



Transforming Childhood Trauma with Mindfulness

Get out of the past and into the now

CINA HOEY, LCSW



Hi! I'm Cina. A holistic psychotherapist, meditation teacher, and energy healer.

Healing myself and others is my highest passion and I hope that you will find the information in this manual useful on your journey. Please note that any time we are discussing delicate topics like traumatic experiences it is always wise to lean on your support system when necessary. Friends and family are beautiful resources and, of course, I also recommend you work with a skilled therapist if you are in a healing process as this book is not to be used as a substitute for mental health treatment. I'm sending lots of love and compassion to you, may you be peaceful, present, and free.

All My Love,
Cina

CONTENTS

00

Mindfulness & Trauma

01

Self-Awareness

02

Self-Compassion

03

Self-Destruction

04

Being with What Is

05

Distress Tolerance

06

Reconnect with Your Body

07

Then and Now

INTRODUCTION

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is intentional, compassionate, and non-judgmental present moment attention. When you direct your awareness to the present moment - what you're thinking, feeling, wanting, knowing, noticing, touching, tasting, smelling, etc. right now - that is a moment of mindfulness. This is a very limited and concise definition of the life-changing practice of mindfulness, but as you move through this book you will better understand what mindfulness is. Moreover, the way to really understand mindfulness is to practice and experience it for yourself. If you'd like, pause for a minute to focus on your direct experience of this moment with these three guiding questions: What am I thinking about? What am I feeling in my body? What am I feeling emotionally? Welcome to the present moment.

The essence of mindfulness is being able to be with the present moment, exactly as it is, without striving to fix or change it. This kind of flexibility - to flow with life as it is - is in direct opposition to what traumatic experience teaches us, which is why it is such a powerful healing ally.

What is Trauma?

Most people associate trauma with natural disasters, war zones, and major events that turn your life around in an instant. While all of that is true, it is a limited perspective of the full spectrum of traumatic experience that calls for internal healing.

I have come to understand trauma as any experience that occurred either once or over a period of time that overwhelmed your system. At that time you were unable to responsibly or appropriately respond, react, protect yourself, process the information, or navigate the experience skillfully because you were either unprepared, lacking necessary skills, or too young to know how. Additionally, you were likely defenseless, powerless, and there was something in your environment that felt like a threat to your physical, emotional, or psychological safety or well-being.

While you might think that a small percentage of the population is truly traumatized, the reality is that the majority of us have had some degree of traumatic experience. This can range from a parent that worked a lot, a mentally ill sibling, an alcoholic parent that was violent and unpredictable, a parent that was inconsistent, schoolyard bullying, death, divorce, losing your home, and more. Trauma is a spectrum. Take an honest inventory of what you've been through and do not minimize the pain that can linger from neglect, abandonment, shame, criticism, loss, and fear and at the same time you want to be careful to not over identify with your trauma as this can sometimes create new symptoms or make us feel justified in self-defeating or destructive behaviors.

The purpose of this work is awareness and integration, self-compassion rather than self-pity, and taking responsibility for your nervous system, your behaviors, and the symptoms you currently experience to work towards healing and growth rather than staying stuck in the past. At the very least, you must acknowledge that your life experiences up until this point, particularly when you were young, have conditioned you in a way that still affects you today. That is what we are here to heal and that is the focus of this book - the power within you combined with the power of the present moment.

Famous meditation teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, often said “No Mud, No Lotus.” This metaphor reminds us that not only can something beautiful emerge out of pain and suffering, but the pain and suffering are, in fact, necessary conditions for such joy and beauty to arise. Your painful past is the same. Your dark, unpleasant, painful past can be a platform for growth and healing that would not have been available to you otherwise. Mindfulness is a tool for that process.

Read on to learn how you can use mindfulness to heal years of painful experience, reconnect with yourself, and find new vitality in your day to day life.

DISCLAIMER: This book is NOT intended to replace psychotherapy, prescribed medication, formal mental health treatment or assess or diagnose any disorders. If you find anything in this book to be emotionally triggering and destabilizing please consult with a professional to find individualized care.

CHAPTER 1

Mindfulness helps you develop self-awareness...

Self-awareness is being attuned to your thoughts, emotions, body sensations, and reactions. The reason this is first in this book is because awareness is foundational to you being able to change anything.

Awareness is your starting place for healing, transformation, and creating change internally or externally.

When you have painful experiences in your past, not only is it normal, but it also may have at one point in your life been *necessary*, for you to disconnect from the present moment in order to tolerate it. Traumatic experiences teach us to protect ourselves and cope in any way we know how at that moment in time. For many of us this meant finding ways to repress, deny, or ignore our feelings that we were too young to understand, regulate, or process. We may have found comfort in checking out mentally (which can lead to ADHD), things rather than people (which can lead to addiction), being on high alert for problems (which can lead to anxiety), focusing on others instead of ourselves (which can lead to codependency), and so on. But in unsafe or unstable environments what we were not taught was how to honor our thoughts, feelings, body sensations, or needs; there were other more pressing matters (or people) to attend to and protect from.

Another reason self-awareness is so difficult for trauma survivors is that we usually had our attention trained on others. Maybe there was a parent or sibling who took up most of the emotional energy, or whose moods we had to attune to in order to know how to behave to keep ourselves safe. Maybe there was no one there to ask you how you were feeling so you never learned how to identify your feelings or that they mattered. Maybe you had a lot of feelings and were taught you were “too much” and you’ve locked your feelings away ever since. This type of emotional disconnection is totally normal and, fortunately, reversible.

I want to be clear that none of us will be mindful, present, and self-aware 100% of the time no matter how much mindfulness and meditation we practice. The mind wandering outside of the now is totally normal and, spoiler alert, reading this book will not cure you of that. It is part of what it means to be human. We have an enormous capacity to think, process, learn, remember, plan, resist, rehearse, and obsess over events that are not happening in the present moment. There are plenty of benefits to this type of cognitive flexibility and the expansiveness of our minds but one of the downsides is that it is really challenging to stay present with ourselves and really easy to get lost in the relentless internal chatter and reactivity. If you’d like, pause your reading to set a timer on your phone for 2 minutes and kindly ask your mind not to wander, but to be focused only on what you can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch right now. You’ll likely find that your mind jumps around to various topics and you need to drag it back to the present moment several times in just 2 minutes. Welcome to the essence of meditation - begin again, and again, and again.

When you start to pay more attention to your inner world you realize that your body, mind, and heart are constantly speaking to each other. Really, they are constantly trying to speak to you. Without this self-connection and attunement, you are at risk of repeating patterns that no longer serve you and are remnants of the way you coped with difficult experiences in the past.

To process and transform trauma we must be aware of our thoughts and feelings so we can respond to them in new ways, but without awareness we are stuck in endless loops that have been on repeat for decades (yes, this means that something that happened when you were 5 years old can, and often does, impact you when you're 35). If we want deep and significant change we must get out of auto-pilot and this is simply impossible without awareness.

CHAPTER 2

Mindfulness teaches you self-compassion...

If guilt, shame, and a persistent sense of inadequacy are familiar to you, you likely have unresolved trauma. These types of feelings can cause a significant amount of pain and distress and lead to harmful ways of coping.

Studying and practicing mindfulness has taught me that there is a difference between pain and suffering. Pain is inevitable due to the many unpredictable ups and downs of life. None of us are free from feeling disappointment, desire, grief, loneliness or sadness. And while that might sound depressing or hopeless, I invite you to view that as an objective truth. Life comes with challenges. Period. Suffering, however, is all of the resistance and judgment we add on top of the original pain, and the great news is that we do have some agency over that.

When I was binge eating I would lose control around food, hit multiple fast food restaurants one after another, and top it off with a carton of ice cream. Then I'd attack myself mentally and emotionally. So the fact that I'd lost control with food was the pain and the self-attack and judgment was the suffering. See if any of this sounds familiar:

"What is *wrong* with you?"

"I can't believe you did that"

"You'll never change"

"You're pretty screwed up."

"You're damaged."

"You're out of control and no one can help you."

"You better hide this from others."

"I'm so disappointed in you."

"You know better."

"If you keep doing this you're going to be really disgusting and no one will love you."

"No one would want someone who does this."

"If you aren't attractive no one will like you."

"Try harder."

"Do better."

"Be better."

"You're not pretty enough."

"You're not smart enough."

"You're not skinny enough."

"You're pathetic."

This is just a snapshot of some of the hurtful things I used to say to myself and, honestly, I didn't really know that was a problem until I started meditating. The inner critic was loud and sort of normal. What I used to say to myself I would have *never* said to one of my friends. I wouldn't have even said them to someone I didn't like, however, I had no problem saying them to myself.

I often say that the first year of my formal meditation practice was one of the most depressing years of my life. I knew that something was wrong. I was binge eating, obsessed with exercise, extremely anxious, and I had lost many of my social connections and interests to my eating disorder. I stumbled upon meditation and had a deep knowing that it was something that I needed to do. I didn't know how, but I knew it was going to change my life. So I started meditating every night for thirty minutes and didn't let any excuses get in the way.

I started to develop awareness. I was aware that most of my thoughts were about my body, my looks, my grades, my money, others perceptions of me, and all the ways I needed to improve. And although I was more aware, I wasn't feeling better. Actually, I felt worse now that all of my flaws were being brought into the spotlight. Binges and anxiety persisted. I wondered if this meditation crap was working.

What was more apparent to me than my thoughts were the behaviors and ways I treated myself. Waking up at 4:30 a.m. to spend hours in the gym even though I had classes *and* work that day, pushing myself to get a 4.0 GPA even though that didn't really have any effect on my future, always seeking more weight loss even though I was a size 00, and working extra hours even though I could cover my rent if I worked half as much. **It was never enough. I was never enough. I compromised my peace in the present moment while I hustled and hoped that I'd feel at peace in the future if I continued to improve myself.** Neither my thoughts nor my actions were compassionate in the least. I expected too much of myself. It didn't matter how much I meditated, if I didn't start being kinder to myself, nothing would have changed.

This was evidence of my childhood wounds shining through. My mother died of breast cancer when I was 10 and my father worked overtime to support a house and 3 children on Long Island. Many of my emotional needs went unmet, much of my grief went unprocessed, and we all carried on as best we could as more and more aspects of our family, our home, and our health declined. I felt out of control, afraid, alone, and had a strong desire for comfort and safety. I was also the only girl in a house with three men who didn't know how to supply me with the compassion and tenderness I desperately needed (although they did teach me how to fight and play sports, which was fun). Needing something I couldn't have, feeling different from my friends, and emotional neglect drove feelings of inadequacy and the desire to try harder to fit in and be accepted.

Trauma expert Dr. Peter Levine states that "trauma is not what happens to us, but what we hold inside in the absence of an empathic witness." While I had been practicing mindfulness for a while, I was only watching my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors without any sort of framework. And that was amazing and gave me some exceptional insights that led me on the path to change, but there was something missing. I needed to be my own empathetic and compassionate observer of my inner experience. **It wasn't enough to just see what was going on within me, I needed to have compassion for it too.** Without kindness we are just aware of our own self-judgments, criticisms, and ways we attack ourselves and this can sometimes be even more triggering for trauma survivors that never learned how to regulate their difficult emotions.

Compassion is defined as the awareness of someone else's distress and the desire to alleviate it. Compassion is also said to be translated to mean "to suffer with." Having compassion for the people we love is easy. Having compassion for the people that hurt us is hard. Having compassion for ourselves sometimes feels impossible.

For most people self-compassion is life-changing. For trauma survivors, it's life-saving.

This is a non-negotiable, my friend. Learning to identify when you are in thought patterns of self-criticism, identifying guilt and shame, and responding with compassion for yourself is going to be one of the most helpful processes you can ever learn, build your resilience to stress, and retrain your mind and body to be present and calm.

Mindfulness is not some panacea. It is not some magical practice that will cure all of your problems, but it will teach you to be with yourself and your experiences in a new way. It will not change your circumstances but it will change your relationship to what is happening and that changes everything. You now have more internal peace, ease, and clarity to move forward with intention rather than on the automatic pilot. But most importantly, you become your own safe place.

To be your own safe place means that you can handle whatever arises in your life. You know you can because you have practiced meeting your inner experience with curiosity and compassion and moving through emotions big and small. Being your own safe place means you can notice your thoughts and feelings without needing to distract or dissociate. Being your own safe place means looking within for support, kindness, respect, validation, and care. Being your own safe place means that you let yourself be human filled with imperfections and accepting of yourself as you are. No six pack abs necessary (what a relief!).

I want to be clear that in processing and moving through childhood trauma the main focus is compassion for self. It is not required for you to forgive anyone that hurt, abandoned, neglected, or abused you as a child in order for you to feel more at peace in your life. Forgiveness, and extending compassion or kindness, is an extremely personal process and no one can force you to do that until you are ready, and if you're never ready that is okay too. Sometimes we get to a place in the therapeutic process where we can have compassion for our parents who were just human and dealing with their own unresolved traumatic history, which meant they couldn't possibly parent us perfectly. And even if we can consciously acknowledge that we still have a right to feel angry, upset, and resentful.

Something I've always loved about mindfulness skills is that they are not talents that you are born with, they are skills that can be learned and developed. The more you practice, the stronger the skills become. A popular mindfulness practice to develop and grow our compassion is LovingKindness. This practice helps us use a framework to send compassion to ourselves and others. For now, try the following just to grow self-compassion:

PRACTICE: Set a timer for 5 minutes and repeat the following phrases over and over again until it goes off:

May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I be safe.

CHAPTER 3

Mindfulness helps you let go of self-destructive behaviors ...

If childhood traumatic experiences are the seeds of a tree, our current behaviors are the fruits. The ability to self-reflect and tune into your thoughts and feelings will offer you a glimpse into your subconscious mind, the core of why you do what you do. Most of my clients will come to me because they are not behaving like their highest and best selves; they are anxious, depressed, procrastinating, pursuing unhealthy relationships or destroying healthy ones, drinking too much, binge eating, numbing themselves with drugs, sex, shopping, social media, or video games, lashing out, isolating themselves, blaming others, feeling angry, or not acting in their own best interest in some way. Every one of these responses is adaptive. **My clients learned these behaviors as a way of coping with uncomfortable feelings and to protect themselves from pain.** All of these point to a sore spot within - a place that needs your awareness, attention, love, care, and healing.

Ask yourself the following questions: What are the behaviors that are getting in the way of me enjoying my life? What do I keep doing that I know isn't good for me? What do I keep promising myself I won't do but I keep doing it anyway? What are the actions that show up when I am stressed? What are the strategies I turn to when I am triggered and activated? What behaviors am I feeling stuck in and can't get out of? What actions am I taking that I know are not serving my highest good? These are good questions to ask yourself to uncover the ways you self-destruct and create instability in your life.

Identifying these behaviors is not an invitation for shame. A core element of mindfulness is curiosity. A curious attention to what's happening in order to have a deeper understanding and be present with it. Once you get curious you are taking a very important step towards change. I can also tell you that any client I have ever worked with has had a damn good reason for their self-destructive behaviors and I'm sure (subconsciously) you do too. Remember, trauma overwhelms us and we end up coping the best way we know how.

So how does mindfulness actually help us to stop self-destructive behaviors? I previously talked about the way our minds can wander and ruminate that prevent us from being in the here and now. First let's acknowledge that this in and of itself can be a trauma response. An overactive mind is one that is always looking for solutions to problems before they arise to feel safe. It is also a way that we disconnect from our bodies, but I will talk more about that later. Before we know it, we are lost in a sea of rumination, fantasy, worry, and over-thinking and triggering the corresponding emotions.

This is the key: your thoughts generate emotions, your emotions generate body sensations, and that trifecta (thoughts, emotions, sensations) is the precursor to any behavior you will ever have.

So when we are thinking and feeling on auto-pilot we are also acting on auto-pilot and have very little agency over the decisions we make and the behaviors that inevitably create more problems for us.

As you learn to observe this process - thoughts, feelings, sensations - you will find that sometimes it is simply in the noticing of it that you are able to step outside of this cycle and bring yourself into a balanced state before you behave self-destructively. The true gift of self-awareness is the ability to respond with intention to yourself and your world.

Without awareness you are choiceless, with awareness you are intentional.

Without awareness you are in the past (depressed) or in the future (anxious), with awareness you are present.

Without awareness you are responding to life from your early conditioning, with awareness you are empowered as the agent of internal and external change.

Getting into the habit of checking in with yourself will give you agency and power over your responses to your internal stimuli. While I hope that you'll find mindfulness as a helpful practice before you engage in a maladaptive coping skill, I know you are as imperfect as I am (and everyone else) and **you are going to mess up**. One of the most powerful ways to use mindfulness is after we've already blown it. After we've screamed at our partners, called our ex 47 times without a response, bought the \$200 shoes we don't need, hit our vape, poured the wine, and did the thing we promised ourselves we wouldn't.

After years of suffering, I finally learned to get mindful after an episode of binge eating rather than going through my usual shame spiral. It taught me so much. I was able to understand which feelings sent me to the bottom of a jar of peanut butter. It taught me the conditions I was most sensitive to. It taught me that these destructive responses never happened "out of nowhere" like I thought, and so much more.

Our trauma responses live in our day to day actions and reactions. Pay attention to find out what they are to let go of the ones that are no longer working for you.

PRACTICE: Stop and do a mindful check in by asking yourself these three questions: What am I thinking right now? What emotions do I feel right now? What body sensations do I feel right now?

CHAPTER 4

Mindfulness teaches you to be with "what is"...

Mindfulness teaches you to be in the present moment without striving to fix or change it and that is in direct opposition to what trauma teaches us.

Painful experiences teach us that we need to be on high alert, that we need to control, fix, plan, prepare, and generally that we cannot trust life to unfold without constant intervention from us. The thing is, at one point, that may have been true for you. But, as long as you are in a safe environment now and your trauma is in your past, this way of being is no longer necessary. Mindfulness helps give our brain that message. This is why most people with childhood trauma can relate to the feeling of anxiety, constant worry, or a restlessness that doesn't seem to go away no matter how much you accomplish or "work on yourself."

In short, trauma teaches us to be in survival mode. Whether you're at the grocery store, a party with friends or a business meeting with your colleagues, if you'd tune into your thoughts and body sensations, you might notice that you are tense. What this actually means is that your sympathetic nervous system (the part of your nervous system that initiates fight or flight) is activated. Your body is reacting - heart racing, temperature rising, hair standing on end, blood flowing to your larger extremities so you can run away or fight for your life - which is totally unnecessary while you're waiting in line at Starbucks. Our nervous system detects a threat and it's as if there is an actual predator about to cause us physical harm. In the present day this looks like rushing to get out of the situation you're in because you feel anxious, feeling triggered by something someone said, worrying about how you're being perceived, feeling agitated, embarrassed, impatient, and not at ease. These are the lingering effects of the past in our minds and bodies. We can not be at rest. Something must be fixed, addressed, and improved.

Mindfulness teaches us to relax the need to fix. In this moment, if your heart is racing, let it race. If you feel agitated and impatient, let it be. If you have an urge to binge eat or text your ex, see if you can ride it out without acting on it because it will pass. It always passes. We have between 50,000-70,000 thoughts per day - that's almost a thought every second. Our feelings are coming and going constantly as our thoughts change. Our bodies are trying to keep up with our thoughts and feelings. One of the guarantees in this life is impermanence. Nothing lasts forever, especially your thoughts and feelings.

For deep healing, adopt the following mindfulness phrases: **Let it come. Let it Be. Let it Go.**

The philosophy of mindfulness is that the present moment = the best moment. It's the only moment you will ever have and just because you are feeling uncomfortable feelings doesn't mean there is anything bad or wrong. It doesn't mean you have to fight and claw your way out of that experience to get to a "better" one. All is welcome. This moment, as it is, is enough.

I often point out when my clients get trapped in the “I’ll be happy when...” delusion. I’ll be happy when I lose 10 lbs., I’ll be happy when I get a promotion, I’ll be happy when that guy asks for my number, I’ll be happy when my kids are out of school, I’ll be happy when... fill in the blank. **Our greatest mistake is that we are constantly seeking happiness outside of ourselves and outside of this moment.**

When you’ve been abandoned, you seek attention. When you’ve been rejected, you seek acceptance. When you’ve been abused, you seek comfort. When you’ve been betrayed, you seek isolation and all of these reactions are interchangeable. And all of this seeking leaves us restless. If you feel alone, drop into that experience in your mind and body, get to know it, and let it be there. If you feel uncomfortable, check in with yourself and see if you can ride that out, if you feel afraid, see if you can be with that with compassion.

Our brains are not wired for happiness, but for survival. We have so many protective instincts that have led us straight to the top of the food chain and kept our species going, which is a beautiful display of evolution, however, it’s not great for our enjoyment of day to day life. While any human is wired for survival, this is amplified under the weight of unresolved trauma.

My survival strategies have ranged from getting a 4.0 GPA to achieving a fit body, making a certain income, keeping a perfectly clean home, botoxing my wrinkles away, plucking out my gray hairs, seeking male attention, obsessively learning, to trying to make everyone like me. I wasn’t consciously thinking at the time “I need to change something about myself and the present moment to make me feel at ease,” or “I’ll feel happy/safe when I lose 12 lbs,” but this inability to just *be* with myself was/is often disguised as all of these socially acceptable desires and drives. Needless to say, it also created and sustained a baseline anxiety for so many years that began to wreak havoc on my health, happiness, and relationships that I am still repairing to this day.

Allow yourself to be as you are and let that be enough. Allow the moment to be as it is, and let that be enough. All is well. The past has already happened. It’s over. **You can get out of survival mode now.**

PRACTICE: Ask yourself: What strategies am I using to avoid feeling embarrassed, rejected, abandoned, or inadequate. What am I resisting and feeling like I need to fix or change in my life? What would it be like to let it be instead?

CHAPTER 5

Mindfulness teaches you to tolerate distress...

When my anxiety reached an all-time high in my early twenties I started avoiding everything. I was afraid to go to restaurants, gyms, grocery stores, and especially anything that required a long car ride, a train, or heaven forbid a *plane*. I was afraid that my anxiety would show up in those places and I would feel awful with no escape. My life became small, my friendships became strained, and before I knew it I had limited myself so much that all of that excess energy in my body manifesting as anxiety slowly turned into a deep depression. I hadn't yet learned distress tolerance (until a great therapist taught me how - shout out to Doug) or how important that was. The thought of my anxiety showing up felt unbearable to me. I avoided discomfort, sought safety in the comfort of my bedroom (where I deluded myself into believing that I wouldn't have anxiety attacks there - I did), and stayed this way for too long. To this day I know that under too much stress my coping strategy is to avoid whatever I can, stay on the couch with a book, and overwork so I don't have to face the discomfort of living and creating new experiences. I remember Doug's voice speaking to me as if it were yesterday "It's just energy. It'll burn itself out. It can't last forever." I had to be willing to put myself in situations that I might feel uncomfortable in, ride the wave, let the energy come through, and prove to myself that I could handle it.

Distress tolerance is the ability to tolerate uncomfortable sensations and emotions. Mindfulness teaches you distress tolerance and distress tolerance supports your ability to work through the imperfect moments of life. If you're human, you probably know a little something about that.

It is not your fault if you didn't learn healthy emotion regulation skills, but it is your responsibility to learn them now. Mindfulness teaches us that our emotions are like the weather. Sometimes rain comes through the sky, sometimes sunshine, wind, hail, sleet, or snow, but regardless of what passes through, the sky is unchanged. You are the sky in this analogy and your emotions are the weather. You are an open space and you can allow energy (emotions) to move through you. When your system is overwhelmed and energy can not flow through you, it gets stuck. This is another way of looking at trauma - stored energy in the body.

The usual strategy when we encounter discomfort is to reach for whatever we can to make it go away. Human beings generally seek pleasure, avoid pain, and conserve energy at all times. This is part of the reason it's so challenging to build new habits. To floss your teeth every night is time consuming and annoying, we'd rather skip it. To go to a spin class requires us to challenge our strength and endurance and we'd rather avoid it. To meditate for 20 minutes each night forces us to face our impatience, restlessness, and lack of concentration, we'd rather dissociate with the latest Netflix series. The things that push us outside of our comfort zones are the things that change us for the better, but in order to change we must be willing to tolerate the distress that comes with being uncomfortable.

Seeking pleasure is part of being human, but if we do not have enough willingness to tolerate distress, and even seek it out on a regular basis to practice this skill, life becomes unbalanced. If we never floss we have dental issues. If we never exercise we have health issues. If we never meditate, go to therapy, or practice stress reduction and self-care, we have mental health issues.

Unresolved trauma creates emotional discomfort and when we are uncomfortable we seek relief or pleasure. Fortunately and unfortunately for us, pleasure and comfort have become readily available luxuries. These pleasure-seeking behaviors are usually the ones that feel good in the short term (eating, drinking, drugs, shopping, gaming, etc.), but cause more problems long-term. I want to be clear that no behavior in and of itself is “bad,” but it is up to you to follow the bouncing ball of your actions. So while there is nothing wrong with shopping, if you are overdoing it in a way that creates more problems in your life, it is not serving your highest good and enabling you to stay stuck.

Early experiences in dysfunctional families or circumstances teach us all sorts of unhealthy ideas about our emotions. We have too many or too little; emotions don't matter; keep your emotions to yourself; emotions get you in trouble; my emotions are inconvenient for others; my emotions aren't heard so that means I should start ignoring them; to get the attention I need I must be very emotional; boys don't cry or get sad; girls should always be nice, etc. **Mindfulness teaches us a new perspective. No feeling is bad, they do not need to be ignored, shoved down, or acted on, they are not dangerous, and as long as I am human I am going to have a lot of them and that is okay.**

Acceptance is inherent in mindful awareness. When we are mindful we are not judging whatever is happening, but we are open to it and we can be with what is, whatever that may be. It makes it easier to accept our emotions when we remind ourselves that they are temporary and that is the best thing about our less desirable emotions - they pass. This is what it means to stop identifying with your feelings. You are not your thoughts or feelings just like the sky is not the rain. They are just energy, they come and go, they will pass. **When it comes to emotion regulation, the way out is through.** One of the practices that teaches this and, unsurprisingly, has had the most profound effects on my clients is that of RAIN.

Recognize what you are feeling

Accept and allow it to be there exactly as it is

Investigate your mind and body sensations

Nurture yourself with compassion/Non-identification with your emotions

This practice teaches you some of the most important skills needed to withstand the “weather” of life. Because regardless of how much therapy you do, healing you pursue, or meditation you practice, you will never not be human. And the human condition is one with an ever-changing emotional experience. Disappointment, guilt, shame, fear, worry, doubt, and discomfort are our companions through this life (as are joy, excitement, peace, comfort and happiness). Trying to escape is a wasted effort and one with consequences you likely have already identified while reading this book. Learning to be with “what is” (our lesson from the last chapter) includes our emotions. **Acceptance of our feelings ironically is what allows that energy to move through us so we can regain our emotional equilibrium.** In our equilibrium is where we are creative, grounded, spontaneous, and clear to make choices that support our highest good.

The opposite of acceptance, of course, is resistance. Trying to push away, deny, and repress your feelings is worth a shot, but can only hold up for so long. If you are in a healing process and working to understand yourself, you likely already know this. Trying to repress your feelings is like holding a beach ball underwater, it'll pop up eventually and likely smack you in the face. Resistance keeps those emotions carefully tucked away in some corner of your energy field, while acceptance is what actually allows them to come and go.

Let it come. Let it be. Let it go.

PRACTICE: What is something that has challenged you and created a storm of emotional weather within you lately? Can you practice RAIN? Can you allow the weather to come through? Sit and breathe while you imagine your emotions as energy moving through your body. In the words of Doug: It's just energy. It'll burn itself out. It can't last forever.

CHAPTER 6

Mindfulness reconnects you to your body...

Your memories and experiences are stored in your subconscious mind and your subconscious mind is not just in your brain, it's in the muscles, tissues, tendons, organs, cells and systems of your body. This makes connecting with your body an essential step on the healing journey because your memories and experiences include your unprocessed trauma. Some indicators that your body and nervous system are still being impacted by events of the past (and being triggered in the present) are a disturbed sleep pattern, constant nervousness, increased or decreased appetite, body aches, chronic pain/muscle tension (often in the neck, back, or shoulders), fatigue, trouble concentrating, flashbacks, nightmares, digestion issues, unexplainable health issues, and self-destructive or addictive behaviors.

In my therapy practice I work with a lot of women with childhood trauma that manifests as eating disorders and unbalanced relationships with food. This is such a common trauma adaptation because what we learn to do under traumatic stress is dissociate and disconnect from our bodies. In order to have a healthy and balanced relationship with food, we must be attuned to our bodies. We need to hear our bodies tell us when they're hungry and when they're full. We need to hear the calls from the body for movement and for rest. We need to partner with the body to know what kind of food the body most wants and needs right now. This is so challenging for many people because they've left the body in an effort to re-establish a sense of safety.

One of the key components of getting back into your body is retraining your nervous system. If you think of your body like a car you have a gas pedal and a break pedal. Your sympathetic nervous system is the gas pedal that speeds everything up and your sympathetic nervous system is your brake pedal that slows everything down. Sympathetic nervous system is fight or flight. Parasympathetic nervous system is rest and digest. **Trauma leaves us in a constant state of hyperarousal and as we frequently scan the environment for danger and threats, we lose the connection to our internal environment.**

Being able to turn inward to attune to our bodies gives us the opportunity to relax and soften our involuntarily constricted muscles that activate when we perceive threat. Depending on the level of trauma we experienced as children, we can perceive threats some of the time, most of the time, or all of the time. Take a moment to check in with your body right now. Is anything tight? Is any area constricted? Do you feel yourself "holding" energy somewhere? Can you soften and relax?

This is an important step towards regulating your nervous system and retraining yourself to know you are safe. **Please note that if your nervous system has been dysregulated for many years it is totally normal to check in with your body and find it tense every time.** It takes practice and consistency to retrain what your body automatically did for years. Be patient with yourself.

To be conscious of your body sensations is known as “interoception,” and this is exactly what mindfulness teaches us to do. This is probably a good time to acknowledge that “mindfulness” is a terrible name for this practice because you’re not really using your mind all that much. The mind indicates thinking and mindfulness is not about thinking, it’s about noticing. It’s awareness. Awareness and thinking are two different modes of mind. Awareness of your body sensations, which is really more like feeling them than thinking about them, allows you to identify real versus perceived threats, which is crucial to trauma healing.

Ask yourself, am I perfectly safe right now? You might think you’re not. You might say, well I can never really be perfectly safe - a car could hit me as I’m driving, or someone could break into my house while I’m sitting on the couch reading this book. But is anything actually threatening you right now? A good way to test this is by checking in with your senses. If you were in real danger, your senses would let you know. You’d see, smell, hear, taste, or touch whatever it was that was life-threatening. This is the purpose of the sympathetic nervous system - detect threats and provide the physiological changes necessary for you to run or fight for your life. **So, if you check in with all of your senses and you cannot detect actual danger but your stress response is activated, your body is perceiving threats based on earlier painful experiences rather than the present moment.**

One of the most common mindfulness practices is the body scan. During a body scan you intentionally move your awareness through different areas of the body to notice sensations without judgment. Without judgment means that if you find an unpleasant sensation you notice it without adding any narrative about not liking it or wanting it to go away. Notice and move on. You’ll see when you practice body scans that if you’re going through different muscle groups and you notice a tightness it is instinctual that you will soften and relax those body parts to whatever extent you can in that moment. This is a beautiful overlap of mindfulness and trauma healing: attune to your body, soften what you can, don’t get more stressed about what you can’t. Be with what is, stay connected to your body, and re-establish your body as a safe place.

While nervous system arousal is probably the most common physical effect of trauma that often leads to other symptoms, this chapter would be incomplete without touching on dissociation. Dissociation is when we leave our bodies and go somewhere else in our minds that is more tolerable than where we are in the present moment. Every human is familiar with this. An example of how we all dissociate is when our minds wander when we’re in a meeting at work or in a classroom and we are also in a dissociated state when we’re watching TV or scrolling through social media. Dissociation is like being there but not really there. An example of a trauma adaptation would be dissociating for periods of time while you endured emotionally overwhelming experiences. Any traumatic experience can cause dissociation because we are trying to protect ourselves from threat. If we couldn’t escape, fight back, or advocate for ourselves in some way, at least we could remove our attention from what was happening. Many of my clients with painful pasts will tell me they can’t remember all that much from their childhood. I will often validate that this was just their brain’s way of protecting them.

Mindfulness can be so beneficial here because it is the exact opposite of dissociation. Dissociation is checking out and mindfulness is checking in. This can take practice if one of your coping strategies has been to dissociate and you have found comfort in that for a long time. Coming back into these memories and feelings can be overwhelming.

This is where I will again mention the benefit of a skilled therapist that can help you to process any repressed material that surfaces. It is wise to have some solid emotion regulation skills before you really dive into healing specific traumatic memories so that you can confidently ride out the discomfort that arises (a great opportunity to practice RAIN).

When I teach body scans to my meditation classes I always warn them of the potential of this effect. When we start paying more attention to the body, breathing deeply into it, focusing on where energy is being held, we can sometimes tap into stored energy that feels scary. This is why self-awareness, acceptance, compassion, nervous system regulation, and distress tolerance are so powerful. Learning that our thoughts and feelings are not us, that we can safely observe them, and that we can be curious and compassionate are the skills that will help you to really see and release whatever arises in consciousness. **The ability to be with whatever comes into the present moment internally is your superpower.**

PRACTICE: Set a timer for 5 minutes and practice noticing body sensations. Start at your head and slowly move downward until you reach your toes. Relax any tense muscles along the way.

CONCLUSION

Mindfulness takes you out of the past and into the now...

This one might seem glaringly obvious and remnants of this lesson weave their way through other chapters of this book, but to really drive this point home, trauma leaves you stuck in the currents of your past while mindfulness is about where you are today.

The present moment is all you have. While learning from past mistakes has value, as does planning for the future, if we spend too much time outside of the present moment it takes a serious toll on our physical, mental, and emotional well-being.

The present moment is the only moment you will ever have to experience peace. **And as long as you are looking for joy, peace, or contentment somewhere else it will never be where you are.** If you're looking for peace in the past you prevent yourself from having it today. If you're waiting for peace in the future you'll still be waiting when that moment finally comes around.

We become conditioned by whatever we repeatedly think and do. So if you are repeatedly feeling unfulfilled, unsatisfied, impatient, unhappy, and anxious for the future, your body is learning this pattern and repeating it over and over again will only make it easier for you to maintain this pattern. So, if in the future you get some of the things that you've been waiting for to make you happy, your body has only ever known how to practice discontent, it will not magically start being happy now.

When I was younger my brothers and I loved to create a "whirlpool" in our aunt's swimming pool. We'd walk in one direction around the perimeter of the pool to eventually create a current. Then we'd lift our feet up and giggle as the current would move our bodies around the pool. The more we intentionally moved in one direction the more the current kept us afloat. At some point, we'd turn our bodies around to try to get the current going in the other direction. When we first faced the other direction we'd get blown back by the current we'd created for the last 10 minutes and have to hold onto the edge of the pool, fight the current, and keep moving in the new direction, but eventually with some persistence we'd get the current going the other way.

You are fighting against a current that might be decades old. Sadness, anxiety, depression, lack of trust in others, relying on substances for dissociation and pain relief, feeling like a victim, not believing in yourself, seeking perfection, and feeling unworthy are all currents of the past. If you are beginning your healing process it's as if you just turned around and although you're trying to move in a new direction, the current of the old direction is powerful. Even though you are ready to think, feel and act differently, this takes time, patience, and persistence.

You've already been through the worst. As long as you are now in a safe environment where your childhood trauma is not still occurring, you have made it through. That was then. This is now. And these reactions that are built into your mind and body to keep you safe, approved of, loved, cared for, fed, and protected are no longer necessary. If your brain and body could get that message you'd feel more at peace, however, the auto-pilot mode and the instinct to self-protect from harm is powerful. **Trauma healing is a constant process of letting the mind and body know that we can get out of survival mode now.**

What you think causes your stress does not actually cause your stress. Your painful past learning associated with these triggers is what causes your stress. This is why some people get triggered by certain events and others do not. For example, if you grew up with a narcissistic mother you may go into a stress response if you feel like someone is condescending to you, whereas someone without that kind of upbringing might not perceive this to be stressful, personal, or dangerous at all. The key is to be aware enough to know when we are in a stress response and intentional about becoming present and identifying that we are not actually in danger.

Without awareness, you will continue to get activated by past patterns and react accordingly. With awareness, you have agency over who you want to be today. If you're reading this book, you have wounds from the past that still impact you. I hope you will come away with hope and new tools to bring you to the here and now. There is a delicate balance between acknowledging our feelings today that are from the past and getting caught in the current.

Happiness is now. Peace is available now, in this moment, with everything exactly as it is. Making peace with your past is impossible if you are still in it. Be here, now. Be present. This is where you find peace, this is where you change, and this is where you get to form a new narrative and story about who you are, what you're capable of, and where you're going next.

Thank You!

Let's keep in touch!

THANK YOU for reading.

I hope you are feeling seen and supported. Be kind to yourself as you make changes and please reach out with questions and comments because I love your feedback!



@cina_therapy



@cina_therapy



cinahoey@yahoo.com



Cina Hoey

