



Becoming a MINDFUL ME

Easy and Hard

You probably already know that some days life feels easy and fun, and other days everything goes wrong. You might have an argument with a friend or sibling and not know how to settle it or handle your angry feelings. Or, maybe school is hard and homework piles up. You could feel overwhelmed by everything you have to do, but be afraid to ask for help.

Then there are times when you're so excited about an upcoming event that you can't stop your brain from thinking about it. Maybe you're about to play in a soccer match or perform your first piano recital. A little stress can be good for you, because it pushes you to prepare. But what happens when you can't turn off your worries? Do you end up with a stomachache or have trouble falling asleep?

And what about loneliness? Sometimes you might feel like you don't fit into the popular crowd no matter what you do. Have you ever felt like that? Maybe other kids don't understand your passion for collecting spiders or doing crossword puzzles. That doesn't mean these aren't cool hobbies—they are!—but you could find yourself doing them alone.



You might think you're the only one with these challenges, but the truth is, everyone has hard times. Really, everyone! You can't control these situations. But you *can* control how you deal with them. Do you get angry and yell when things don't go your way? Do you cry or hide? Do you act out so people will pay attention to you? Or do you pretend nothing's wrong and hide your sad feelings? We all find ways to cope, but sometimes we make the situation worse when our methods are not skillful.

That's where MINDFUL ME PRACTICE comes in. Think of it as learning techniques for handling your life with wisdom. Instead of complaining and stressing about your bad luck or bullies or homework, you could learn to face whatever is happening and let it teach you something. Use the situation to make you stronger, or to make changes.

With MINDFUL ME PRACTICE, you can become a mountain,

solid in any storm.

What Is MINDFUL ME PRACTICE?

When you practice MINDFUL ME exercises, you are practicing *mindfulness*. Mindfulness means paying attention, on purpose, to what's happening around you and inside you right now, without judging things as good or bad. You become curious about your experiences in a friendly way. You notice the details of whatever is happening through **present-moment awareness**.

Awareness is noticing and knowing. Here's an example of present-moment awareness. Imagine you are looking at a bee sitting on a flower. You are simply watching the bee with full attention. You notice the bee's shape and colors. You hear the bee's soft buzz. You notice the bee's antennae moving. You notice how the flower bends a little when the bee is sitting on it. All of your attention is on the bee.

When your mind loses present-moment awareness, it starts narrating like this: "Oh, bees are scary. I wonder if the bee will sting me. I don't like bees because they hurt when they sting. Are there more bees? What if I get stung? Do I have to go to the doctor?" These are thoughts you are having *about* bees. They are not observations *of* the bee.

If you are allergic to bees, this is a useful line of thinking that tells you to move away from the bee. But many of us are not allergic, and yet we get distracted and upset by imagining that the bee is a threat to us. When that happens, you're back in your head, thinking and worrying. And the more thinking and worrying you do, the more stress you could feel.

But if you are simply practicing present-moment awareness of mindfulness, you will notice you were distracted and shift your attention back to the bee on the flower.



How Can Present-Moment Awareness Help?

So you've seen the bee on the flower. Maybe you got distracted but redirected your attention to studying and mindfully observing the bee. Perhaps you are feeling more relaxed and calmer. But why? What about this present-moment awareness of mindfulness can help you?

Let's look at present-moment awareness of your inner experiences. You might notice that when you have a busy mind full of anxious thoughts, you feel stress. If you obsess about something and avoid doing anything about it, the situation often grows worse.

However, when you use your present-moment awareness to notice and identify what's going on inside you—your thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations—you can begin to respond to your stress with strategies that calm you down and improve your health and happiness.

In other words, you need to become aware of a problem before you can find ways to deal with it.

Why Be Mindful?

Still not convinced mindfulness will help? Let's review the benefits of mindfulness that scientists and doctors have discovered:

Increased Awareness

Mindfulness practice helps you to develop your present-moment awareness of both your outer experiences—like the bee on the flower—and your inner experiences. Your thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations are all part of your inner experiences. This increased awareness can help you because it allows you to develop strategies for your health and wellness. When you have a toolbox of strategies, you often feel a greater sense of well-being and experience less pain and distress.

Focus and Attention

Mindfulness won't take away those homework problems we talked about, but it could help you pay attention and focus, so you study better and improve your grades.

Handling Emotions

Mindfulness won't make other kids magically love your spider collection, but it could help you manage disappointment when you feel left out or unhappy. That's because regular mindfulness practice often results in changes in your brain that help you handle uncomfortable feelings more easily.

Less Stress and Anxiety

Mindfulness practice will not stop your friends or siblings from bugging you. It will not take away all conflicts. But it might reduce your feelings of anger or stress when you're under pressure. Why? Because those brain changes we discussed also help you respond to conflicts with less fear, anger, and anxiety.

Understanding Helpful or Unhelpful Stress

In MINDFUL ME PRACTICE, you learn the difference between positive stress (*eustress*) and negative stress or worry. How can stress be good for you? Sometimes when you face a challenge, like preparing for a test or practicing for a performance, *eustress* motivates you. It makes you sharp and gives you energy to go out there and perform well. If stress keeps you from sleeping, gives you a headache or stomachache, or causes you to harm yourself, that's when you should ask for help. If you pay attention, you will know when stress is helping you or hurting you.

Increased Feelings of Kindness

Mindfulness also helps you understand that other people have thoughts and emotions much like yours. When you become aware of this, you can develop your understanding and compassion for other people. And when people are kind to each other, they feel closer and build a community.

What Is in MINDFUL ME PRACTICE?

MINDFUL ME PRACTICE includes developing a routine of awareness exercises, relaxation techniques, and meditation. The point of using this book is to find the exercises that best help you focus, notice what's going on inside and out, increase your present-moment awareness, and accept situations so you can deal with them in a positive way.

Mindfulness Takes Practice

You might be ready now to start MINDFUL ME PRACTICE. One point to know before you do is that nobody masters mindfulness on one try. (Too bad! Wouldn't it be great to snap your fingers and

master your mind?) Mindfulness takes practice. Baby steps before giant leaps. That's important to remember, so let's highlight it:

Mindfulness takes practice.

If you forget to be mindful one day, don't worry. We all do that. No need to scold yourself. Instead, say, "Oops!" and start again.

The **past** is **over**. You can only make changes in the **present moment**. Right NOW! Each moment is another chance to be a MINDFUL ME.

Become a MINDFUL ME

So, let's recap. We all have challenges and need ways to deal with those challenges and respond positively to life. MINDFUL ME PRACTICE includes techniques that may improve your awareness and well-being. And finally, this book guides you through many different mindfulness exercises so you can learn what helps you most.

Here's the Takeaway

MINDFUL ME pays attention to the inside and also to the outside. MINDFUL ME notices the thoughts, feelings, and body sensations you are having right now and understands how they affect you. MINDFUL ME takes responsibility for your actions and attitudes, and trusts your inner goodness. MINDFUL ME cares for you and for the people (and animals) around you. MINDFUL ME uses helpful techniques to respond to life with wisdom and awareness.

Make a commitment to yourself.

Become a MINDFUL ME.

Chapter 1

MINDFUL ME Toolbox

What's Inside?

This book is a toolbox of mindfulness practices: exercises, activities, journal prompts, and meditation guides. See which ones help you the most. You might not like all of them. That's okay. Everyone is different. There are no hard rules in mindfulness—only helpful pointers.

Writing and drawing about your thoughts and feelings could help you understand them. You might see a problem in a new way. You can keep everything you write and draw in your MINDFUL ME Activity Book, or use your own MINDFUL ME binder or notebook. Check back any time and see how you have grown and changed.

MINDFUL ME Meditation

What Is Meditation?

Meditation is an important part of MINDFUL ME PRACTICE. In meditation, you stay alert and rest your mind in its calm, relaxed, and natural state.

What *is* the mind's natural state? That's hard to explain, but you experience it as an awareness or knowing that you are not the *center*

of the universe but an important part of it. You're not an isolated dot in the middle, but one piece of a giant puzzle. And so is everyone else. That helps you see you are not alone. What you do affects your entire community and the whole planet.

Meditation also shows you that life is a flow, and everything is always changing. The Earth rotates, and the sun rises and sets. Seeds grow into plants that live out their life span. You were once a baby, and soon you'll be an adult. When you accept this ever-changing flow instead of struggling with it, you might find more peace in your heart. You can relax a little when things aren't going your way because you know they will change.

When you settle your mind, body, and breath in meditation, you may experience your natural state. And if you don't, just wait and try again. Remember the guidelines—mindfulness and meditation take practice.

How to Sit in Meditation

To practice meditation, sit in a chair or cross-legged on a mat or blanket. Place an extra pillow under your bottom to help your posture. Sit up straight—as if you were a tall mountain—but not stiff. Relax your shoulders and jaw. Rest your hands on your thighs or in your lap. Keep your eyes slightly open and stare at a spot on the floor in front of you. If that distracts you, you can close your eyes until you're settled and then open them a little.

The benefits of keeping your eyes open are that you will be less likely to fall asleep and more likely to focus your mind. Some of the relaxation exercises in this book, however, do suggest you close your eyes. Find out what works best for you.

Begin each meditation with three MINDFUL ME BREATHS, described below. Relax all your muscles, and let your body sink into

your seat. Let yourself be alert but relaxed.

You can start by taking three MINDFUL ME BREATHS.

Examine these images of meditation posture. Choose one that allows you to be relaxed with a straight spine, and alert.



Seiza



Quarter Lotus



Full Lotus



Chair



Half Lotus



Modified Quarter Lotus

Three MINDFUL ME BREATHS

As you begin, notice your breathing. Take three soft, slow breaths, and feel them in your body.

Breathe in, and feel air coming into your nose.

Breathe out, and count one.

Breathe in, and notice air filling your lungs.

Breathe out, and count two.

Breathe in, and see the air expanding your belly.

Breathe out, and count three.

Repeat for two more rounds of breathing into your nose, lungs, and belly.



Take three MINDFUL ME BREATHS any time you want to settle down and focus your attention. Then keep your attention on your normal breathing. If you notice you start thinking about something else, just bring your attention back to your breath.

This is a simple breath meditation.

Extra Support