

simple
mindfulness
practices
to help you through
difficult times



Jeffrey Brantley, MD

author of *Five Good Minutes* and *Calming Your Anxious Mind*

The life we had and the world we knew, too suddenly it seems, are gone. What happens next? How long must we endure the new reality before things get better? Where do we turn? What can we trust? And who?

In this time of COVID-19, each person must find answers that work for themselves and their loved ones in their particular situation. And each situation will likely be unique and different.

And yet, each and every person is also capable of accessing a place, and qualities within themselves, that are not so different. In the language of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), we like to say, “No matter what a person thinks is wrong with them, we believe there is more right than is wrong.” And we mean everyone.

What we are pointing to with that comment is our wholeness as human beings, which includes two things specifically. First, that everyone can be mindful. Mindfulness is the awareness that notices what is here now. It is not thinking or planning. For example, when you feel the coolness of a breeze on your face before the thoughts about the breeze arise, that is mindfulness. Mindfulness is the awareness that notices that the thoughts you are having are worrisome, or are the same narratives that have repeated all day long. Mindfulness is the awareness that notices thinking—and sounds, sights, tastes, smells, and sensations in your body—whenever these are present here and now, in this moment.

The second thing that we believe is “more right than is wrong” is the collection of qualities that collectively one might call “good-heartedness”—qualities such as kindness, generosity, compassion, and the ability to feel grateful, for example. Many meditation teachers refer to mindfulness and good-heartedness together as “heartfulness,” adding that without qualities of kindness and compassion, for example, there is no mindfulness, because mindfulness is essentially the awareness that includes and welcomes (does not judge or reject) whatever comes before it.

The good news is that we already have all mindfulness and good-heartedness we need. We do not have to try and manufacture more. We can, however, become forgetful that these qualities and capacities are a part of us. We can be stressed and feel out of touch with kindness and compassion, or distracted, lost in thought or worries, and not mindful in a given moment or situation. For those reasons, it can help to be reminded of what we have and are capable of, and to learn and practice ways to abide more steadily in these qualities and places within us. Such practice could be called “meditation.” Through that practice, we can begin to discover how, trusting our wholeness as human beings, and drawing upon the mindful, good-hearted aspects of our wholeness, we can better and more effectively meet challenging times and decisions such as those we are now facing, individually and collectively.

Below you will find ten selected meditation practices from the *Five Good Minutes* book series to help you explore the qualities of mindfulness and good-heartedness within you. Hopefully, practicing with them will help you find a still center, a solid place to stand, and a way to respond during these challenging times. These particular practices have been selected to help you specifically to touch peace, stillness, and ease within; to connect with greater happiness and joy; and to increase your resilience.

A Brief Orientation to the Practices

The word “practice” as used here does not mean trying to get something, or to become better in some way. It does not mean rehearsal, either. In this context, “practice” means simply that, as you are doing a particular mindfulness or practice of good-heartedness, you have taken the position of mindfulness or kindness, for example, for the time of the practice at least, and are actually *experiencing life from that perspective*. You are simply *being* that quality, for the time of the practice at least. This means that to benefit from these practices, you actually have to DO the practices! It is not enough simply to read them, or to create a lot of thinking about them. Just DO the practice, as suggested—for as long as you like, and as often as you like.

Go ahead. Try one or more of them out. See what happens. What do you notice? You cannot make a mistake. Remember that you already have all of these qualities that you need. In fact, you are using them every day, even if you do not realize it.

If you prefer, you could think of these practices not so much as “meditation practices” as a kind of “skill building.” The specific “skill” you are building is actually the skill of directing and stabilizing attention in order to touch the parts of yourself that are mindful and good-hearted. Building stronger, steadier attentional focus can make the qualities of mindfulness and good-heartedness you already have within more available to you. Developing your skill at accessing these qualities will empower you to touch these qualities more readily, and rely on them to find peace and ease in yourself, to better manage stress, and to increase your capacity to tolerate and respond effectively to difficult emotions and in challenging situations.

Practices for Touching Peace, Stillness, and Ease Within

- “Go with the flow of your breath,” p. 44 in *Five Good Minutes*
- “Wish yourself safety,” p. 30 in *Five Good Minutes*
- “Relaxed body, clear mind, open heart,” p. 54 in *Five Good Minutes with the One You Love*

Practices for Cultivating Happiness

- “Really taste your food,” p. 88 in *Five Good Minutes*
- “Connect to the natural world,” p. 114 in *Five Good Minutes*
- “Count your blessings,” p. 85 in *Five Good Minutes with the One You Love*
- “Rest in beauty,” p. 64 in *Five Good Minutes with the One You Love*

Practices for Increasing Resilience and Equanimity

- “Feel your connection with all things,” p. 196 in *Five Good Minutes*
- “Be a mountain,” p. 202 in *Five Good Minutes*
- “Safe with me,” p. 170 in *Five Good Minutes with the One You Love*

Practices for Touching Peace, Stillness, and Ease Within

Go With the Flow (Of Your Breath)

The busyness and frantic pace of modern life can seem unending, overwhelming, and inescapable. In truth, relief is only a mindful breath away.

You can connect with a deep sense of inner calm and spaciousness by practicing mindful breathing.

- Breathe mindfully for about a minute.
- Set your intention. For example, “May this practice give rise to deep peace within me.”
- Sit quietly, and set all your burdens down—the inner ones and the outer ones.
- You don’t have to do anything else. You don’t have to make anything happen. Just allow yourself to relax, soften, and observe, following the breath sensations, and the movement of your attention between breath and other things.
- End by opening your eyes and moving gently.

Wish Yourself Safety

The feeling of safety is priceless and often elusive. Even the possibility of safety may at times seem unreachable.

There is profound power in the simple gesture of wishing safety for yourself. As a meditation, this practice is done in the same spirit of a parent holding a frightened child and lovingly whispering soothing words.

- Breathe mindfully for about a minute.
- Set your intention. For example, “May this practice support a deeper peace and ease in me.”
- Relax, let your eyes close, and imagine a picture of yourself.
- Bring compassionate attention to yourself, as a parent would to a child.
- For the next few minutes, imagine speaking directly to yourself, whispering a phrase like “May I be safe from all harm,” or, “May I be protected from all inner and outer harm.” Wish yourself safety with the same spirit you would wish a dear friend a safe trip.
- End by opening your eyes and moving gently.

Relaxed Body, Clear Mind, Open Heart

Stress and tension in your body, coupled with worry and hurry in your mind, can be barriers to an open heart.

If you’re feeling tense and stressed, try the following practice for self-care of body and mind, and see what happens in your heart space:

- Select a time and place where you will not be disturbed and breathe or listen mindfully for about a minute.
- Set your intention. For example: “May this practice bring me wisdom.”
- Bring mindful attention to your body. Imagine that each in-breath fills you with ease and each out-breath carries away tension and stress.
- After a few breaths, bring mindfulness to any thoughts or stories that come up. Let them be. No need to fight them or follow them. Let them go.
- After a few more mindful breaths, bring attention to your heart space. What is happening there now?

Practices for Cultivating Happiness

Really Taste Your Food

Where is your attention when you eat? Do you ever see an empty plate before you and wonder who ate the food? Do you ever eat from boredom or worry, instead of hunger?

This practice invites you to become more mindful as you eat. By paying mindful attention as you eat, and connecting to the unfolding experience, including your inner life, you can find more pleasure and the possibility for a healthier life.

- When you sit down to eat breakfast, breathe mindfully for at least a few breaths.
- Set your intention. For example, “May eating mindfully make me healthier.”
- As you begin to eat, with the very first bite, pour all your attention into the process. Notice how the food looks, smells, and tastes for each bite. Notice sensations of chewing and swallowing.
- Let go of all other thoughts, plans, reading, television, computers, music—all of it.
- For the next few bites, just pay attention to your experience of eating, including your inner life, allowing it to unfold without interference.
- Enjoy! Discover! Become healthier!

Connect to the Natural World

The beauty of nature can offer a sense of peace and vitality that is refreshing and healing. This practice invites you to use mindfulness and the power of each of your senses to connect deeply with the healing power of the natural world. You can do this outside or inside, looking at plants or flowers or water elements.

- Breathe mindfully for about a minute.
- Set your intention. For example, “May this practice bring me peace and strengthen my connection to nature.”
- After a few more mindful breaths, open your eyes and look at any expression of nature before you. Look mindfully, without judgment and with acceptance. Really see what is there, just as it is. When thoughts come, patiently let them go. Look again, more closely, at shape, color, space, movement, light, and shadow.
- Close your eyes and shift attention to another sense. Practice mindful hearing, smelling, feeling sensations, even tasting. Attend to and receive deeply what is happening in nature around you, with interest and friendliness, and without judgment.
- End by opening your eyes and moving gently.

Count Your Blessings

When the judging mind is in session, the heart feels closed, and feelings of anger and upset often prevail.

Shifting your focus from what’s wrong to what’s right can change everything.

Whenever you are caught churning in judgment, try the following practice:

- Notice your inner world of criticizing and judging. Begin breathing mindfully and continue for about a minute.
- Set your intention. For example: “May this practice reconnect me with ease and joy.”
- Focus more closely on breath sensations as you breathe mindfully for a few more breaths.
- Shift attention to your body. Breathe mindfully, feeling sensations. Appreciate how your body works to sustain your life.
- Look around you. Acknowledge the helpful people and things that support your present situation.
- Nurture any feelings of gratitude arising in you, and rest there.

Rest in Beauty

When you are feeling closed off, isolated, or alone, relief is closer than you might think. Learn to restore and reconnect by resting in beauty. Your key to connection lies in mindful attention to the fullness and beauty of life around you.

- Stop whatever you are doing and practice mindful breathing, listening, or movement for about a minute.
- Set your intention. For example: “May this practice of attention to beauty revitalize me.”
- Continue mindfulness practice for a few more breaths.
- Look around you. Notice beauty. See it in color, shape, space, motion. When you find something beautiful, look closer. Rest there.
- Listen mindfully. Find the beauty in sounds. Hear the tones, rhythm, and silence.
- Find beauty around you using your other senses—smell, taste, touch.
- Rest in all the beauty around you.

Practices for Increasing Resilience and Equanimity

Feel Your Connection With All Things

Using phrases linked to the process of inhaling and exhaling, this practice offers the opportunity to explore your connections in the web of life.

- Breathe mindfully for about a minute.
- Set your intention. For example, “May this practice open my heart more deeply.”
- Focus attention on your breath.
- Link silent phrases with each in-breath and out-breath as follows:

“Breathing in, I feel breath supporting my life.”

“Breathing out, I say ‘thank you’ for being alive.”

“Breathing in, I know all living things must breathe.”

“Breathing out, I feel my connection with all living things.”

“Breathing in, I wish happiness and peace for myself.”

“Breathing out, I see that all living things wish happiness and peace.”

- Explore linking your breath to any other phrases that appeal to you.
- End by opening your eyes and moving gently.

Be a Mountain

This is a good practice for those times when you are feeling scattered, off balance, or unfocused.

It allows you to reconnect with the elemental quality of earthiness and strength within. Doing this practice can ground you deeply in the present moment.

- Stand or sit comfortably.
- Breathe mindfully for about a minute.
- Set your intention. For example, “May this practice help me find inner strength.”
- Imagine the most beautiful mountain you have ever seen, either in person or in a photograph.
- As you visualize your mountain, let your body become the mountain. Feel the same qualities of steadiness, strength, unshakableness, and majesty.
- For the next few minutes, rest in your “mountain body,” unmoved by any thoughts, fears, worries, or other experiences around you, just as the mountain is unmoved by any weather patterns around it.
- End by opening your eyes and moving gently.

Safe with Me

One of the greatest gifts you can offer another is a feeling of safety in your company.

By learning to better manage your own disturbing states of anger and fear, you make your presence safer and more inviting to others.

Try this practice for working with your own anger and fear:

- When you notice you are upset or angry, mindfully offer compassion to yourself.
- Breathe, listen, or move mindfully for about a minute.
- Set your intention. For example: “May I manage my own anger and upset wisely.”
- Stop fighting the anger or fear. Stop feeding it, too. Try making space for it. Feel it in your body. Whatever you feel, breathe mindfully with it.
- Notice any anger- or fear-driven thoughts. Don’t fight or feed them, either. Acknowledge them and let them go. Breathe mindfully with them.
- End by offering yourself an affirmation. For example: “I am stronger and wiser than this upset.”
- Move forward.

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is distributed with the understanding that the publisher is not engaged in rendering psychological, financial, legal, or other professional services. The information in this book is provided as an educational resource only, and is not intended to be used or relied upon for any diagnostic or treatment purposes. The interventions in this book should not be used as a substitute for conventional medical therapy.

© 2020 Jeffrey Brantley / New Harbinger Publications. First published May 18, 2020.

For more information please contact

New Harbinger Publications
5674 Shattuck Avenue
Oakland, CA 94609
www.newharbinger.com

