

Taken from  
*A Daily Dose of Mindful Moments:  
Applying the Science of  
Mindfulness and Happiness*

by Barbara Larrivee

## CHAPTER 1



# My Journey to a Daily Mindful Moment Practice

*The destination is “to be” and not to arrive somewhere else.*

—STEPHEN PAUL

For many years, my meditation practice consisted of a daily meditation as soon as I awoke, in fact, even before I got out of bed to make sure I did it before the day got crazy. I would prop myself up with pillows so my spine was straight and meditate for twenty minutes repeating a mantra. Some days, typically about two or three times a week, schedule permitting, I would meditate a second time in the evening.

A few years ago, I began questioning my daily meditation practice because I didn't seem to be reaping the wondrous benefits I kept reading about. After practicing more than a decade, I had yet to experience a blissful state many meditators report experiencing. I never really zoned out to be in that space Deepak Chopra refers to as “the gap.” I did, however, sometimes fall asleep.

I started to experiment with my meditation practice. I first tried changing it from a mantra-based meditation practice to breath awareness, paying attention to and feeling my breath. I did notice a slight difference. I seemed to be able to stay focused a bit longer

before my mind traipsed off to something. I also tried body scans, but I had trouble sensing and isolating specific body parts. I couldn't seem to "feel" my ankles or other body parts. And when I was done, I didn't feel a whole lot more relaxed.

I then moved to guided meditations, selecting ones that matched my mood or feelings, or the opposite, counteracted my mood or feelings. I also began targeting my guided meditations to align with a character quality I wanted to enhance, like kindness, forgiveness, or gratitude. I found I was enjoying my meditation practice more and looked forward to trying new meditations. As I subsequently learned, and will discuss later in the book, experiencing pleasure along with continuous new experiences is what the brain thrives on. The feeling generated from the kind of meditation practice I did carried into my day, but not for long. It soon dissipated.

While experimenting with guided meditations, I had tried a variety of compassion meditation scripts but none of them seemed to move me to actually feel compassion for myself or for others, or certainly not for "all sentient beings." Somehow, it just didn't resonate with me to wish that everyone on the planet "be happy and live their lives with ease," a common phrase in many compassion meditations. In my research, I learned that my experience was consistent with what the research supports (see Chapter 12). Apparently, you first have to be moved to feel a positive emotion before the compassion meditation practice has a positive impact. There are substantial differences among individuals, pointing to the fact that a particular compassion meditation script will not work for everyone. It may take a lot of trial and error before finding one that moves you to actually feel compassion. I'm still searching for one.

Meanwhile, to try to figure out what I might be doing wrong and how I might improve my practice, I delved deeper into the mindfulness meditation research that I had been following and writing about for several years. With my training and experience in conducting, writing, and deciphering research, I was surprised to find that many of the benefits being touted everywhere were not really substantiated by rigorous research, and that the rewards were often not realized until a practice was in place for quite some time. I was averaging from about 180 to 200 minutes per week, or about

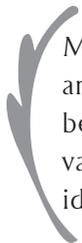
three hours. Taking this out to my cumulative number of hours for a ten-year practice came to about 1500 to 1700 hours. I discovered this was a mere drop in the bucket compared to the amount of practice long-term meditators in many of the research studies had done. Often these long-term meditators had accumulated from 9-10,000 hours of practice. I was never going to see that in my lifetime. So I began thinking about other ways to practice.

Around the same time, I found that soon after my morning meditation, a sense of gloom often came over me. And I'm more often than not a "look at the bright side/dig for the good in everyone" kind of person. This also coincided with leaving my university teaching position after many years to concentrate on my writing. As I soon found out, writing can be a lonely venture when you're used to being socially engaged most of the day. My meditation practice wasn't translating into a calmer, sunnier, and gentler way of being. I felt constant angst. So I started to take little pleasure-inducing and stress-relieving breaks during my writing workday to try to shift my mood. I found the effects from a break typically lasted about an hour before I needed another one. And voilà—the birth of my revelation to write this book about getting "a daily dose of mindful moments."

I was also trying out the many research-based practices I was learning about in my research to relieve stress and support a more positive outlook. Some of these included sprinting up and down a flight of stairs, stroking my palms and arms, savoring enjoyable experiences, appreciating my daily accomplishments, and expressing gratitude for the little things that usually fell under my radar.

It was also important to me that my practice go beyond my self-serving need to boost my spirits. And as the research clearly shows, acts of generosity, kindness, and compassion are a direct route to happiness, life satisfaction, and fulfillment. I wanted my mindful moment practice to align with what I held to be dear and the values I wanted to live by. For example, what seemed to work better for me than doing compassion meditations to actually feel compassion was to deliberately practice being more compassionate. I started with setting an intention for the day for my mindful moments to have a designated theme to be compassionate. But that wasn't enough by itself to translate into action. It had to be coupled with a more specific

check-in prompt. As a firm believer in it's what you say to yourself that revs up your negativity, one cue I used was to become more aware of when I was assigning someone a negative label like "he's such a jerk" or "she's so self-centered." Then the label itself served as my signal to reconstruct a more compassionate thought or comment.



My theory is the more you focus on being the person you want to be and how you want to behave toward others, the more mindful you'll become. A daily mindful moment practice can help bring your core values and actual behaviors into authentic alignment. When your inner ideals and outer actions are in harmony, then you are truly mindful.

### *Searching for Evidence*

Given my research background, I began searching to see if I could establish an evidence-base for a mindful moment practice. My predisposition is to have to *prove* or provide evidence for my musings, so I started doing research, more and more research, and it took me far and wide. As it turned out, I wasn't the only one advocating for short, deliberate mindful breaks throughout the day. But typically what others were advocating was a simple "check-in" with body sensations or breathing to reel in a busy mind to be present to the moment, the assumption being that anchoring in the present moment is enough to then act mindfully. The daily mindful moment practice I'm advocating goes beyond awareness to trigger a mindful act.

Because of my personal experience having trouble hanging on to a positive or optimistic outlook, I was especially interested in strategies and practices that might keep me on the sunny side and keep my positivity flowing. I looked again at the positive psychology research that I was already familiar with because I had reviewed it for my previous book intended to help teachers deal with the stress of the job and keep from succumbing to burnout that is common among those in the helping professions. I discovered that some of these practices had an impressive research base and took little time to implement and so could be incorporated as mindful moments.

Then I moved on to the literature on the relaxation response and found that there were many, many practices in addition to meditation

that could be used to elicit this response. This took me way beyond the meditation research to some of the research on exercise, touch, and social support...and the list goes on and on. Across all of these domains, there were brief evidenced-based practices that could readily be integrated as part of a mindful moment practice.

Finally, I had to say enough. If I were ever going to get the book written, I had to stop researching and start pulling together the years of research I had conducted and the hundreds of files accumulating on my computer.

At this point, I began sharing my vision for a daily mindful moment practice. My passion and enthusiasm was contagious. I've been practicing what Marcia Wieder, author of *Dream: Clarify and Create What You Want* has dubbed “enrollment.”<sup>1</sup> When you have an idea you're fired up about you need to have what she calls “powerful enrollment conversations” to share your ideas in such a way that it inspires others to get on board.

So that is what I've been doing—enlisting others to join me. Nearly everyone I share my idea about mindful moments with gets enthusiastic about it, and some start practicing it right away. Now I've got my friends and family members talking about doing their mindful moments. And we're checking in with each other to support our efforts to get our daily dose of mindful moments. They're sharing with me the new things they've tried. A friend recently shared a body tension-relieving break she takes leaning backwards over an exercise ball for a minute or two. It gives her body just the pickup she needs. Another friend shared how she recently rediscovered *skipping* as a quick mood enhancer. Simply changing your gait to skipping along for a bit makes you feel like you're seven again playing hopscotch. When I tried it, I was amusingly surprised at how quickly it put a smile on my face, not to mention got my heart rate up in no time.

People say yes to what's important to them, and apparently the idea of taking mini destressing, enjoyment, or altruistic breaks throughout the day to amp up their pleasure barometer resonates. A daily mindful moment practice makes sense, it doesn't take a lot of time, it's easy, it's pleasurable, and it's gratifying. And when you integrate practices that extend to others you can get all the benefits that come with practicing compassion, kindness, and gratitude.

I haven't given up my meditation practice, but getting my daily dose of mindful moments allows me, as the saying goes, to "walk my talk" to live and act more mindfully.

## What Is a Mindful Moment Practice?

As we're constantly reminded, one route to cultivating mindfulness is a mindfulness meditation practice. An alternate, or complementary, path to being more mindful is the one I'm proposing, a daily mindful moment practice. And the research reported in the coming chapters provides evidence of its promise for enhancing mindfulness, as well as increasing happiness and reducing stress. Spreading mindful moments throughout your day can weave mindfulness into the very fabric of your life.

A *mindful moment* by definition is 1-minute mindful pause, but in practice it can be anywhere from a few seconds to a couple of minutes. A *mindful moment practice* is pausing regularly throughout your day to cultivate mindfulness. A mindful moment takes less than 1-2 minutes and is a deliberate action you take to be mindful. While mindful moments can serve many ends, the core purpose is to accomplish three things: (1) to act with greater mindfulness, (2) to bring more pleasure into your life, and (3) to keep stress from building throughout the day. A mindful moment can be anything that is enjoyable or elicits any positive feeling (including the lift you get from being kind and helping others), triggers the relaxation response to relieve stress, energizes you when you need an energy boost, or is self-soothing or calming. Depending on the juncture in your day, it can fulfill many needs.

Some of your mindful moments can be preventative to offset your acknowledged self-defeating habits, some may be maintenance to keep you tracking when you're tooling along, and some may need to be responsive to deal with the daily onslaught of opportunities for *mindless* moments.

A mindful moment is a deliberate reprieve from business as usual with the intention of being mindful and taking a mindful action, either on your own behalf or for the welfare of others. In my definition, mindfulness takes into consideration how our behavior affects others. Research shows kindness and generosity toward others may

make you feel even better than doing something for yourself. So it's crucial to incorporate acts of kindness and generous deeds among your daily mindful moments.

Merely being present-in-the-moment, even if you are aware of your inner landscape, doesn't necessarily translate into acting mindfully. It's not likely that a mindfulness meditation practice will lead to mindful action without simultaneously employing other action-oriented practices. The awareness a mindfulness meditation practice cultivates has to be transported beyond our internal world to infuse the way we treat, interact, and engage with others. A complementary mindful moment practice has the potential to develop skills that actually lead to being more mindful. A mindful moment practice may even work better than a daily mindfulness meditation session if your desired goal is to be happier, more content, and less stressed.

Sometimes during your day what you need is something relaxing to curb mounting stress. At other times when you're feeling beat up, you may need a self-soothing break. If your day has gotten you in a bad mood, you could benefit from something that brings you a little pleasure or conjures up any positive emotion. Or, if someone is getting on your nerves, you can shift your negativity toward the person by spending a mindful moment reflecting on one of the person's good qualities. If you're having an energy slump, you may need a spurt of energy, so you need to do something that is energizing. If your day is clicking along smoothly without too many glitches, that's a good time to spend a mindful moment being generous and doing something that enriches someone else's day. The idea is not only to tailor your mindful moment practice to meet the range of challenges a given day brings, but also to nurture your highest values.

Interspersing preplanned mindful moments throughout your day just may be the fast track route to living more mindfully. While you might be able to actually *be* mindful with a mindfulness meditation practice, it has to be in place for a long time before it permeates your moment-to-moment actions. Until the rewards of an ongoing mindfulness meditation practice gel, dispersing your mindfulness practice across your busy day is a more direct route to managing

daily stress and maintaining a positive outlook, two critical life skills for well-being.

While not everyone may be able to allocate sufficient time to see the benefits of a dedicated mindfulness meditation practice, everyone can easily fit mindful moments into their daily routines. While it doesn't take a huge time commitment, it does take acting intentionally. It's not difficult to make mindful moments your practice if you are deliberate about designing your own daily repertoire of practices. You can do this initially by trying out and choosing from over 100 practices provided in this book.

But just as with mindfulness meditation, you'll have to be both intentional and consistent to reap the benefits. A daily mindful moment practice is accessible to anyone and virtually needs no training, although a meditation practice is a valuable companion. Even though minimal time is required, it does take careful forethought and conscious intention. It involves shifting your attention to positive thoughts and experiences, being grateful for what you have and receive, taking time to appreciate run-of-the-mill daily activities, and choosing to act with concern for others in mind.

The key to getting your daily dose of mindful moments is to create your own inventory of mindful moment practices you can tap as needed to offset a hurtful comment, the mounting stress of a never-ending to-do list, or a looming dark cloud hanging over you. And research indicates that our brain is hardwired to seek novelty so you'll want to keep your list varied and novel. It's also important to choose practices you enjoy and motivate you enough to actually do. Over time, you can craft your "personal best" collection of mindful moment practices. Eventually, taking a mindful moment pause will become automatic at the first signs of any form of distress.

Even in the most jam-packed day, you can find a minute in every hour or so to practice mindfulness. Many of the practices offered here can take just seconds. Devoting just one minute most of your awake hours is a minimal commitment with an enormous potential payoff. Because we all have segments of our day where we won't be able to pause for a mindful moment, the target is about 10 in a day. That's only about 1 percent of your day.

## The Mindful Moments Path to Mindfulness

A mindfulness meditation practice may not be the right fit for everyone at this point in their lives. Some people aren't able to carve out the time for a mindfulness meditation practice, or think they're too hyper so they don't even try. Others may find the standard ways of meditating too challenging.

Research in the behavioral sciences reveals that when we don't receive sufficient feedback that we are making progress, we tend to disengage from our pursuits.<sup>2</sup> This is a likely explanation for why some people have trouble sticking with meditation. Beginning meditators often succumb to feelings that they just can't seem to settle down their minds the way they *think* they should. Because thoughts are persistently invading their minds, they don't have a sense that they're making any progress. Research also shows that smaller, immediate pay-offs are more motivating than larger, delayed rewards.<sup>3</sup> With a meditation practice, you may not experience any immediate benefits. With a mindful moment practice, you'll not only have a sense that you are making progress, you'll get multiple daily rewards both in the form of feeling less stressed and the chemical surges in your brain that go along with being more grateful, kind, and caring.

I'm certainly not advocating that you give up trying to meditate. Whenever you draw into yourself and bring your attention to your inner world to interrupt the otherwise unconscious flow of your mind's chatter, it's beneficial. But if you're struggling with keeping up a meditation practice, you can still practice being more mindful. Taking brief moments to intentionally be mindful interspersed throughout your day can be your practice. You don't have to keep beating yourself up about not taking the time to meditate. And you just may discover that you start to feel good about your practice, even with just a few mindful moments at first.

## Merging a Mindful Moment Practice and a Mindfulness Meditation Practice

While it's not necessary to have a meditation practice to initiate a mindful moment practice, a meditation practice may groom you to take mindful breaks. A mindful moment practice and a mindfulness meditation practice are great partners in cultivating mindfulness. They

can go hand-in-hand to advance your mindful practice. My experience after practicing more than a decade was that it wasn't enough. I found I needed to be more deliberate to act mindfully and to align my actions with my core values, which included fairness, kindness, and generosity.



You actually have to seize opportunities for mindful moments throughout the day in order for your meditation practice to have real staying power so it permeates your day. Even if you do have a dedicated mindfulness meditation practice, it's likely you'll still need to intentionally create openings for mindful practices throughout your day.

After practicing meditation for some time, you may be able to automatically switch in and out of your daily busyness to act with mindful awareness throughout the day, but until that happens, having a repertoire of intentionally-planned, ready-made mindful moment practices will make that more likely to happen. Try adding mindful moments for yourself to see if your day seems to go better than just doing a single meditation session, or even without one.

If with your mindfulness meditation practice you're calmer, more aware, less stressed, less reactive, more positive, kinder, and more generous, then it may be all you need. If you're lacking in some of these qualities, taking brief moments to be intentionally mindful, and specifically targeting your activities, may augment your practice to bring in additional qualities that aren't elicited by your current meditation practice.

The ultimate mindfulness practice is when practice melds into momentary conscious living. Jon Kabat-Zinn says he likes to think of mindfulness simply as "the art of conscious living."<sup>4</sup> When you walk through life mindfully conscious of every step, you no longer have to remind yourself to hold your tongue when anger strikes, prompt yourself to show appreciation for life's little gifts, or remember to do random acts of kindness. The time comes when you can stop *practicing how to be mindful*. You have unleashed your awareness potential to live mindfully in the moment. Until then, you will need many, many orchestrated mindful moments.