

# Mindfulness Meditation for Pain Relief



Practices to Reclaim Your  
Body and Your Life

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 **sounds true**  
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## Introduction

**T**he universe you are about to enter in picking up this small book graced with color, pictures, and words is the universe of your own true nature. It addresses and embraces your absolute validity and completeness as a human being, inclusive of and also extending well beyond the conditions and circumstances that have shaped your life so far. Not many people will seek out a book on the subject of pain, especially one addressing how to live and live well with a chronic pain condition, unless they understand something firsthand about suffering, and how difficult it can be to live the life that is yours to live as fully and as satisfyingly as possible under such challenging and often rending circumstances—and to take on such a challenge while you have the chance, which only occurs in the present moment. This book and the practices it invites you to engage in can be a doorway into that universe of possibility.

Know that you are not alone in this engagement. Many thousands of people with various chronic pain conditions and diagnoses for whom medical and surgical treatments have either not been appropriate or were not beneficial have taken up this exploration and adventure through what is called mindfulness-based

stress reduction, or MBSR. The benefits overall for most people have been and continue to be profound and life-restoring.

There is an inevitable and essential solo aspect to mindfulness as a meditation practice and as a way of living. Obviously, no one can meditate for you. You have to do the inner work yourself. All aspects of this book, along with the guided meditations in audio form, are meant to be friendly and supportive resources, reminders, and guides to inhabiting and navigating that territory. Hopefully, this offering will also help you to keep going when you encounter the challenges and trying circumstances that inevitably keep surfacing in all of our lives. And hopefully, it will also remind you over and over again of what is most important, especially in those moments when it is so easy to lose heart.

For it is neither understatement nor overstatement that it is only the hardest work in the world to *turn toward and open to* what we most wish would simply go away. By doing so, and by embracing with a sometimes-uncomfortable intimacy the unwanted and the aversive in all its forms, you can discover that there is almost always room to grow and heal and transform your life, no matter what obstacles you may be facing. As you will see, putting out the welcome mat for all experience and holding whatever arises in awareness in the present moment, whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or fairly neutral, is the ground of both formal and informal mindfulness meditation practices.

But beyond the solo dimension of mindfulness as both a rigorous and ongoing meditation practice *and* a way of being, there is also the very real and extremely necessary element of *community* associated with the cultivation of mindfulness. We are social beings, and we need community almost as much as we need oxygen when it comes to living lives of meaning and fulfillment across the life span, given what life sometimes throws at us. In hospital-based MBSR programs, that community arises spontaneously in the eight weeks of classes that medical patients attend. They come with a wide range of medical diagnoses, including major chronic pain conditions that have not fully responded to standard medical treatments, if they have responded at all. When we feel we are part of a community of people who like ourselves also have very challenging conditions, we realize that we are not alone. What is more, we can be inspired seeing what others have to live with and come to terms with in their lives, and by reports of their victories, both large and small, in the ongoing cultivation of mindfulness in their lives.

One university professor, who I knew personally from my days as a graduate student at MIT decades earlier, came to MBSR in advance of a bone marrow transplant to prepare himself for that ordeal and the extended isolation in the hospital that the procedure required. In class one day he expressed the strong feeling that everybody in the room belonged to what he called “the community of the afflicted.” He also said

that he felt far more at home in that room with those other medical patients than he did with his colleagues in faculty meetings. Looking around a crowded subway car during rush hour in Boston one day while he was in the middle of the eight-week MBSR program, he had a momentary and poignant realization, which he later shared with us in class, that we are all part of the community of the afflicted.

It turns out that over the past forty-five years, the community of mindfulness practitioners has grown exponentially and become a global network. So as you enter into this book and engage in the guided meditations on a regular basis, with a certain degree of intentionality and discipline, since that is how they are meant to be used to have maximal impact on your pain and in your life, know that you are not alone. Know that the practice does not promote or privilege “special experiences” or special “states of mind.” What it is inviting is the recognition that every moment and every state of mind and body is special right in this timeless moment, and that we can come home to ourselves by recognizing that we are already whole (the root meaning of the words “health,” “healing,” and “holy”). The challenge is not to become who you are not, or to transcend or obliterate pain. Rather, it is to recognize the fullness of who you already are, and how beneficial it is to be at home in your own skin and your own being, and to *belong*, both within the family of those you care for and who care for you, and within the larger world.

When it comes to pain, both physical and emotional, the body really does keep the score, as asserted in a powerful book of that title about how to heal from trauma of all kinds. We tend to carry our emotional pain and hurt in the body, even as we frequently ignore that dimension of experience as much as we can and get totally lost in our thoughts and emotions—in other words, in our minds. For this reason alone, mindfulness of the body is a very good place to start. But it does involve putting out the welcome mat for *whatever* is present, whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither, and holding it in awareness long enough to discover that the pain and the hurt and the wounding, however significant and challenging, are much smaller than the full dimensionality of your being. And to navigate that territory, you may at times need the ongoing support and the love of a community of practitioners of mindfulness, as well as from family and friends. The good news is that there has never been a time on the planet when there has been anything like the breadth and depth of resources now available to support an ongoing mindfulness meditation practice. They are widespread, they are accessible, and they are diverse in every sense of the term. And in alignment with the deep meaning of mindfulness, they are committed to recognizing and naming the root causes of suffering, whatever they might be, and supporting a very real liberation from that suffering in its multiple aspects and forms.



When it comes to pain associated with trauma of any kind, the support of a community that recognizes the unique elements of hurt and harm that often go unnoticed by others and, sadly, by institutions and society as a whole, is essential. The Internet now allows us to find such communities at our fingertips and to benefit from the resources they offer in support of your meditation practice. If at any point you feel isolated and alone with what is arising as you engage in the guided meditations offered here, I encourage you to seek out communities where you can engage with others who, like yourself, may be suffering in ways that call out for open-hearted human connection and compassion. It could be an MBSR program online or in a hospital, or connecting with a meditation center or community—anything that allows you to find others with whom to share this journey of a lifetime. I list a number of supportive resources in the back of this book.

# 1

Learning to Live  
with Pain

# Learning to Live with Pain



**I**f this book has landed in your hands, chances are your life is shaped by pain in one way or another . . . and by the suffering, both physical and emotional, that accompanies it. If this is the case, there are two things it might be useful for you to keep strongly in mind from the very beginning of our work together.

One, you are not alone.

Two, it is possible to learn to live with pain that does not easily diminish or go away.

Tens if not hundreds of thousands of people have discovered that living with pain is a process, a kind of minuet. The type of music may not be what you would have chosen if you were solely in charge of how things unfolded in your life. Yet, I think you will find that your situation is nevertheless workable in some wonderful and potentially very freeing ways, especially if you are willing

to do a certain amount of playful and exploratory experimentation and ongoing interior work that only you can engage in, the work of reconfiguring your relationship with the actual experiencing of the unpleasant and the unwanted as it is unfolding.

The good news is that there is no one right way to approach this adventure. There is no cookbook or singular recipe, no one-size-fits-all, no universal method. Everybody is unique, and everybody ultimately has to find their own way to live and live well in the face of the difficult, the challenging, and the unwanted, which sooner or later arise for all of us in life.

Therefore, your unique experience, including the particular difficulties you face and thus have available to work with, all become essential elements of the work of mindfulness itself rather than obstacles to being mindful or impediments to the relief from pain that an ongoing practice of mindfulness can lead to.

With this attitude, there is no way to fail at this engagement because we are not trying to force anything to be other than as it is. We are simply learning how to hold it in awareness differently. Out of this gesture alone, the experience of pain—and our relationship to it—can change profoundly.



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