMENT.
8. My thoughts, my emotions, my memories are all parts of a much larger vessel which holds them all – my awareness. CBT has focused more specifically on a part of that vessel.
9. My thoughts are impermanent – they change by the minute, the hour, the day. They do not require a response but may be acknowledged for what they are in this present moment.

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10. I can come to this place as often as I like and stay as long as I like. This is the practice of mindfulness. It can be studied in many ways but really must be experienced to truly be understood.

### The Power of the Breath

We do it 24 hours a day, from the moment that our heart and lungs are fully formed in the womb to the day that we literally draw our last breath on this earth. We do it without thought. Our breath is with us always and is literally under our noses. How did we as a culture miss its significance in learning the art of emotional healing? How did we miss out on the need to take a moment and “catch our breath? The analogy that has always remained with me when trying to describe the power of the breath is the image of a lake. During a storm, the surface of a lake can become turbulent and choppy, muddied and unclear, much like our thoughts during an emotional crisis. And yet, twenty or thirty feet down, even the most wind-whipped lake is quiet and serene. Cultivating an awareness of our breath becomes this silent and peaceful place, which when worked with on a daily basis is what formal mindfulness meditation practice is all about. Where is your mind right now? Is it still here, or do your eyes continue to scan the page but your awareness has gone on holiday, as the British say?

Many of us have taught our clients diaphragmatic breathing as part of an intervention technique to stop a spiking panic attack as a means to induce the relaxation response. During such practice, the technique reverses the fight or flight pull of our autonomic nervous systems and seeks to restore an equilibrium that we have momentarily lost. There is no dispute as to the effectiveness of this technique, especially when practiced before the actual need for its use arises.

The use of the breath in mindfulness practice is different. There is no “correct” way to breathe here. The practice of mindful breathing ITSELF IS THE PRACTICE – the intentional decision to step out of clock time and to enter into a timeless moment. We focus our attention on the sensations of our breath, where we feel the breath in our body, and try to stay with it, at first for maybe just a minute or two, but eventually for as long as we like. Sooner or later, probably within seconds, our auto pilot “doing mind” is bored. “Why are we here?”, it asks. “This is no fun”. “We have so many other things to do than to watch our silly breath”. “How much longer?” My back hurts from sitting in this chair”...and a thousand other thoughts will begin to intrude on our quiet respite. Our task during this attempted hostile takeover is to gently pull our attention back to the present moment using our breath as our trusty anchor. When our attention wanders a hundred times, a hundred times we bring it back. The hurtful past comes. We come back to the breath. Future worries crash down. We come back to the breath. Intense emotions demand to be given their due. We acknowledge their presence and come back to the breath.

Watch your thoughts as you would white, puffy clouds floating by against a deep blue sky. Watch your thoughts as you would the big and small fish coming and going in the aquarium – some staying for a bit and then scurrying off; some staring you down for some time before moving on their way. Watch your thoughts as someone sitting on the banks of a river, watching your thoughts float by as so many leaves. If and when you latch onto a thought, just let it go, lest it pull you out of the present moment. That’s it in a nutshell – a skill so profoundly simple to describe but a skill taking a lifetime to master.

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No expensive equipment to buy and no need to even leave your bed, or your office, or your car, or your beach chair. You can keep your eyes open or fix your gaze to a place on the floor to welcome mindfulness. It's all inside you already. Some reminders as you embark on this new adventure:

- Remember most of all that mindfulness requires practice. You will come to know it intimately if you do it for five minutes a day rather than read a hundred articles or books about it. We need to go to the gym of our minds.
- Have patience and be persistent and kind to yourself. Like learning any new skill, everyone's learning curve will be a bit different. Remember how you stumbled around trying to use your first computer?
- Do not judge yourself for "not doing it right". Finding time to do it at all IS the right way.
- Mindfulness practice is not about seeking some altered or trance-like state or escaping life's challenges. It is about finding yourself in this moment with no other agenda. You may find your own nirvana, but that is not the goal.
- Accept the frequent tendency of your mind to wander. The mind will learn to settle into this new place once it realizes who is really driving the car.
- During your practice, try your best to "allow" all thoughts, feelings, perceptions, memories to just flow past, without judgment. They are all but a thousand grains of sand passing through the moment. Let nothing stick to you ("teflon mind", a wonderful phrase coined by Dr. Marsha Linehan). Always return to the breath and simply notice every detail in your awareness in this moment.
- Remember that mindfulness is a "being" state and not a "doing" state. It's about not seeking to change anything. It is uni-tasking and not multitasking.

- Extend your practice gradually and find a group to practice with if you like. Share your experience and learn from others. Take a workshop or an MBSR course. I have provided further resources elsewhere in this newsletter.
- No need to assume any special position in the beginning. Sitting in your favorite chair or laying down on your bed or on your lawn is fine, so long as you do not get sucked into a dreamy state and fall asleep. As you develop your practice, you can learn more about special sitting, laying down, and walking meditation practices, as well as different positions for your hands, called mudras.
- There is absolutely no need to assume any new religious affiliation or spiritual beliefs in order to practice mindfulness. As a contemplative practice, it already exists in some form in most of the major religions of the world anyway. Those with no particular faith are welcome as well. Yes, it came from the Buddhist tradition, but one does not need to adopt Buddhism in order to adopt a mindful world view.

As you become used to what this new experience feels like, you will find yourself becoming a different person. As Dr. Linehan so wisely describes, you spend less time in "emotion mind", less time in your logical, analytic "reasonable mind", and much more time within the peaceful halls of what you know and FEEL to be true –your "wise mind".

The practice of MBSR has enormous implications for the fields of medicine, psychology, education, and corporate management as well as so many others beyond the breadth of this article. In all of its applications, mindfulness teaches that when physical or psychological pain comes, we no longer run. We mindfully learn to accept that it is here. The real question becomes how we want to be with our pain.

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In our frenzied society, which has overdosed on a sort of cultural ADHD of faster I-phones and all-night everythings, we need to learn to come back to our senses. Therapists need this. Teachers need this. Parents need this, and most of all – our children need this. As therapists, we are trained listeners, and with a mindful heart, we are just so much more present. What would happen if our classrooms were such places? It already is happening, all across the country and in places one might not be so likely to look. We come to learn how to look outside the box of our thoughts. Yes, our cognitive therapy skills will always be at hand to help us detect

and challenge thoughts which have gone awry, but through mindfulness, we learn to go to a deeper level of awareness where troubling thoughts exist apart from us, and can be challenged if we choose to, or – just noticed as thoughts and the stuff of our minds. An old Chinese proverb teaches us so well: Yesterday is history... tomorrow a mystery. Today is a gift. That's why we call it the Present.

Oh my goodness!! My dryers are done and the Sunday morning rush is on!! It is time to leave now, but my going will be a bit sweeter for having taken the time to stop.

## Practitioner Resources

**Editor's note:** Tony Pantaleno was nice enough to compile the following list for those of you who are intrigued by his article on mindfulness and want to learn more. Here are some further suggestions to get you going.

1. Start by going to Google and entering the name Jon Kabat-Zinn. He was the pioneer colleague who brought this practice to his stress reduction clinic at the U. of Mass in 1979. Watch the first video which runs about an hour - he's actually addressing and doing a simple mindfulness practice with employees of Google! The other videos are also a wonderful start and accessible for free to patients.
2. The best single article you can read may be accessed by going to: [www.behavioraltech.com](http://www.behavioraltech.com). Click on the link for DBT resources, then the mindfulness link on the right, then the article "Learn Mindfulness Practice."
3. A comprehensive and user-friendly guide entitled "Mindfulness in Plain English" may be downloaded for free at [www.urbandharma.org/udharma4/mp.e.html](http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma4/mp.e.html). The home page of this web page also
- has tons of other good mindfulness articles [www.urbandharma.org](http://www.urbandharma.org).
4. Make a small investment in a set of basic mindfulness CDs to practice with yourself. Go to [www.mindfulnessstapes.com](http://www.mindfulnessstapes.com). You can order other books from Jon Kabat-Zinn here as well. His latest book is a must-have for those who treat depression: ***The Mindful Way Through Depression***.
5. Best recommendations for patient bibliotherapy, all available at [www.newharbinger.com](http://www.newharbinger.com)  
***Calming your Anxious Mind*** by Jeffrey Brantley  
***The Dialectical Behavior Therapy Skills Workbook*** by Matthew McKay et al  
***Depressed and Anxious: The DBT Workbook for Overcoming Depression and Anxiety*** by Thomas Marra.

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6. Essential reading for all mental health practitioners:

**Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression** by Zindel Segal et al available at [www.guilford.com](http://www.guilford.com). This book chronicles how a group of CBT researchers went to take the eight-week mindfulness-based stress reduction course with Jon Kabat Zinn at the U. of Mass, figuring that they would incorporate some skills into a depression-relapse prevention program they were developing for NIMH, and how they came to be converted to the use of mindfulness as THE core skill in depression relapse.

**Mindfulness and Psychotherapy** by Ronald Siegel and Paul Fulton, also available from Guilford Press. Dr. Siegel also offers many workshops on mindfulness and psychotherapy nationally which may be accessed at the National Institute for the Clinical Application of Behavioral Medicine [www.nicabm.com](http://www.nicabm.com). Further education and resources in mindfulness psychotherapy integration may also be found at [www.mindfulnessandpsychotherapy.com](http://www.mindfulnessandpsychotherapy.com).

7. Essential reading for the general public: **The Miracle of Mindfulness** by Thich Nhat Hahn.

8. Visit the U. of Mass Center for Mindfulness web page at [www.umassmed.edu/cfm](http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm) to see just how far the training opportunities in mindfulness have developed.

9. Go to [www.soundstrue.com](http://www.soundstrue.com) and pick up a basic CD on mindfulness from the international master himself - Thich Nhat Hanh (pronounced tick-not-hon), such as "Mindfulness and Psychotherapy" or "The Art of Mindful Living." If you Google him as well, there are a variety of lectures and mindfulness practices available as well. His book, **The Miracle of Mindfulness**, is a wonderful introductory reading for us all. This web site is also the publisher for a major new text in SEL which features, guess what... a CD narrated by Dan Goleman himself with mindfulness and tense-relax instructions for age groups starting as young as ages 5-7. The title is "Building Emotional Intelligence", by Linda Lantieri and Dan Goleman.

10. Some other WONDERFUL web sites for educators: [www.mindfuled.org](http://www.mindfuled.org)  
[www.mindfuleducation.org](http://www.mindfuleducation.org)

11. Take a workshop sponsored by The Omega Institute. Visit their workshop offerings at [www.eomega.org/omegalworkshops](http://www.eomega.org/omegalworkshops). Introductory workshops designed for wide audiences are frequently offered such as: [www.eomega.org/omegalworkshops/10b4dd6b9fcdf6cae821fb6be1359813/](http://www.eomega.org/omegalworkshops/10b4dd6b9fcdf6cae821fb6be1359813/)

12. Download the "Mindful Clock", a free download which you program for your computer to periodically sound a "Bell of Mindfulness". Available at [www.mindfulnessdc.org](http://www.mindfulnessdc.org). Enjoy!!!

## Committee Reports

### Pro Bono Committee

Dr. David Belser reports that he continues to receive calls from uninsured patients who are seeking low cost or no-cost therapy. If you are willing to see a patient or two, either pro-bono or for a reduced fee, please send David an email.

Tell him how many patients you are willing to see, where you are located, what your specialties are, and what your lowest fee is. He can be reached at [DavidBelserPhD@optonline.net](mailto:DavidBelserPhD@optonline.net) or (631) 979-6828.