Understanding a child with ADHD, and optimally supporting and helping her, means understanding how executive functions relate to ADHD. In order to offer compassionate support, build confidence, and create a plan for the future, the first step parents take is to sort out the reality of underlying issues present in ADHD, including all the varied implications of executive function. By holding onto these basic facts, you can appropriately challenge your children to grow while building for long-term success.

PART II

Mindfulness in ADHD Care

CHAPTER 4

Attention Training and the Brain

Much of what scientists thought about brain development in the past has been tossed out the window. They used to think that the brain stopped developing in early childhood; they now know that the brain is consistently rewired and reformed throughout life, including anytime people learn or practice a skill—a concept called "neuroplasticity." One of the best-studied areas of neuroplasticity is attention, which, as it turns out, is a trainable skill. Training attention helps ease stress and anxiety, because much of anxiety builds out of challenges with attention shifting—something scary grabs us and we struggle to focus away from the thought. Just like our brains can change, even our genetics are not fixed. Our bodies selectively express some genes based on our experiences. While we cannot change our fundamental biological programming—and we cannot cure ADHD with attention training—we can influence the paths our minds and bodies take.

In a laboratory at the University of California, San Francisco, in 1993, two groups of monkeys were used to explore the brain's physical response to outside experience. While listening to varied tones, the monkeys' fingers were tapped by a machine. One group was trained to push a button when the tempo of the tones switched—thus, they focused on the sounds. The other was taught to push a button when the finger taps changed, so they concentrated on their fingers.

The actual physical experience—the sound and the finger tapping—for the monkeys was identical, but their brains were working differently. When the researchers examined their brains after the experiment, they made an incredible finding. The part of the brain that controls listening had grown in the monkeys who focused on sounds, while there was no change to that same area in the monkeys who paid attention to their fingers. Both groups heard and felt the same physical sensations at the same time, but focusing on sound caused the brain's auditory center to strengthen and grow. Where these monkeys chose to place their attention affected brain development.[1]

This experiment demonstrates what we now know to be true from a larger body of research: The brain is malleable and can change according to environmental influences. This finding has major implications because the same applies to people. Where we choose to focus our own attention affects our perceptions, our brain development, and our lives.

Training the Brain

Up until the last fifteen or twenty years, scientists believed the brain stopped growing and changing after early childhood. They also believed whatever genetic traits we inherited from our parents were our destiny. In reality, however, the brain adapts and creates new connections throughout life. We also know that just because we have a particular gene does not necessarily mean it will be expressed. That, too, can depend on outside influences.

The brain is made up of millions of nerve cells connected to each other by synapses, which are responsible for much of how the brain functions. A baby is born with tens of thousands more synapses than an adult. As we learn, we make new links between neurons and prune away unused connections. At age two, the density of connections is twice what it will be at sixteen. This pruning represents one aspect of plasticity, and is all part of growing up.

The brain is malleable or "plastic" in many ways. Anything we do repetitively eventually becomes hard wired. This is helpful for an activity like tying our shoes; we wouldn't want to think and plan where the laces overlap each and every time. But it also means that throughout our lives anything we encounter repetitively, including behaviors, reactions

to challenges, and even thoughts can add and remove connections, physically altering the brain.

Unfortunately, the discovery of neuroplasticity is being misused by people marketing 'educational' products, classes, and tools to parents. Parents shouldn't feel pressure to teach their children everything right away. Bombarding children with intense math or reading programs does not, in the end, advance their maturation or learning.

Development is sequential, and the foundations of early development are socialization, language acquisition, and emotional regulation. A steady progress of linguistic and cognitive abilities must be made before a child can learn to read and do arithmetic. Trying to jump the line—to teach academics too soon, for example—does not work. It also takes away from developmentally appropriate activities such as unadulterated free play.

Children require an environment that is stimulating, balanced by an emphasis on unplanned time with parents and other children to play and explore. Young children learn vital abilities—many related to executive function—from unstructured interactions with children and adults. Over-scheduling children distracts them from larger goals, such as social and emotional balance, that are greater predictors of academic and life success. It also can lead to excessive stress, which in itself inhibits learning.

Respecting neuroplasticity requires an even-handed approach, recognizing how much is too much, which skills to emphasize, and when. We guide our children by raising them in an enriched environment, giving them opportunities to independently explore, to succeed and to fail, setting consistent limits, and filtering the chaotic world around them. Our parenting influences brain development, but it is more like nudging a raft around boulders and through rapids on a fast-moving river than steering a motor boat on an open, placid lake.

How Neuroplasticity Works

The concept that neurons grow and develop new connections beyond childhood initially surprised many scientists. Yet we now know for

certain that brains can adapt throughout a lifetime. For example, studies in dyslexia, first with children and then in adults, compared brain functioning before and after receiving instruction using an evidence-based multi-sensory reading curriculum. Researchers found that reading fluency increased as a result of the intervention; the subjects became faster and more accurate readers. A next logical question is: "What effect, if any, does that have on the brain?"

Part of the premise of this study is that people tend to use the front of the brain to attack novel problems. As activities become mastered, we delegate other areas to facilitate these rote actions. Much less effort is required, little conscious thought expended. For someone with dyslexia, each attempt to read is a new hurdle, so frontal areas remain active.

When these researchers used specialized magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scans to look at brain function, they found the structured reading curriculum had changed the brain. Posterior parts used by fluent readers were now activated. These adults had trained their brains to use new paths.[2] A later study documented growth in related areas of the brain as a result of a similar intervention.[3]

Another small study involved playing the piano. Non-piano-playing adults were asked to practice a particular set of keyboard exercises for two hours a day. After a short time, brain scans showed an increased size in regions related to fine motor discrimination. Impressive enough, but in a follow up, another group was asked to *think about* piano playing exercises, and again, the same region of the brain grew larger.[4]

If thinking about piano playing can affect brain development, what is the effect of repeatedly thinking of something fearful? Or, alternatively, training the mind to focus *away from* fearful thoughts?

Changing Our Genes

Your basic genetic material is inherited from your parents at the time of conception. Within this information are about 25,000 genes, which contribute only about 2 or 3 percent of your total DNA. The rest is composed of what had been called "junk DNA," seemingly random sequences of bases not coding to build anything. Of course, 98 percent of the genome is not junk. It's actually more like an owner's manual for your body—the information that tells genes when and where to express themselves.

Your genes contain all the information that defines you—your eye color, hair color, height, and other physical traits. In addition, there are genes that predispose you to different conditions, such as hypertension, cancer, diabetes, and even ADHD. But your genes alone do not tell the entire story. Even if you have a gene putting you at risk for ADHD, you may or may not wind up with the condition. How and when genes express themselves make all the difference.[5]

Why does this thumbnail sketch of medical genetics matter? It turns out that our bodies sometimes can pick and choose the genes that come into play based on experience. The brain stops or starts certain biological tendencies, or one organ communicates with another, sending a genetic message: Danger ahead, time to focus on survival.

In certain situations, our experiences sway genetics in ways that affect a lifetime. Children raised under chronic stress—in extreme poverty or in neglectful homes, for example—"inherit" predictable changes regarding how they will physically respond to stress in the future, such as having over-reactive stress pathways in the brain.[6] As well, both maternal cigarette smoking and fetal alcohol exposure put children at risk for ADHD, especially if they are already genetically predisposed. So there may be children at risk for developmental or mental health issues, but whether or not they develop symptoms is predicated on what happens in their lives.

At the same time, no parent should ever be led to believe that ADHD is caused by how they are raising their children. Parental choices influence some, but far from all, genetic tendencies and aspects of brain development. While parenting styles affect symptoms, ADHD is a pre-programmed biological condition. As parents we can nudge our child's brain development, but beyond creating a healthy home environment and offering opportunities for growth and learning, much is beyond our control.

Training Attention and ADHD

One of the first questions about mindfulness and ADHD often raised by parent is: If we can train attention, can we cure my child's ADHD?

The answer is, almost certainly, no. The genetics of ADHD win. However, building attention is like building muscles. Increased strength and flexibility are possible. Numerous studies have shown distinct benefits of activities that enhance attention.

In 2009 Dr. Antoine Lutz at the University of Wisconsin published a study in which subjects completed a three-month meditation program. The style of meditation used was mindfulness meditation where, as mentioned earlier, one of the trained skills is focused attention.[7]

The measure used by Dr. Lutz was a test of auditory discrimination. In the midst of tones played through headphones, people were asked to track one in particular as it varied. Dr. Lutz found that people who completed the meditation training were better able to maintain attention to the sound. They also were quicker to notice when they became distracted and return their attention to their task.[8]

Another study explored the concept of attention shifting through a neurological finding called the "attentional blink." If we view a series of rapidly shown stimuli, at some point they pass our eyes so quickly we miss one. At a rate of one picture a second, we might notice picture A followed by B followed by C. At two pictures a second, we may still see all three. Much faster, we see only picture A, miss B, and then recognize picture C.

In another study, a group of adults was trained in meditation for three months. The group completing the meditation program improved the speed at which they shifted attention. In the midst of a series of letters, people who had trained their attention noted two more rapidly presented numbers, instead of seeing only one of them.[9]

While this study has not been repeated specifically for patients with ADHD, attention shifting is a fundamental difficulty in ADHD. These studies and others like them show affects of training on various cognitive skills related to this disorder. So can meditation be used directly to build skills in motivated people with attention problems?

In one pilot study, conducted in 2008 by Dr. Lidia Zylowska at UCLA, adolescents and adults with ADHD completed an eight-week mindfulness program. Dr. Zylowska tracked several measures. For starters, she wanted to document that people with ADHD could even complete a meditation-based program. Was it feasible? Could a bunch of people who struggle to pay attention to *anything* sit still and observe their breathing, or their bodies, or anything else for any amount of time? It turned out that most people enrolled in the study completed the program, including exercises assigned for completion at home.

Dr. Zylowska also examined several measures of attention. After an eight-week program people's ability to maintain and shift attention was enhanced and executive function improved. Numerous other

studies since have shown benefits for attention and executive function skills both inside and outside the ADHD population.[10]

Mirrors of Behavior

The fact that children learn while watching adults is nothing new, but scientists recently discovered a neurological basis for this. We've always known that neurons fire in response to our own experience, but scientists now know that some neurons react when watching *someone else's* experience. When we drink water, these particular neurons fire; watching someone else drink water, they also fire. These neurons, appropriately, are called mirror neurons. Mirror neurons perhaps explain why sports fans experience such joy and heartbreak watching their favorite team, or why viewers get such excitement and agony out of reality television.

This hard-wired response system, reflecting what we observe around us, also has implications regarding parenting. Basic living habits form as children observe adults in their environment day to day. Kids are hard-wired to mirror experiences they see in their worlds; they are sponges that absorb the details of life around them.

We cannot escape the fact that our children learn life skills from us. Treat family friends and strangers with warmth, and your child is more likely to do the same. Children learn their own habits and go off in their own directions over time, but their foundations are built at home. And while we cannot model perfect behavior, we can do our best and then, when needed, model gracious handling of situations that haven't gone as smoothly as we'd hoped.

CHANGE STARTS HERE

Many intensive behavioral interventions in ADHD begin with a simple step. Parents are advised to spend scheduled time with their children every day during which their child leads the activity. Children need to depend on this consistent time with their parents. By using it as an introductory exercise in attention training and mindfulness, parents can enhance the experience for themselves and their children.

Choose one activity a day that you already do with your child. Find some play time or routine task, like walking to the bus or bedtime, and for those few minutes a day bring your full attention to the experience. Act however comes naturally for you, without striving for anything unusual; the goal is nothing more than to pay attention. Play catch, eat dinner, or read a book. That's all.

It's not so easy. Practicing this exercise requires breaking habits of living lost in your head, away from life. Note when you get distracted or off in thoughts like *this is fun*, or *I forgot to send that email*, or *I should plant more rose bushes*—and then let it go and come back to whatever you've chosen to do. If you find it helpful, perhaps focus your attention on details of the experience, the sounds or sensations or nothing more than the steps involved in the activity itself—throwing and catching a ball; serving food, eating, and conversing; turning pages and reading a book, or whatever else you have selected. Without tying yourself in knots, spend this time together.

Our lives are busy, and often we're mentally checked out while with our children, planning our next activity or wrestling with exhaustion. And yet so much of a child's behavior is driven by wanting adult attention and approval. For these few minutes a day, practice giving nothing else.

Teaching Children to Focus—and Beyond

Most experts accept that motivated adolescents and adults can train attention skills. The research has become hard to refute. Yet the concept of teaching young children often strikes a dissonant chord in our culture, and the overall question of how and when to start teaching children these skills remains open for debate. At the same time, the benefits of direct instruction are becoming clear in studies all the way down to preschool age.

Yet the broader concept of mindfulness has nothing to do with teaching meditation, yoga, or any other contemplative practice. Abilities like self-regulation, cognitive flexibility, and emotional resilience correlate with well-being and social and academic success. An initial question to address might not be "can we teach mindfulness to children" but "how do we best build the social and emotional skills that children need in life?"

So how do we best promote these skills in children? Certainly, studies with children have demonstrated benefits of direct instruction, using age-appropriate methods that teach self-regulation and focus.[11] However, mindfulness training does not displace the reality that cognitive flexibility and resilience, along with an increased likelihood of long-term well-being, all start at home.

Fundamentally, training children begins with practicing mindfulness as a parent. The foundation for teaching children attention and focus extends beyond any one parenting style or behavioral intervention. It begins with stable and supportive relationships with parents in a household that balances affection with consistent limit-setting and boundaries. Leading a lifestyle that models compassion, calm in the face of stress, comfort and familiarity with emotional experiences as they arise, and even-keeled conflict resolution influences children long before any direct training might begin. As well, emphasizing daily life experiences such as free play assists children in acquiring many basic cognitive skills.

It turns out that many traits that correlate with well-being over a lifetime, such as mental flexibility and resilience, can also be cultivated through mindfulness. Various programs that train these skills have been studied in kids. Researchers at UCLA have shown that preschool children are capable of following a mindfulness program in a group setting. According to reports from teachers and parents, children's ability to start focusing and to shift and monitor their attention improved, and they showed gains regarding aspects of executive function. They even found that children with executive function problems at the start—seemingly at risk for ADHD—experienced a greater increase in executive function skills than typically developing children. Other studies have shown benefits affecting behavior and social skills as well.[12]

Much of the art in these programs comes from translating the concepts of mindfulness and meditation so that they are both developmentally and culturally appropriate. Brief exercises of focused attention can be mixed with age-appropriate games. Yoga, which builds many mindfulness skills, is often integrated, allowing children a more physical approach to training.

Classroom interventions that promote skills such as an ability to delay gratification and flexible problem solving lead to a lower incidence of behavioral problems. Children who attend developmental preschools, which emphasize social emotional development and free

play, may be more likely to succeed in school than those in settings emphasizing early academics. And strong executive function abilities are better predictors of academic success than early reading and math skills.[13]

Studies using various play-based activities show they are effective at building self-regulation, impulse control, and related abilities. Dr. Adele Diamond has been researching preschool programs that build executive function using a curriculum emphasizing fantasy play and other common childhood games. For her studies, she broke skills into three areas: inhibitory control (resisting temptations and impulses), working memory (holding onto and using information), and cognitive flexibility (adjusting to change). Her results showed improvements in all three areas. Based on these findings, Dr. Diamond is in the midst of research on whether this program may actually decrease the rate of ADHD diagnosis.[14]

A 2007 *New York Times* article quoted a child engaged in a classroom-based program who suggested that mindfulness is getting angry and "not hitting someone in the mouth."[15] Which sums up a basic life lesson—I'm angry, but I'm going to pause and choose an appropriate response. A vital skill for any child to have learned!

Stress Management 101

It was the first time I'd ever sat in meditation. It was really hard, but I kept listening and coming back to each direction—focus on the feelings in my knee, or my hand, or whatever else. I'd never realized before that I could put aside all those thoughts and worries I was having about what I need to do and what my kids are doing. I didn't have to pay attention to them right now. They kept coming back, and I kept moving them aside. And I felt more relaxed than I have in months.

Whether you've been practicing mindfulness for forty years or have never heard the word before, stress will be part of your life. You will never reach a point where you'll do away with stress; everything in life changes and there will always be another surprise waiting around the corner. And there's no reason to eliminate your stress reaction anyway,

because much of the time these impulses keep you from harm. A physical or emotional danger arises, and your body braces itself.

What we learn through mindfulness is to notice our stress cycles earlier and earlier. As we become familiar with our own tendencies, what situations create our stress, and how our body feels early in the stress cycle, we become more skilled at shutting the pattern down. We begin to recognize quicker what sets us off, allowing a chance to pause.

How you manage stress also affects your children. Stress is an interpersonal experience that affects you and everyone around you. Mirror neurons fire for something as simple as drinking water and as complex as yelling in anger. When you watch someone else get angry, stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol start to flow. You may not always manage stress the way you hope to, but the very fact that you are working on it will benefit your children.

Stare It in the Eyes

We spend a lot of time reflexively passing judgment on our experiences, adding mental layers to our already complex lives. This is great. This is lame. This is how it should be. We create emotionally laden stories judging everyone around us, from our spouses to the bus driver and especially our children. My child should be doing a better job. He should know better. He'll never learn to behave, he's just a C student, he's not motivated to learn.

And we judge ourselves. I'm doing a great job. Or, I blew it again. Or, I should know better. This running commentary isn't always helpful and can take over when we don't bother to pay attention to it.

Naturally, we tend to avoid things that disturb us. There are aspects of ourselves, our lives, and our families that we'd rather not deal with. They hurt. We don't want to go there. But when we see things as they are, instead of wrestling with a sense that something that already happened *shouldn't* have happened, we often find a chance to make assertive choices that promote change.

With that in mind, we can practice paying attention to what is difficult: My child is acting out. Every time I go to the playground they end up pushing someone. It's embarrassing. I'm afraid they're never going to have close friends. How come I can't get a handle on this? I'm pissed off and not thinking clearly anymore.

So you pause. You notice a complex and overwhelming wave breaking over you. And then, you can start to practice letting go of judgment. The situation doesn't feel right, and no one says it should. But underneath the acute emotional turmoil, what would be your most skillful response right now?

When you take a few breaths, you create some distance from chaotic thoughts and emotions. Bringing yourself back to your concrete reality, rallying your inner resources, what makes sense right now? Is it time to leave? To enforce some discipline? To resolve that you will come up with a new long-term plan to teach them better self-control?

With attention fixed on a particular solution or a particular viewpoint, finding novel solutions becomes challenging. When you notice thoughts before reacting, you develop an increased ability to respond flexibly, to discover new options and perhaps to make more proactive choices. At times, below all the rumination and fantasy resides a simpler reality to address. If you try to stand up to an ocean wave, you'll probably get knocked down. If you know it is on its way, you might be able to jump over it, dive into it, or surf it.

Years ago, I woke one morning with a sharp knee pain that hurt whenever I took a step. I jog regularly, but couldn't recall an actual injury. An orthopedic surgeon was so certain that I had a meniscus tear that he scheduled surgery. To confirm, and to guide the surgery, he also scheduled an MRI.

For weeks, I limped everywhere. I protected my knee from the injury by hobbling downstairs, and I stopped exercising. I sat with my leg straight all day long. When I saw the surgeon again before surgery, I told him nothing much had changed.

But then the MRI came back normal and the surgery was called off. I had no meniscus tear. The doctor wasn't sure why I had the pain and prescribed a regiment of ibuprofen and physical therapy.

Realizing I had no tear in my knee, over the next few days I started playing around with it again. I began to see that, in fact, the original pain had changed. It wasn't exactly the same anymore. It was a little better. Over a week or two, stairs became manageable, and in a few months I started running again.

The mental state I'd created—I have a serious knee injury—had shut me down. I was unable to see an alternative. I was so busy protecting myself from pain, I hadn't tested the knee enough to

notice the pain ebbing. A fortress of thoughts had boxed me into my belief.

Sometimes, out of fear, we duck our heads and miss the opportunity to notice a chance to head off a larger problem. Sometimes, without paying attention, we miss the chance to notice subtle improvements. There is nothing wrong with being annoyed or angered by something distasteful. But paying attention to our reaction allows us to break the cycle of stress and to remain open to the possibility of a different experience in the future.

Stress Creates Stress

Stress causes a concrete physical cascade of reactions throughout the body. It is our basic fight-or-flight response, our body kicking off a chain of self-protective events. From an evolutionary standpoint, it is a survival skill: "*I'm about to get crushed by a wooly mammoth. Run.*"

A part of the brain called the amygdala fires. It yells and screams. It causes a burst of adrenaline and a shutdown of less essential activities, like digestion. But the amygdala has no intelligence. One scary thought—I'm going to be crushed by a mammoth—is the same as any other—I have a big math test tomorrow. Anything we perceive as frightening causes the identical chain of events to happen, and both situations kick off similar physical reactions.

Once started, stress perpetuates itself. Hormones excite the body, prepare it for action. The body reacts. So many of the ways you experience stress, from upset stomach to tightness in the chest to sweaty palms to headaches, trace back to the physical cascade triggered by the amygdala.

And then these concrete physical experiences lead to actions that cause more excitement and more agitation. And thoughts and emotions arise based on how your body feels. When your body is tense, your mind starts to wonder why. My shoulders are hunched, my heart is racing. I must be in danger. This then triggers more thoughts and emotions. And on and on.

What sets off the cycle? Once in a while, it's an actual physical danger. But more often than not, stress is triggered by a perception, an unconscious sensation that some experience is more than you can handle right now.

DEFUSING STRESS BEGINS HERE

Spend some time for a week or two watching how you react under stress, in the face of challenging moments. For the purpose of this exercise, observe yourself when stressed, without trying to do anything different or new, from how you feel physically and emotionally, to what you think, to what you say. You might reflect on what, if anything, you were particularly aware of while the moment was happening. As a start, notice any thoughts judging yourself, your kids, or anyone else involved. *I shouldn't act this way, he shouldn't misbehave.*

Either while you are still dealing with the situation or shortly afterward, write down for yourself what you were feeling in your body. Did you feel muscle tension, a dry mouth, tightness in your jaw, or nothing physical at all? What feelings, moods, or emotions arose? Did you feel furious, sad, fearful, or some combination? Where did your thoughts go? Were you at all tying the event into the past, or leaping into guesses about the future? What habitual patterns did you observe in your reaction, and in what you said or did next?

Attention and Anxiety

Anxiety is not always an overreaction to something worrisome. Anxiety instead can grow from the struggle to let go of a scary thought. Overreaction is not the problem; *persisting* with the disturbing thought is.

If two people are exposed to the same frightening experience, both feel scared: "Is that an angry pit bull running toward me?" A person without a fear of dogs may recover quickly—"It's okay, the owner has it on a leash. Not to worry." A person scared of dogs may be equally frightened at first and then ruminate about the experience, feeling the fear and related stress much longer.

Anxiety causes a circuit in the brain to fire, and this circuit is like a rut in the road. As you try to redirect the wagon of your thoughts, the wheels skip right back into the path they've ridden hundreds of time before. "I wonder if that dog is still following us. It's going to chase me down." Long after the event has passed, the thoughts and emotions linger.

A 2008 study showed this relationship between anxiety and attention. Young adults were given an increasingly challenging task in which they were asked to identify parts of a briefly shown string of letters. Researchers, using a brain scan, found that people with the highest levels of anxiety struggled to focus attention on the task at hand, instead of on anxious thoughts, especially during easy tasks. As the problems became more difficult, people became more engaged in the work and the anxiety center of the brain shut off. For less engaging tasks, anxiety persisted and interfered with performance; once attention was fully grabbed by the task, anxiety dropped.[16]

The authors concluded that these findings may clarify one benefit of mindfulness meditation. An ability to focus attention away from anxiety-provoking thoughts helps explain the increased well-being and lower stress experienced by people who practice mindfulness. Imagine the opportunity when we begin to separate our instant reactions from the feelings and thoughts triggering stress, or when, through an increased awareness of our inner states, we manage to reverse the cycle faster when it starts.

Of course, it's impossible to never feel anxious or unhappy. We cannot find a perfect moment of bliss and then wrestle life to a standstill. Some amount of uncertainty and pain is inevitable in life. When we start expecting anything different, we set ourselves up for disappointment.

You're doing nothing wrong when you feel tired, unhappy, overwhelmed, or anything else. Whatever you feel is your experience. Each of us is doing the best we can all the time to handle our lives. Why would we do otherwise?

Breaking the Cycle

I had no idea what to expect. I'd never tried meditating. I thought it was probably pretty flakey. But it's not at all—it's logical. At some point you need to stop and pay attention and think about what's going on in your life. It's like when I was in my twenties and miserable in a good job and then one day I finally stopped myself. I was so unhappy. I was scared to death, but I switched

careers. I could have kept doing it for years and years, forever. And it turns out that's all meditation is, stopping and looking at what you are doing and what's going on in your life. It makes sense.

We spend much of our time in life lost in thought. At breakfast with our children we have a distracted conversation while hustling to get out the door. We're pouring cereal and cracking a joke and also planning what to buy for dinner or ruminating over a challenging meeting scheduled at work. Something rattles us in a conversation, and we spin off into anxiety or anger, and miss the details of what is said for the next half hour.

We drive while thinking about our job, making calls, listening to music, and not paying all that much attention to the act of driving. Or to the scenery outside the window. Or that we needed to get off at exit ten today instead of exit fifteen. So, we notice the exit only as we zip past.

There isn't much we can ever do, or should ever try to do, to stop ourselves from thinking. That's what minds do. But we never have to take our random thoughts at face value. While our beliefs and mental experience often feel etched in stone, thinking or imagining something doesn't make it valid or real.

Some thoughts are worth acting on: I need to find a gas station or I'll run out of gas. Some are not: If I run out of gas right now, I'll be late for my job interview, and they'll never hire me, I'm such an idiot, I should have filled up last night, my wife drove the car yesterday, this is her fault, where's the cell phone I'm going to call her right now... all these thoughts and reactions escalate an already stressful situation to new levels.

In order to be aware of all the physical, emotional, and behavioral habits we have, we must bother to look, to pay attention. In order to break habits that make us feel stressed or overwhelmed, we need to be aware of them in the first place. So we need to sharpen our ability to plainly see what's going on in our lives.

We aim to break stress cycles earlier and earlier, to step away from all the habits we perpetuate when not consciously thinking or reflecting on our actions. The goal is practical, but hard to maintain—to pay full attention to our lives as they happen, without skewed judgments, and without getting lost in mental distraction. Pleasant, exciting things happen, and we appreciate them without expecting them to last forever. Unpleasant things enter our lives—and we strive to change them when that's a viable option, and to wrestle with them less when it is not.

Mindfulness meditation is one common way of training this type of focused attention. As we've seen, the ability to manage attention by steering our thoughts away from distractions reduces stress and anxiety. We train our attention to be where we want it, moving away from random mental add-ons. We build an ability to notice distractions as distractions, and return our attention to our present experience after each one.

Meditation also builds particular skills and attitudes such as stepping away from reactivity and giving ourselves a break when self-judgment arises. We cultivate an ability to be more present in our lives as they happen, instead of always 'doing' something, always on the go and never still or at peace. And in honing our ability to focus away from any habitual rumination over fears, thoughts, or emotions, back to the present, we offer ourselves an opportunity to live our lives more fully.

BASIC MINDFULNESS—FOCUSING ON THE BREATH

Here are basic instructions to begin practicing mindfulness meditation on your own. As you cannot read from a book and meditate at the same time, you can instead read the directions and follow them on your own later. Choose for yourself how long to practice, maybe between ten and thirty minutes, whatever feels most appropriate for you.

Sit in an alert and balanced posture where you're less likely to fall asleep or fidget. If sitting is challenging, you can lie down or stand. Trust yourself, and make whatever adjustments your body needs. Find a way to position yourself that feels awake, dignified, and comfortable. Let your eyes close, or gently focus your vision several feet in front of you on the floor.

When you are ready, put aside the book and bring your attention to your breath, wherever the sensation of breathing feels most obvious to you. You might recognize a feeling of air moving out of your nostrils or your mouth. You might instead notice the rising and falling of your belly, or subtle movements almost anywhere else in the body. Without changing how you breathe, without exerting any effort trying to feel relaxed or to control your thoughts, notice the physical sensations as your breath comes and goes.

Meditation often starts by focusing on the breath because, for most of people, it is a "neutral" experience, without a lot of emotional baggage. You are always breathing and wherever you are, you can use it as way to bring your attention back from wherever it has gone. The practice of mindfulness meditation at times can be little more than noticing when your attention has wandered from your breath, and bringing it back.

In practicing meditation there will always be distractions that grab your attention, anything from noises in the room to random mental images and deliberations. Instead of being swept into a stream of thought, pause when you become aware you've gone elsewhere and return to your breath. Let go of any sense of exertion, or of trying to "do" something. Each time you return to the sensation of breathing you allow yourself a moment without striving, without trying to get somewhere. You can, for a few brief seconds, be still.

When your attention wanders off—as it certainly will—practice lightly returning yourself to the present, letting go of frustration as much as possible. Expect distracting thoughts, feelings and sensations to arise over and over again. Whenever your mind has gone off somewhere else, come back to your breathing without chiding yourself for having "failed" in any way. Through the hundreds and thousands of distractions, release them and come back to your next breath.

Lots of judgment crops up when people start meditating, often about the practice itself: *I must look silly. No way, I'll never be able to meditate.* Or even, *this is great, I feel so peaceful, I'm sure it will change my entire life.* You may notice your mind going off your breath and think *I'm terrible at this*...but in fact you cannot meditate well or meditate poorly.

None of these thoughts or experiences are better or worse than any other. You may feel calm, you may feel bored or fidgety,

and you may feel anything in between. You cannot in any way force yourself to be at ease or free of stress. Instead, you can balance the practice of noticing distractions with a letting go of expectations, sitting for a few moments and observing your moment-to-moment experience. Meditation, like life, is sometimes relaxing—and sometimes challenging.

Notice each mental or physical experience you have during meditation, and the related urge to act on it. *I've got to move, I can't stop thinking, I have got to write that idea down this moment.* While you are sitting, let the thoughts be. Some other time you may choose to plan, or discover something to fix that requires immediate action. Right now, give yourself permission to slow down.

As much as possible let sounds, physical sensations, perceptions, emotions or whatever else you encounter come and go without becoming entangled. You will never still your mind completely, or through willpower induce a particular state of mind. But by changing how you relate to your experience in these ways, you may discover a sense of stillness and stability more often available in your daily life.

Find a few minutes a day to sit quietly. Choose an amount of time that works for you, and then commit to it—thirty minutes, perhaps. Or ten. Or forty. You need nothing special to get started, but a timer may help at the beginning. Finding a quiet place away from distractions may be useful, but you can sit even in the midst of noise and chaos. You might not notice much of a change at the start, or you might continue to find sitting still difficult. However it feels on any given day, you are still practicing.

Like marathon training, there is no distinct start or end point with mindfulness meditation. As a runner, you forever refine your abilities and perhaps carve a few seconds off your time. You finish one run, go back to the rest of life, and do it again the next day. At the start, or on any particularly challenging day, jogging around the block or to the mailbox may be enough. Likewise in training attention and practicing meditation, focusing for even a handful of moments while sitting is perfect.

In the end, the point of meditation is not how you feel during your time sitting. While it helps to quiet the mind for these few minutes

every day, meditation develops traits that maintain a settled mind and allow you to see situations more clearly throughout your life. As we'll review next, studies show that mindfulness leads to an increased likelihood of everything from an enhanced sense of well-being to improvement in certain medical and mental health conditions.

CHAPTER 5

The Science of Mindfulness

Mindfulness encompasses an evidence-based group of skills and traits that can be cultivated, with direct, proven psychological and physical benefits. Decades of research have demonstrated an increased sense of well-being, a lessening of anxiety, and a lowering of stress in people who practice mindfulness. It helps with specific psychological conditions ranging from depression to borderline personality disorder. Medical benefits have been shown regarding pain management and immune function, and for chronic conditions including arthritis, psoriasis, and diabetes. And concrete changes have been shown in the brain when people meditate regularly—increased firing in centers related to happiness and compassion, as well as beneficial growth in specific areas of the brain.

For many centuries, the great thinkers of Western society have focused on conquering the world around us through science and technology. By contrast, many great thinkers in Eastern society have spent centuries refining tools that quiet the mind. Cultivating equanimity and wisdom through observing the reality of day-to-day life, without snap judgments and bias, is an end in itself. These methods, developed over centuries, are accessible to anyone. They are meant for use in daily life, regardless of any individual's belief about spirituality or religion.[1]

A New Perspective

Over thirty years ago, Dr. Jon Kabat Zinn developed a Western adaptation of certain Eastern practices. He called it "mindfulness-based stress

reduction" (MBSR). This eight-week program separates Buddhist practices of meditation from their religious context. Since its humble beginning in University of Massachusetts medical center basements, MBSR has been shown to be beneficial for overall well-being and when integrated into the care of numerous psychological and physical conditions.

Dr. Kabat Zinn began his program at the University of Massachusetts in the 1970s. He asked doctors to refer patients whose bodies failed to respond fully to Western medicine. First referred were those with hard-to-treat conditions such as chronic pain or heart disease. Dr. Kabat Zinn recognized the medical world might be skeptical, and encouraged structured research right away.

From the outset, the results were clear. MBSR is now used at hundreds of academic medical centers and all around the world. Mindfulness-based interventions have crossed over into traditional, Western-based medical and psychological care. Even while researchers continue to examine the details, the perception of mindfulness meditation as alternative medicine is outdated. The overwhelming consensus of all the various studies is difficult to refute—mindfulness-based interventions have proven to be effective.

UNIQUE AND STUDIED

Mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) is not the only approach available for building mindfulness, but it is one of the best studied. Other related practices, including traditional yoga, tai chi, and various other types of meditation have similar benefits. Mindfulness also has been integrated into forms of psychotherapy and cognitive behavioral therapy. Similar content can be found in many settings, but MBSR and its adaptations may be unique because of their accessibility.

There are hundreds of successful studies on this topic. The evidence points in the same direction across publications: Mindfulness meditation increases well-being, decreases stress, and helps with a long list of physical and psychological issues. In many ways the field of mindfulness has transitioned from asking *if* it works to an examination of *how*.

We still don't know for certain which traits of mindfulness are most important for individuals, or what aspects of the classes. Do people need to meditate fifteen minutes a day, or forty-five? Should classes be six or eight weeks? Can mindfulness be taught without meditation?

Research is ongoing to further refine teaching methods, and to offer people more sophisticated classes and advice. The process of adapting the program culturally and to different age groups also continues every day. But as a bottom line, mindfulness training does *something* that helps people live their lives differently. And for parents of children with ADHD, it addresses a body of skills parents need to take control of their lives, find objectivity and clarity in the midst of confusion, cultivate their own inner strength and resilience, and rediscover warmth and compassion in strained family relationships.

An Evidence-Based Approach to Health and Well-Being

The *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* is one of the more established medical journals. Its standards are high. In 2009 *JAMA* published a study showing that mindfulness relieves burnout and increases empathy in physicians.[2]

Several hundred physicians were offered an eight-week program built around mindfulness training, with close to a year of follow up. Doctors reported an increased sense of well-being, less stress, and "increased attitudes associated with patient-centered care." They reported improved mood, along with decreased tension, anger, and fatigue.

Or course, physicians have no exclusivity on burnout. Teachers, construction workers, psychologists, firefighters—we all are at risk. Any program that reduces burnout and increases empathy benefits any vocation including, without a doubt, parenting.

Other studies have suggested that mindfulness may proactively shield people from emotional stress. In February 2010, Dr. Amishi Jha at the University of Pennsylvania published a study titled "Examining the Protective Effects of Mindfulness Training on Working Memory and Emotional Experiences." With the cooperation of the military, marines waiting for deployment completed an eight-week mindfulness program.[3]

It's hard to imagine the stress felt by soldiers waiting to leave for battle. Dr. Jha found that after training in mindfulness there were less negative feelings reported by soldiers. They were better able to manage their fear. This change could have represented a blunting of overall emotion, or a shutting down of feeling, a common way humans manage

when overwhelmed. Instead, Dr. Jha found something much more encouraging: For people practicing mindfulness in the face of a huge life stress, unpleasant events weren't as traumatizing as they could have been, and the soldiers also reported that enjoyable experiences were still as enjoyable as ever.

The lead up to deployment typically affects a soldier's working memory, the place in our minds where we hold onto and manipulate information as it is encountered. Under stress these core cognitive skills, vital for problem solving and learning, usually degenerate. After mindfulness training, those who consistently practiced their exercises were protected against this loss of mental ability. Mindfulness appeared to shield them from the mental effects of stress.

Mindfulness programs improve executive function and attention skills and foster emotional regulation. Clinical studies, research on attention, and examination of brain functioning after meditation all suggest profound benefits. Most studies are not of monks or people who meditate extraordinary amounts of time. They instead look at people who take a six- or eight-week class, or meditate less than half an hour daily for a stretch of time.

One of the initial studies completed by Dr. Kabat Zinn involved patients with psoriasis. Psoriasis is a chronic skin condition that causes dry plaques to form on various areas of the body. In rare cases, it can cover people from nearly head to toe.

One intervention uniformly works in these extreme situations. Intense ultraviolet light treatments resolve an outbreak of psoriasis every time. However, the number of treatments required varies greatly among patients, requiring several weekly visits over a series of months. This chronic exposure to ultraviolet light puts people at risk for skin cancer, so limiting the number of treatments is ideal.

In an early study of mindfulness-based stress reduction, some patients with psoriasis were given guided meditation tapes during their light treatments. Another group sat through the treatment as usual. At the conclusion of the study, the meditation group had required 30 percent fewer light treatments.[4]

Mindfulness interventions have since been shown to reduce symptoms related to chronic pain, insomnia, rheumatoid arthritis, and a host of other conditions. For cancer patients, mindfulness does not cure their disease, but it can change how they perceive their quality of life. People completing mindfulness classes demonstrate a stronger immune response. In another study, people who spent eight weeks practicing mindfulness had a more robust, protective response to getting a flu vaccine than people who got the same shot but didn't take the course.[5]

Remarkably, a small 2009 study of patients with HIV showed similar results. The health of patients with HIV depends on the maintenance of white blood cell counts, since white blood cells fight infection. Cell counts remained constant in the group taking an MBSR class, and fell at a typical rate for another group of patients who attended a one-day general stress reduction seminar.[6]

Reading all of this, you may wonder if mindfulness sounds too good to be true. While studies are ongoing, month by month more research is published regarding both new and potential ways mindfulness can help us enhance our lives. But the greater answer may simply be this: The effect of mindfulness on well-being and chronic stress may alter the course of almost any psychological or physical condition.

Research integrating mindfulness and the field of psychology has exploded over the last decade as well. Specific applications have been developed for conditions as diverse as depression, borderline personality disorder, and insomnia. Beyond benefiting individual conditions, a theme emerges throughout these papers. People who practice mindfulness report an enhanced sense of overall well-being.

Psychologists in England have developed a program called mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression (MBCT). This program integrates traditional cognitive therapy techniques with mindfulness training. One of the concepts introduced through MBCT is that our moods often fluctuate, but how we respond varies from person to person. If we have a tendency for depression, as our mood drops we may rapidly fall into ruminative thoughts: *Oh no, here I go again. I can't handle it. I'm going to be miserable.*

When you break the mental cycle you often stop the rumination, reminding yourself, perhaps, that "thoughts are just thoughts." Your mood may be low, but you pull back from the precipice and avoid a full episode of depression.

The actual MBCT program is much more intricate. It involves intensive patient education and other therapeutic techniques. Regardless, the program has been so successful that it is recommended for depression by England's national health program. In adults with a history of chronic depression, the rate of relapse dropped from 66 percent to 37 percent after completing the MBCT program.[7]

Many studies demonstrate benefits for anxiety—and not only for clinical anxiety disorders, but for the day-to-day stress that comes and goes for all of us. College students who completed a *one-week* intervention with meditation training offered for twenty minutes a day reported feeling happier and less anxious while performing a challenging task and had lower blood levels of cortisol, a stress hormone.[8] Another study showed increased pain tolerance and decreased anxiety in college students after one hour of mindfulness training divided over three days.[9]

The skill of noticing and labeling inner emotional states may be beneficial for stress all on its own. A UCLA study showed that the simple act of verbalizing an internal feeling minimized its emotional impact. Researchers used MRIs to document that once negative emotions were expressed and described, stress induced by those emotions seemed to shut off in the brain.[10]

Studies have looked at what happens in family relationships when parents complete a mindfulness program. Parents of children with developmental disabilities and autism completed classes and reported less parenting stress, increased social interaction with their children, and more comfort with their parenting abilities. Children with intense behavioral problems showed improved behavior after their parents completed the program.[11] Another pilot study conducted in 2009 examined parent-child pairs where the children had ADHD. Children's compliance improved when their parents completed mindfulness training. Compliance improved even further when the kids completed a similar program, modified for their age.[12]

Brain Benefits

Exactly how flexible our minds are in training attention remains to be seen. But we know the basics—attention is a fundamentally trainable skill. A motivated adult, such as anyone practicing mindfulness, can improve attention to some degree much like they would build muscles through weight lifting. Can we document physical changes that parallel these clinical benefits?

On a simple level, when people report feelings of optimism and well-being, neurons in the left frontal lobes are found to be firing more than those in the right. When the ratio shifts, people are more likely to be sad, or feel pessimistic. After two months of beginning meditation and mindfulness instruction, people in one study not only said they felt better, but electrical activity in the brain showed a shift to the left.[13] Other brain scan studies have demonstrated similar benefits, such as increased synchronization in electrical firings in the brain, which also correlates with feelings of well-being.

A study at Harvard University observed physical development in the brains of people who meditate. Dr. Sara Lazar measured the thickness of the brain's outer layers—the grey matter—over the frontal cortex in two groups of people. The outer cortex thins during adulthood, and cortical thinning of this kind correlates with memory loss and the onset of conditions such as Alzheimer's disease. The control group, who had never meditated, showed typical thinning over time. The group of mediators? There was no thinning at all. Dr. Lazar also noted thickening in the area of the brain called the insula, which is involved in emotional regulation.[14]

Expectations and Stress

On the one hand, stressful, unpleasant events are inevitable in life, which is why mindfulness does not promise stress elimination. On the other hand, the actual experience of stress frequently stems from our thoughts—a fearful image triggers a concrete chemical chain in our body. This frightening thought is not the same as actual danger, so not everything that induces stress is inherently unsafe. While we cannot change the fact that stress will find us, we can begin to change how we respond.

Continuing the discussion of stress from chapter four, the cascade of physical and emotional stress started by the amygdala works like an on-and-off switch, without much room for nuance. I'm afraid, I'm not afraid. I'm safe, I'm not safe. Run. Don't run. Thousands of years ago, this type of reaction was, most likely, quite useful. Under threat from

animals, starvation, or other humans, we developed a complex series of reactions to survive. The amygdala fired and our adrenaline kicked in, blood flow shifted from our digestive system to our muscles. We coiled to react, to protect ourselves from danger.

The amygdala does not discriminate. Fear is fear. Thoughts enter our minds—I have too much to do today, I have to get to the doctor by two and pick up the dry cleaning and something for dinner and my back is sore and and and... and that's it, the amygdala fires and we feel wound up and stressed.

Very often, there is no real risk to our well-being. The to-do list will get done—or it won't. Through mindfulness we begin to note the process—the tendency to escalate from an idle thought to a physical surge of hormones and reactions. If we catch ourselves before reacting, we can stop. That's only a thought. I'm busy today—that's all. And then return to the breath one more time.

Humans are talented at perpetuating our own stress. We're wired to protect ourselves, but often go overboard. Rattled by something, we immediately push back or run away. Our thoughts snake into the past, tie our present situation to a string of experiences that are long gone. Or they unravel into the future, and we become agitated and then remain on guard because of a cascade of worry.

Afraid of what we imagine, we might fall back on denial, twisting the facts. They're just a kid. That's how I was. Their teacher is too hard on them. Or we may paint pictures of the future, and create expectations that cannot be met—I'm starting to meditate and by next month I'll be completely without stress and my child will behave better and life will be perfect. These strings of thought maintain our unrest.

Emotions trigger their own stress cycles. I'm feeling down today. I'm on edge, there must be a reason, there must be something I can fix. And then, your problem-solving mind fires up and looks for a solution. Your mind ratchets up, adrenaline flows, and all the related defensive processes continue.

The physical state of our body perpetuates stress. We may tense our muscles or become fidgety at first, but then our minds notice our

body's responses. Our shoulders are hunched, or our head feels off, or we're scowling... and we assume we are on edge for a reason. Off we go into thought and problem solving again, and the amygdala continues to fire.

Sleep deprivation enables stress. Exercise, for most people, decreases it, when we find the time. Caffeine—as much as many of us enjoy it—often pushes our stress level higher. What we consume and the life style choices we make in general all influence how at ease we will feel day to day. In all these different ways stress fuels itself, until we notice the pattern, and take a new direction.

And of course, we also often grab onto pictures we have of how life *should* be. You're in New York, and decide to head to the Bronx Zoo. They have this great new exhibit that has a white alligator, and everyone in the family seems excited. You herd your son out the door, and your blood pressure is rising because the zoo closes at four thirty in the winter, and the day is slipping away.

You arrive at the zoo. It's two, he's hungry, you pause for a snack, and he becomes completely engaged in relishing his hot chocolate. And then wants to ride the carousel. And meanwhile, you're 90 percent focused on getting to see any actual animal—much less the alligator—before closing.

There you are. You're on vacation and with him at the zoo. But you have this picture—we need to see an animal, and you wanted to show him the alligator. Actually, you wanted to see the alligator yourself. You're nudging him to move, calculating in your head how many more minutes until it's too late, how long a walk is it from here to there. And you're stressed—because your picture of the day, apparently, is quite different from his. He's having a blast. And you, most certainly, are not.

Respond, Not React

Paying attention to how we experience our daily lives lays the foundation for change. We become familiar with the feelings, thoughts, emotions, and details of our interactions with the world around us. Breaking our self-perpetuating cycles of reactivity begins with this level of awareness. We practice patience, the ability to pause and return to the moment and to respond with equanimity to challenges.

Not every thought or emotion merits an action—although they often feel like they do. So often, emotions are passing states of mind, either entirely random or momentarily triggered. Your mood crashes because you are exhausted. Unconsciously you might start to search for why you feel down—it must be because of my daughter, when will she get her act together?

But if we're uncomfortable because of a state of mind, we cannot always fix that. Sometimes we start looking outside of ourselves and place blame. I must feel bad for a reason. There is a false assumption that every internal state—"I feel rotten"—has a distinct, correctible cause. In fact, our mood may have shifted all on its own, or maybe we're just overtired or drank too much coffee.

As well, the world is never perfectly stable and safe and unchanging for any length of time. We're going to feel a little unsettled at some point. It's inevitable—and it is an inner experience that does not necessarily resolve just because we reach out and do something to it, for it, or about it. Shutting down the stress cycle may start with a shift of perspective, accepting that the discomfort around a situation is nothing more than discomfort.

When feeling off balance, we may shut down, actively ignore problems, or strike back at the world around us. I'm stuck. I'm scared. Leave me alone. We feel off, so we get angry or anxious or become enervated or obsessively focus on problems. And then we try to do something to alter the world around us, to avoid that feeling of uncertainty. We overplan, or ruminate, or go for a drink, or overeat.

Children are particularly skilled at triggering the unsettling sensation that life is not fully in our control. We have these great ideas about how to be a parent, what to say in some particular circumstance, or how a child should live their life. And then somewhere in early childhood they develop their own personality and will. We pictured long hikes in the woods, they want only to play baseball and hockey. We think that they'd be a brilliant engineer, and they want to major in English.

And day to day, it turns out we cannot affect every aspect of our child's behavior. We want a guarantee a situation will turn out as we pictured, and our child leads us down a different path. We're sitting at a wedding and we'd really like them to remain in their seat and stop making noise, and, in spite of all our best efforts, they simply will not. We're finally at the head of the line at the grocery store and out of nowhere, there's a tantrum.

The sensation of instability is magnified when caring for someone with ADHD. Right now, today, your child has her own strengths, and perhaps a long list of ADHD-related difficulties. You're doing a lot to make changes. There may have been improvements but issues persist. You may have had a nagging sense of fear, for months or years, a wish that you could know for sure that everything is going to work out as you hope. Instead of reacting to the feeling or shutting down, you can build an attitude of, okay, I feel unsure, take a breath, it's normal to feel this way.

One of the first concepts that connects for many people taking a stress reduction class is "responding, not reacting." Instead of saying or doing something reflexively, we build an ability to stop a moment, gather ourselves, and choose what comes next. But to know when to pause—when to make sure we're not being reactive—we have to be aware of our unconscious habits in the first place.

Sitting here reading this book or meditating or having dinner, that sense of unbalance may be hanging around you. Acting on it—by obsessively problem solving or drinking or exercising or reading or yelling or anything else—may temporarily distract you from the discomfort. Another perspective is to notice it, and what it feels like. Recognize, this is how I am when I'm off balance—and I don't need to act at all until I'm ready.

There is a common assumption that if we wrestle with a problem long enough, we will find a definite resolution. This makes sense for some concrete issues, situations where a particular action will lead to a likely conclusion. But for emotional experiences, there can be a backward logic to it. You might be thinking, if only I struggle with this complex series of completely illogical thoughts and emotions long enough, I'll be at peace.

In reality, the opposite may be true. When we start at a place of peace, the complicated thoughts and emotions grab us less, become less intense, and may even resolve themselves. Are you stressed and ruminating because some problem has taken over your mind, or has some problem taken over your mind because you are stressed? We may assume we'll be happy as soon as we stop ruminating. More

likely, though, if we can find a way to feel less stressed, then we'll stop ruminating.

Again, nothing about the practice of mindfulness means that life will never be stressful, or make us angry, or be painful, and trying to notice your responses in various stressful situations without self-judgment can be challenging. When your child decides to toss a milkshake across a restaurant, it doesn't mean that you have "failed" at meditation when you get angry. It's never a failure to get flustered or upset. Like stress, those moments are inevitable, and all that we control is how we respond to them.

THE BODY SCAN

The body scan is another method you can use to break the stress cycle. In the body scan, you pay attention to sensations in your body, as always without forcing anything in particular to happen along the way. Many people find this exercise relaxing, but you might feel restless or sleepy or anything else. Whatever your experience, you are still cultivating mindfulness through the practice of paying attention.

You can choose any comfortable, stable place to practice the body scan, a chair, or your bed, or using cushions or mats on the floor. Lying or sitting in a comfortable position, start by bringing your attention to your breath. Take a few gentle breaths, and notice the rising and falling of your stomach. Wherever you find it easy, let go of tension you feel in your body. If lying down, let your arms and legs fall gently to the side, and if sitting, let your hands rest easily on your thighs or together in your lap.

If you prefer to do the body scan lying down, choose a time of day where you aren't overly tired. Keep your eyes open instead of closed if you find it helpful in staying awake. You can even hold your hands gently together in the air over your midsection; you'll notice them moving if you start to drift off.

The body scan is a useful relaxation tool for some. It may even help you unwind for sleep—a slightly different use than as an alert, focused meditation. If you find it useful for sleep, enjoy it and maybe complete a different meditation some other time during the day.

Bring your attention first to your feet, either one or both. Try to notice any sensations you feel, like warmth or cold, dampness or dryness. You might notice nothing at all, and that's normal too. And then slowly, pausing along the way, move your attention from your feet up along your body to your head. Spend several minutes paying attention to each area of your body, step by step from your lower legs to your knees to your hips, and then upward. Pace yourself, continuing to relax whatever tension you can let go of easily, but not trying to force yourself to feel anything.

If there is discomfort anywhere along the way, notice that. If you're able to maintain your attention on this area, observe the sensations for a little while—they likely wax and wane, changing their quality over time. If the feeling is too intense, shift your attention away to another area of your body, or to the breath. And at any point if you need to move then pause a moment and, with intention, choose the moment that you shift. Make whatever adjustments you need, whenever you need them.

The body scan also helps you become aware of subtle sensations in your body related to feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Once in a while you may begin to notice your body reacting before your mind takes over—*my shoulders are tight, my jaw is tense.* And when in meditation, or in life, you find your mind swept away in thought or emotion, you can often ground yourself by returning to the sensations in the body—feeling yourself sitting in a chair or the wind in your face. You may pull a discursive mind out of its ruts for a moment, letting thoughts settle and emotions calm.

Take Time for Yourself

Our hectic lives as parents often seem written in stone. *I can't catch up. I have no time for myself, and probably never will. From when I wake to when I sleep, I'm busy, I have things to do. I cannot possibly find fifteen minutes to meditate.*

We're overscheduled. We have loads of responsibilities and sprawling to-do lists. All true. But is every moment truly spoken for, every day? If someone offered you one thousand dollars for each time you sat in meditation, would you find a way to make it happen?

If you've committed to some time for yourself, protect it and schedule it. Track several days on a calendar if needed. How much time do you take answering e-mail? Surfing the Internet? Watching television?

How much time do you play with your child, or talk to your spouse? Could the household chores be juggled? Could you wake up fifteen minutes earlier?

There is no one way to start—chose a plan and stick to it as best you can. And when you stop practicing for a stretch, treat yourself as you would during meditation. Notice you've gotten off track, pause, and recommit to the lifestyle you've chosen.

THE MYTH OF MULTI-TASKING

Multitasking turns out to be an ineffective way of living. We might, in any moment, feel pulled by four or five pressing things we have to do, and problems we have to solve. It often feels most efficient to do them all simultaneously. Or we may feel that we have no choice but to attack everything at once.

But our minds can only pay attention to one object at a time. When we juggle ideas, we're not processing several in parallel—we're rapidly moving back and forth between them, and not paying full attention to anything. In reality, multi-tasking increases the time any individual task takes, and makes it more likely we'll make mistakes along the way.

By building the skill of attention management, it becomes easier to place your attention where you want. Each perceived problem or item on your to-do list still grabs at you, but you can focus on each activity in full, moving others to the side. You can reach a point of resolution, or choose a moment to pause, and then shift to the next point. Both your overall efficiency and effectiveness will improve.

The traditional mindfulness-based stress reduction program recommends meditating forty-five minutes a day. It is a commitment to radical change, a shift in how you experience your daily life. If you can do that, great, the investment will pay off—but that's not the only way to start.

Commit to ten minutes in the car after parking on the way into the office, and ten minutes before leaving for home. Fifteen minutes at the end of lunch hour. Fifteen *breaths*, once an hour through the day—one minute an hour, as a starting point, to settle

yourself. Everything is completely falling apart around me and I'm going to be the one to pause, for these few moments, before moving forward.

Ian, a participant in a mindfulness class I was leading, had two kids with ADHD and worked at a mile-a-minute commodities firm. He spent every minute in the office connected to his cell phone, e-mail, and computer. After a few weeks of class, he commented about watching the smokers in his office building.

Smoking had been banned indoors. Many times a day, the smokers would gather, walk to the elevator, wait patiently, and ride down to the ground floor. Walk outside. Smoke a cigarette. Stroll back in the elevator. Ride upstairs. Jump back into the hectic financial mix. And no one thought twice about the breaks they had taken.

After two weeks of struggling to find meditation time, Ian actually notices the smokers in action. They're leaving their desks, over and over again. Their world isn't ending. They still have their jobs. Why can't I just shut my door for two minutes and breathe?

So he did.

While mindfulness can develop without meditation, meditation is a proven and profoundly helpful tool. As we train our attention, we become more aware of how we think and where our mind runs throughout the day. We break the cycle of autopilot, time spent moving through life without paying attention, and without making conscious and intentional choices about what we say or do. We use focused attention to become more aware of the unconscious perceptions and experiences that influence our behavior. We pay more attention to our mental habits, and we develop the ability to pause, reflect, and make skillful new choices. Coupled with a thorough understanding of ADHD, managing your own stress and cultivating openness to new ways of handling challenges lays the groundwork for transforming your family's life with ADHD.

CHAPTER 6

Taking Care of Yourself: Mindfulness in Action

Practicing mindfulness, we try to get out of "autopilot"—mindlessly running around lost in thought, reacting to situations without foresight. In bringing our attention to our moment-to-moment experience, we'll still find some parts of life pleasant and others unpleasant. We also build the skill of noticing and labeling the sensations we experience, our thoughts and our emotions—an essential component of mental health. And as we become familiar with our habits, we often recognize what we have been doing unconsciously, and then have the option of choosing a new path.

You might wonder, what does following my breath or noticing that my feet feel warm have to do with my child's ADHD? It's a fair question and the answer is, you have to start somewhere. You want to break lifelong habits and develop new coping tools, but you cannot begin in the midst of a behavioral crisis. That's why most of the mindfulness exercises offered throughout this book examine far less emotionally charged aspects of life than your interactions with your child. As you get more practiced, you'll expand toward more challenging moments and even then, the opportunity to return to your breath will be available as a calming and less daunting focus for your mind.

This chapter offers an overview of mindfulness techniques—your first steps toward a new way of living your life and managing your child's ADHD. Interspersed throughout are exercises you can try at your own pace and return to over time. The chapter ends with a six-week program outline for those who would like to work with these tools in a more structured fashion.

Stepping into Life

There I was in this store and my two boys were running around, I didn't know exactly where. I was looking for new jackets for them. I'd never get it done if I chased them around. And then the store manager came up and said to me, "Your kids are running up and down stairs with a $400 fishing pole," and without thinking I said, "Why were they able to get their hands on a $400 fishing pole?" He looked kind of stunned, and I felt like I'd won. And then I looked around the store. Several people had heard, and two had their kids right with them. All of sudden I realized, how come I was the only one whose kids were out of control? It was the first moment I recognized, something has to change.

Without effort, we live out our lives barely paying attention to what is going on around us. We spend so much of our time not quite here. We carve out a little time to relax and go for a run, and then instead of taking the time to recharge we spend the time mentally rehashing our financial situation. Reading a book with our child at bedtime, we dwell on a problem at work. Wherever we are in life, our minds are often off somewhere else, not fully involved with the world around us.

When we live on autopilot, something rattles us and we stay lost in thought. We may dwell or ruminate afterward—*I can't believe they said that. I should have kept my mouth shut. Next time what I'm going to say is*...and through all that extra thought, we're not paying attention to our lives as they are happening.

We often lose out on brief moments of peace. Frustrated that the morning unraveled, we fail to take advantage of ten minutes respite as our children board the bus. Our bodies and minds remain in stress mode. We're ready for action, agitated, and formulating what we'll say next time around. But we're actually in a quiet, warm house drinking our morning coffee.

We might yell when our children misbehave because we always have yelled, and it gets them in line. And our children have learned their own habits, their own autopilot. They've learned they don't have to listen until we start yelling. Everything until then is play time. Since anything we do repetitively becomes hardwired, these well-worn paths exist in our brains. A pattern we fall back on becomes that much easier to trigger the next time around, regardless of whether it is particularly skillful, or what we'd recommend for a friend in the same situation.

We all have our ways of responding when challenged. Tripping on the way to the podium, one speaker might think, *What a klutz I am.* Another might think, *How embarrassing, they're all laughing at me.* Another might lash out, *Who left their bag in the aisle? You nearly killed me.*

We can't expect to, and nor should we want to, strip ourselves of every habit. Each response has a time and a place. Being obsessive about cleanliness and detail is imperative for a surgeon in the operating room. Maintaining that same standard with your family kitchen? Perhaps a cause of stress. What is skillful and brilliant in one situation may not apply in another.

No habits are inherently better than any others. At some time in life, you'll want to stand up to the world. At some point, you'll want to take stock of yourself and withdraw. There's a time to yell, to react with fear, to hyperfocus on a crisis until it is solved. Awareness of our habits allows us to pick and choose which we give weight to; our lives do not need to be dominated by them. There's nothing right or wrong about most habits, but there's no need to let them run your life.

Direct Your Attention

Mindfulness, on one level, is a simple tool. Any time during the day you can pause, take a few breaths, and settle yourself. Almost any activity can be done meditatively—why *not* focus on our families while we're with them? When it's time to work, work, and if you need to fix the dishwasher, go fix it. At its most basic, the practice is focusing our attention away from mental distractions, back to our lives as they happen. Easy to say, challenging to live.

Meditation may conjure up images of beatific individuals smiling blissfully, eyes closed, off lost in the woods. But that type of escape isn't the point. Mindfulness meditation isn't about running away, or self-analysis. It's about the opposite—stripping away whatever barriers keep us outside of our daily lives.

Relaxation is not even a goal in and of itself; instead, we strive for a sense of balance. If we become too relaxed, we fall asleep, or in certain situations might find ourselves defenseless. Nor do we want to be too

tense, battling our minds to focus without a break. We seek instead a stability between alertness and calm.

While there is a larger goal of becoming more familiar with our experience and habits, practicing mindfulness is not meant to be therapy. In therapy, people explore the cause and effect of their emotions and behaviors, and focus on problem solving. Through mindfulness meditation, we're not trying to analyze our mental states or patterns of thought. We're trying to become familiar with them. We cannot compel ourselves to a particular state of relaxation or wisdom or happiness. We're slowing down and watching, developing an unbiased, awareness of our lives that builds a sense of steadfastness and composure. Skillful choices and insights often follow.

We also cultivate an attitude during the experience of meditation. When the mind wanders we try to return to the breath without frustration or self-flagellation. So you became distracted? Great job, you noticed that and focused yourself again. That's the practice; however many hundreds of times you become distracted, striving to come back with a measure of compassion.

Even on days when meditation is immensely challenging—our minds on fire with excitement or anxiety, happiness or grief—doing our best to return to our actual experience is still practicing. We observe, watching things change and letting things be for a few minutes. We pause and let the dust settle, hoping to see our lives with clarity.

Practicing the release of any compulsion to be doing something every moment of our lives, fixing and solving and planning all the time, we protect some time and space to quiet down. Not everything in life can be controlled, and there can be strength in not doing anything.

You can practice mindfulness through any moment in daily life, even mundane chores. You can wash the dishes while annoyed and pressured because you want to be doing something else, but if the dishes need to be done anyway, why not elect to do them without adding on layers of stress? Pay attention to the details, the warm water and sounds of the plates moving, and notice when your thoughts are off elsewhere. You cannot force any activity to become enjoyable, but you can focus away from mental distractions, back to the moment at hand.

Or not. With practice, you step out of autopilot and decide when to pay attention. You might make a conscious choice to avoid thinking

of some other chore—someone has to clean up after the dog in the backyard. That's going to be a nasty experience, as it was the last dozen times. So instead of focusing your full attention on the unpleasantness, focus on something else, like your next vacation.

Experience the Moment

Practicing mindfulness is not only about how we approach challenging experiences. With almost anything we do in life we add layers, some of which may complicate even a straightforward, pleasurable moment. Finding a break, we take a walk and feel guilty for not working, or for leaving our children with a babysitter, or for simply getting lost in daydreaming. Attending a concert we might find ourselves thinking *this is great, I can't wait to tell my wife about it, I need to remember exactly what he played, let's see, first he played*... and now we're not paying full attention to the music.

When you're with your children, you can focus on playing with them. You can be mindful about driving—not meditating, but paying full attention to driving and nothing else. When eating, just eat. You don't have to shovel in food, barely tasting it along the way. Pause between bites. Enjoy yourself. Slow down and notice, in a relaxed, unstilted way, the experience of eating.

As an exercise, try eating a piece of fruit as if it was the first time you ever encountered it. Imagine you're deciding if it is edible, if it is safe to eat, or what it might taste like. Don't force anything to happen. Explore, noticing each of your five senses—vision, then touch, then smell; listen to any sounds the fruit makes, moving it around in your hand.

Before placing it in your mouth, pause. Notice any sensations in your mouth or body as you hold still. Choose the moment you move your hand, paying attention to your muscles along the way. Notice any urge to rush, to move quicker, to eat, or to quit. And then again, with intention, decide when to chew, paying attention to taste, and then swallow.

As soon as you start, your mind likely kicks in. You might feel awkward and think, *this exercise is lame.* Or you might enjoy it, and think, *this tastes good, what a great way to celebrate food.* Both are normal responses. For almost any experience in life, our mind reacts with this instant classification into good, bad, or neither.

Most of us recognize that when eating slower we eat healthier and enjoy our food more. Instead of eating raisins by the handful, we can choose to taste them, yet few of us eat with such care day to day. Once a day, or once a week, pay attention to nothing but the food in front of you as you eat. It can be a three-course event at an upscale restaurant, or a snack on a crowded subway car. Wherever you are, this eating meditation is available, helping you focus out of your thoughts onto the simple act of eating.

Good Judgment

I'm hardly even telling anyone we started medication. There's all this chatter when people do. They don't even think about what's it's been like for us, or for our son Alan. My husband isn't constantly correcting him anymore. They sit and play a whole game together. Alan has this chart at school, red lights for bad behavior, green for good. All of a sudden he's getting green every day. He's talking about it all the time. He's playing longer with kids. And still, there's so much judgment about using medication, like we couldn't deal, or we're trying some kind of band-aid.

Judgment is so much a part of life when you have a child with ADHD. Someone feels that your child is not acting right, that his behavior is inappropriate and you are responsible. A magazine article or a relative suggests that ADHD comes from parenting, and you feel the statement is directed entirely at you. You choose medication and feel judgment from people who disagree. You choose not to use medication, and someone criticizes your choice.

Returning to the basic definition, mindfulness is often defined as a being fully aware of what is happening in the present moment *without judgment.* Without judgment means without the reflexive, often reactive categorization of our lives into good, bad, and neutral; this last group we often dismiss as not worth a moment's thought. Being nonjudgmental does not mean meekly accepting the status quo. When something needs addressing, we still do what we need to protect ourselves and make hard choices to solve problems.

There is a difference between idling in traffic trying to figure out another driving route, and sitting in traffic stewing about being late for an appointment. Anger arises—*there shouldn't be traffic right now, I shouldn't have driven this way*—but there is, and you did. There's nothing else to be done. All that angst and frustration inside, and the traffic outside hasn't budged.

We can strive to tell the difference between clear thoughts—*I need to find another way to work; I need to call ahead and let people know I'll be late*—and judgment—*why didn't I leave earlier, why can't they just get this traffic jam cleared, they must be completely incompetent.* Practically, you might instead resolve, once you calmed down, not to follow the same route again.

Mindfulness therefore requires separating the terms "judgment" and "discernment." Judgment mindlessly categorizes experience and often leads us to wrestle with what is not in our control. Discernment is recognizing what we can and should change, and what we cannot, much like the traditional serenity prayer: To accept what we cannot change, to change what we must, and to find the wisdom to tell the difference.

There are certainly moments in life that demand instant action based on the quick assessment of a situation. Years ago on a hike in Costa Rica I was stepping over a log when my body froze in midstride. Looking down, I saw a poisonous snake coiled in the shadows. My reflexes were faster than my conscious mind. I'd stopped before I could have said why and saved myself, an ability I prefer to keep honed and at the ready.

Long ago on the path of evolution, our judgments and reactions expanded far beyond their practical usefulness. Intense fear or stress often focuses our thoughts for a period of time. We lose all awareness of the greater world. This is a perfectly useful response as long as the acute danger lasts, but not so much when we return to daily life. But for most of us life isn't a matter of moment-to-moment survival anymore.

Judgment has its uses. You'll still have likes and dislikes, and unpleasant experiences are still unpleasant, even after practicing mindfulness. "No way, I'm leaving" may be a skilled response when you notice someone lurking as you enter a dark alley. But it may be a

less-than-useful voice of fear that you hear when walking into a job interview. In the second case, you might notice your reaction, pause, take a few breaths, and open the door.

There's never a goal of getting rid of thoughts, either. Thoughts are going to come and go. We can note them, without becoming completely enmeshed. *My child needs to do better in school? Great, let's make a plan tonight. Right now, I'm playing baseball with him. Everything else going on in my mind is judgment, thought, emotion.*

Judgment is often triggered by thoughts and social interactions more than any concrete, acute danger. A simple, common belief—my kids *should* act differently—escalates our stress level. It is a judgment of the situation—life *should* be different. But life can never be different than it *is* as we're living through any particular moment.

We recoil—my child should not have ADHD. Or maybe we think, it is not right that I feel overwhelmed, other people have it worse than I do. But your child does have ADHD. And you really are overwhelmed, even though you know other people face greater challenges.

We often compare our lives to some standard or expectation—this is not what I pictured. And then we reactively get angry or sad or anxious. But things are as they are, and there's typically nothing we can do it about it in this exact moment. This isn't meant in any stilted way. It's simple truth. The only thing we can affect in life is whatever we decide to do next.

SELF DOUBT, MOVE OUT

"Ordinarily, we spend all our time comparing and discriminating between this and that, always looking around for something good to happen to us. And because of that we become restless and anxious about everything. As long as we are able to imagine something better than what we have or who we are, it follows naturally that there could also be something worse. We are constantly pursued by misgivings that something bad will happen. In other words, as long as we live by distinguishing between the better way and the worse way, we can never find absolute peace that whatever happens is all right."[1]

We often hold ourselves to different standards than we hold the rest of the world. We love our children unconditionally, even when we are frustrated or angry. When they mess up, we try to give them the benefit of the doubt: *You were trying your hardest. You made a mistake and I still love you. You'll do better next time.*

But with ourselves, our standards can be brutal. We strive to be perfect, and when we mess up we're harsh. There even may be a subtle sense that someone else—a parent, or a spouse, or a social group—is watching, judging our actions moment to moment.

We're often overly influenced by this perfectionism and insecurity. There's a "negativity bias" inherent in human nature, a tendency to focus on things we perceive as bad. These biases potentially cause us to feel insecure or inadequate in aspects of our lives, and then we may make decisions that protect our ego, or insulate ourselves from distress. When finding some sense of acceptance of our selves as we are right now, we begin to make settled choices about our lives.

We label and judge everything we experience, from the moment we wake until the moment we fall asleep again: *That was a good thought. That made me angry. That person looks like someone I'd like to meet. That person looks surly and unpleasant. I shouldn't judge people so quickly.*

Practice noticing this voice of judgment through the day. When you are meditating, note it and come back to your breath again, or sensations in your body, or whatever you've chosen. If you are hanging out with your children, come back to your children. Wherever you are, develop an awareness of thoughts you have that include *would, should,* or *could.* They often suggest judgment.

Practice separating your own clear-sighted perceptions from these random judgments created by the reactive mind. Notice the voice of judgment as nothing more than another thought. Letting it go, focus your attention wherever else you choose instead.

As we sit and slow down and start to become familiar with how we think, judgment crops up again and again. Instead of accepting it as reality, we can notice it as nothing more than another thought. Pay attention to the random voices that heckle and demean you through the day. If someone else said them—if a relative gave you an ear piece and said "I'm going to give you a little helpful advice for the rest of your life"—what would you do? Odds are you'd find a way to get rid of the ear piece.[2]

Practice Pausing

We notice a change in our reactions and in the kids, too. After I meditate I can carry it over to our lives and have even talked to the girls about it. I'm calmer. I don't shout as much. My kids have been taking breaths when upset, counting to ten. They're sticking out a disagreement without resorting to yelling. All good stuff.

Once we recognize judgment—there's that voice again—then what do we do? Left unchecked, our emotional reactivity takes over our conscious minds. A sensation appears. Immediately, liking or disliking follows. This feels good or bad, this is how it should or shouldn't be. These reactions lead to other thoughts, reactions, and then snap decisions. We add layers upon layers to moments that were complicated enough to start.

Instead of reacting, falling back on what is mindlessly familiar, pause. Notice what you are feeling physically or emotionally. Can you begin to detect when you are starting to react, before you say or do anything? Where have your thoughts gone? What emotions are rising? Is your stomach twisted in a knot? Is your face tight? Is someone actually in danger, or is a chronic problem rearing its head again? Take a breath, reflect, and, with intention, choose what to say or do next.

No one is asking you to shut off your sense of right and wrong. Stuff happens that is fairly disagreeable in life—sometimes a lot of it. But more often than not, snap judgments and reactions limit us. A battle begins when your child doesn't want to come inside from playing. The reactions start, *This again, why can't she just come in when I call?*

So you shout out the window, "*Lisa, get in here already, I don't want to have to repeat myself!*" She ignores you, or yells something back. Day after day, you wrestle. You push her to come in sooner, she pushes back, and you both end up angry.

Stop for a moment. What's going on? Right now, today, Lisa hasn't failed to listen yet. She's happy. You were happy a moment ago. Is your anger based on anything that happened today, or is it fueled by the past? You're starting to fall into autopilot. This is

what I say, this is how I feel, this is what she says, this is how she feels.

Things Change

When I was younger, I experienced intense stage fright. I'd even freeze up playing charades with a close group of friends. It didn't affect my life much; I was comfortable telling people that I wouldn't get on stage. That's all. It's not for me.

Someone would ask me to give a lecture or play a game, and my brain would leap into action. *Absolutely no way. I hate it. I'd embarrass myself. Impossible.* A line of excuses would form a traffic jam in my mind.

I assumed this trait was fixed, like my height. Then my life changed. I found a career I enjoy, I got married, I began meditating, I grew up. Whatever it was—some piece of those, or none of them—I found myself giving talks more often. Then I started getting positive feedback, being asked back to speak at the same places. One day I realized, this defining trait of mine—I hate being in the spotlight—had shifted.

There are still situations in which I'll "never" feel comfortable, like charades. And that's reactivity again. Never? Who knows? Right now, today, I'd never want to sing onstage or perform in a show (not that anyone is asking). A clenching feeling in my gut, a fearful projection even thinking about it, and yet nothing has actually happened. I'm not in danger sitting here writing about performing. Who knows what I'll think in another decade.

Even knowing that the future could be different, you still take care of yourself. Maybe down the road I'll join the circus, but for now I'm laying low. You trust your instincts, and stick to your beliefs. You make adjustments as often as necessary in order to maintain some sense of equilibrium in your life. But instead of reactively sticking to the party line—yours or anyone else's—you seek the bare facts, the reality of the broader situation.

Instead of allowing your thoughts to run ahead into fantasies of what the future might hold, pause and come back. Instead of dwelling or ruminating about what you or your child has done, notice that tendency and return. Right now, today, what would be the most skillful way for me to act, to teach, to model for my children?

Spending hours and hours in circular, emotionally driven thought leads us back to where we started. Pausing, letting go of the mental picture we painted, we try to advise ourselves like we would a close friend. Or our child.

STOP AND LET GO

In any situation, you can practice this: Listen first, breathe, and then respond. Pausing, you take a different path. You choose how to carry yourself and how to best move forward. What could you do differently? What could you show your child? If you could picture yourself in your wisest moment, what would you say or do?

An acronym used in the original MBSR program is STOP—which can serve as a reminder throughout the day:

S—Stop what you are doing
T—Take a breath (or a few)
O—Observe—what are you feeling right now, in your body and emotionally, and where are your thoughts?
P—Proceed—with intention, choose what you will say or do next

Building Compassion

I was putting so much pressure on myself, and my son Stephan. He has ADHD. We've tried so many different things to get him to listen. And we go to my mother-in-law's, and there's this look she gives me. It's like, without saying a word, she's staring me down. I know what she's thinking—honey, do something and get your monster under control. Or it might be in a restaurant, not that we really go anymore. Everyone is watching, and I get so angry at myself for even trying to go out for a meal. And I'm angry at Stephan. I'm doing everything I can, don't they all realize?

The list of biologically driven, ADHD-related behaviors parents blame themselves for is long. Something happens—a shove on the playground,

or a social rejection—and a visceral reaction starts. I should have known this was going to happen, why didn't I do something? It's often amplified when parents do not fully comprehend or believe the biology of ADHD. Or maybe they do, but their spouse doesn't. If you cannot see ADHD as a medical condition, it's easy to assume the persistent behavior is *somebody's* fault.

My kid does not get invited to parties anymore. They don't seem to have any close friends. My spouse feels I should be doing something different with the children. My parents think I should be stricter. My friends think I should be more lenient. Their teacher thinks I am too indulgent. Their other teacher feels I should motivate them. For each of these ADHD-driven thoughts, a twinge or a deluge of self-doubt may follow. Am I doing the right thing?

You're trying to make a change, and there may be a practical step to take. But the hectoring, often abusive voice of judgment may linger. You're not good enough, you have to work harder, if only you were a better parent. If only I was a better person or you were or he was, then everything would be different. Or you think about your family. If you were a more motivated child, or if you were the kind of dad who spends more time with his kids.

We are frequently led to assume that we find happiness only when we get our act together, reach some state of perfection and answer the voices. Instead, we can notice those voices for what they are, a combination of what we actually hear from the world and our own inner commentaries. And then instead of taking it all at face value, we can train ourselves toward a more compassionate, insightful way of living.

When we are driven by an endless sense of letting ourselves down, or letting down our families, our boss, or whomever else, we exhaust our mental resources and make unskilled decisions. When we begin to notice the voice of judgment, we can begin to let it go. Thanks for the feedback, I'll take it under consideration, I did everything I could.

A subtle (or less-than-subtle) inner message criticizes every move, never satisfied. I messed up again, I should have done that better. I'll never get it right. Or it constantly compares everything as it is to what it "should" be. *Do I have the job I should, the house I should, the kids I should, or even the spouse I should?*

Perhaps one day you're hanging out on a blanket at a picnic, and someone playing Frisbee accidentally steps in your food. Looking up, you see one of your closest friends—and you smile and shrug it off. But if you look up and see someone you don't like, or don't trust at all, what then? It's the same accident, but instead you become annoyed.

Typically, we don't treat ourselves like we treat our friends. You're playing Frisbee at a company picnic and accidentally step in your boss's food. Immediately, you are flooded with a pile of thoughts, feelings, body sensations. Maybe your stomach flips, your palms sweat. You might have reflexive thoughts about yourself. *How careless. Fool. Why weren't you more careful?* All without nearly the patience or grace you would have had for your closest friend, a moment ago. Driven by these unconscious, negative judgments, where does your behavior go? What might you say or do? How clear would you be in your next choices?

Aware of their influence, you might notice when they arise—and choose not to listen. By cultivating for yourself the attitude you'd have toward a close friend, and by giving yourself a break, you may discover something new. I messed up, and I'm sorry. What is my next step?

Observing the world with nothing but cold clarity would be exhausting. It wouldn't take us far towards happiness. While focusing attention back to our actual experience is part of the picture, equally important is building compassion—living our moment-to-moment lives without bias, and without reactive judgment of our experiences.

When we practice meditation, we cultivate this approach. I'm trying to focus on my breath, oops, I was distracted, and then without judgment (and therefore, with compassion) coming back. Even when we make a mistake we can cut ourselves some slack, make amends if we need to, and at the same time take into account our good intentions. Mindfulness training is an antidote to rumination and self-abuse.

Even when you did nothing intentionally wrong in any given situation, you may still hear voices of self-doubt. You start kicking yourself, or lamenting the state of your life, or flaring up in anger at your child or spouse. Noticing that, you can return your focus to wishing yourself well—may I find some peace, health, happiness, well-being, or whatever else you imagine.

While on some basic level each of us strives to find this ease and safety in life, the concept of building compassion isn't asking you to accept everything about yourself or anyone else as perfect. We all have things we could work on and improve, or new tools we might pick up. We still recognize when we're upset, things didn't go as we pictured, and it's painful.

Building compassion isn't asking us to accept everyone else's behavior as right. Our children don't do what we want all the time, and there are situations we will need to address. There are also going to be people we dislike, or others who may do us harm. While we continue trying, when possible, to see their perspective, we can still move them completely out of our lives, and act decisively to protect ourselves. Perhaps, though, we can disagree with someone without losing ourselves in vitriol, or questioning their basic intentions in life.

You can remind yourself that we're all trying our best—you and your child or husband or boss or anyone else. We all deserve to be at ease and find happiness. My child is being defiant again; they blew off their school work, and then lied about it. And I had to repeat myself fourteen times to get them to the bus. But behind all that misbehavior is what? A desire to be happy, nothing more.

You're still going to do what you need to get them on track—and then repeat to yourself, as often as needed, that they're only trying to find well being, like everyone else. In a charged, intense moment—how come you failed English, you told me last week you were getting a B—you can pause. Practice reminding yourself that whatever led to this moment, they don't want to fail English just as much as you don't want to see them fail.

Finding Empathy for ADHD

There may be a notion that children with ADHD should pull themselves up by the bootstraps, get their act together, and stop forgetting, or start to behave better. Maybe you blame your child on some level for his ADHD. *You know the rules. Do your work already. Stop acting like that.*

How does your child feel about it? Behind the bluster or silence, what's going on? Most of the time, they are suffering as much as you are. They have ADHD, with all the intrinsic difficulties it brings. They want to be settled and have friends and to learn like everyone else, and

they want to succeed in your eyes. You may have battles and sullenness and layers of household tension, but what's your child's view of it all?

Recognizing their perspective doesn't release them from responsibility. You still need to set clear limits and enforce discipline. You still expect effort and kindness. And at the same time, you create long-term plans and anticipate problem situations and supply them the tools they need to thrive.

Even when you disagree with their choices, you may be able to recognize they are only trying to get by. You take stands while also recognizing that if your kids had the right tools, they'd probably stop whatever behavior you're trying to correct. Children with ADHD may misbehave or seem to lack motivation, but they want to be happy like everyone else.

In building compassion and emotional resilience, we change our brains in subtle but meaningful ways. Instead of spending twenty minutes mentally lashing ourselves or our children for "failing" in some way, we can focus on a more compassionate perspective. I'm trying my best, you're trying your best. I'm trying to find some peace, and so are you. You notice the self-judgment without buying in. You notice when you harshly judge someone else, and take a step back from the thought.

On a medical level, focusing on compassion causes neurons to fire in particular parts of the brain that relate not only to compassion for others, but to our own sense of well-being. When compassion centers are firing, they change how we perceive the world. We become less likely to negatively interpret all the ambiguous information we encounter every day. They also affect how we choose to treat other people; one recent study showed that focusing on compassion improved people's attitudes towards strangers.[3]

As with most aspects of mindfulness, studies confirm benefits of this practice in daily life. One study exposed people to a challenging experience—public speaking, which is an almost universally successful method of inducing stress. People in the audience were trained to respond in an ambiguous way. Among the participants, people trained in practices that build self-compassion were less stressed and less likely to misinterpret the neutral feedback they were getting as negative.

Studies have shown physical shifts in the brain when people who meditate focus on feelings of compassion. They experience patterns of firing in the frontal lobes that correlate with a sense of ease. We appear able to change our long-term emotional states through mental exercises and concentration.[4]

Children learn empathy through observing their parents' actions and behaviors. They are born with their own innate tendencies and they watch and learn from adults around them. However you treat your children, your spouse, your friends, difficult people you encounter, salespeople, a panhandler, children observe, take unconscious notes, and build their own skills.

METTA: FINDING COMPASSION

A specific type of meditation called *metta* or *lovingkindness* builds this perspective of compassion. Lovingkindness is a biblical word, translated as far back as the 1500s, used to describe both God's nature and the feeling of a husband for his wife. It is also an approximate translation of a Southeast Asian word, *metta*, which describes this practice. The term *lovingkindness* itself really doesn't matter much; if it triggers you negatively, pay attention to the feeling and then substitute a word you find more comfortable.

In practicing *metta*, we start by focusing our attention on ourselves. We deserve happiness, safety, and ease as much as anyone else. When we're dragged down or overwhelmed by self-judgment, we limit our ability to empathize with others. Moving beyond these inner voices, we may find ourselves better able to see ourselves and the world with clarity. A traditional series of phrases represents these universal desires and is often paraphrased as, "May I be happy; may I be healthy; may I feel safe; may I live my life with ease." Begin this practice by focusing these wishes towards yourself, mentally repeating them at a measured pace, perhaps timed to the movement of your breath.

The exact phrases have no importance, so you can substitute whatever other words you like: May I not feel confused, may I feel at peace, may I feel balanced and wise. Find concepts that feel natural for you, whatever you most hope for yourself, choosing only three or four at most.

While practicing *metta* meditation, we focus on these phrases without forcing anything. You cannot make yourself feel loving or compassionate or peaceful or anything else. Feelings come and go. Notice whatever distractions come up and, without effort, return to the phrases as you would return your attention to your breathing.

After spending some time focusing on yourself, when you're ready, picture someone who has been only supportive to you over time—a benefactor for whom you have no conflicting emotions. Perhaps it's someone close, or a mentor, or a person outside your life who inspires you, or someone you've never met. If no person comes to mind (it's common), then stay with yourself, continuing with the same phrases for as long as you would like.

Next, without rushing, move your attention to a friend. You might picture the first person who comes to mind. You might find a friend who truly needs your support right now in some way, someone sick or struggling. Focus the same intention, with the same phrases, on your friend.

Allow some time to pass, and when you feel ready, move your attention to a "neutral" person. Someone for whom you have no particular feelings one way or another. Perhaps someone at a local store or restaurant. Someone in an office across the hall. Someone to whom you've never paid any particular attention at all.

We often dismiss experiences that don't grab our initial attention. Once we categorize someone or some event as neutral, they are off the radar. So for these few minutes, picture this person, whose name you may not even know, knowing nothing about their lives or their difficulties, but recognizing that they are driven by the same human desires. Stay with the same wishes, the same phrases.

Next, move your attention to a difficult person. Don't start with the most difficult person in your life; that may be too much to ask. But find someone who challenges you, maybe someone you have a tense relationship with in your family, or a person in life who has annoyed you in some way. Now offer them the same phrases, the same intentions. Recognize that, in spite of any disagreements, whatever they've done was almost certainly driven by the same wishes for happiness, or ease, or peace of mind.

By wishing someone well, we're not condoning behavior, or putting a falsely positive spin on anything. We can still choose to push back, make changes, or even put someone out of our lives. When possible, though, we can do so with an understanding that while we may be completely at odds, we may see the world from an entirely different point of view, our goals as human begins are the same.

Thinking about a challenging person in this way can be overwhelming. If you find it too difficult, you might picture yourself at the same time. May we both be happy. May we both be safe. May we both live our lives with ease. You also can always return your intentions to only yourself, or to your breath. There's no need to force anything. Explore what is comfortable and uncomfortable, making whatever adjustments you need.

Traditionally, in ending, we offer these wishes to larger groups of people, recognizing that throughout the world, these are the same desires with which people live. You might turn your attention to all of the individuals that you've brought to mind; yourself, your benefactor and friend, a neutral person and a challenging one. May everyone in this group find peace, ease and well being. And then imagine the same for everyone outside the group you haven't yet thought of, recognizing the basic motivations behind the actions all people take, every day. Spend a few minutes with these more general thoughts, *may you all be happy, healthy, safe and at ease,* without trying to create any particular outcome in how you feel. If this ending feels too awkward, you might return to your family, picturing each member individually.

You can use these phrases throughout the day during moments when you find yourself stressed. Find a sense of peace with yourself without glossing over the rough spots and recognize flaws as they are. Ease your experience by searching for the line between working to improve yourself and belittling yourself for needing improvement in the first place. Life is challenging enough without self-judgment and abuse.

Skillful Communication with Children

We were walking up to the cash register and I felt myself get tense. I wanted to grab the two kids and march right through, but I had to pay first.

Last time was such a mess. Joey grabbed a toy from that annoying basket of crap they keep for impulse buys. So, without thinking, I snapped. "Put that back, we don't need it." So then his older brother Michael grabbed it from his hand, and I said, "Get your hands off of him." But then I realized he was only trying to get Joey to put the toy back. Joey started screaming and crying, and Michael started pushing him away from the toys and it was such an embarrassing mess.

This time, Joey immediately started reaching again. I took a few breaths. I turned to face the two of them, and quietly explained to Joey we weren't buying anything more today. And when Michael went to help him put it away, I thanked him but asked him to wait. Joey still started to get upset, but I was able to comfort him instead of riling up both of them.

It's been like that a lot. The calmer I stay, the calmer my kids stay. It seems obvious now, but it wasn't before. It's not always easy, but it helps.

What does skillful communication mean? We've all seen it. You might be able to imagine a person you respect. What traits do you see when they interact with the world? Friendly, strong, funny, calm, compassionate, well spoken, or whatever else, their style often reflects a balance of inner strength, wisdom, and empathy.

Communication with children is an intricate dance for parents. We're always the grown-up—not a friend, not an equal. We set the ground rules, we uphold limits. We have the broader perspective. But while we maintain our place as the responsible adult, we also convey unconditional warmth and affection, collaborate when we can, and demonstrate an understanding that we are not infallible.

As well, our children observe and learn from our interactions with our spouse, neighbors, and out in the world. When we yell, our children yell. When we're nasty, sarcastic, or dismissive, our children learn those tendencies. When we shut down, don't listen, and lock onto a particular outcome, our children shut down as well.

If we approach them braced for the nightly homework battle, our children know what's coming. "*Why haven't you started? What's your excuse this time?*" Or it might be implied, your disappointment shimmering below the surface of the conversation, carried by your tone of voice.

It might be communicated in the way you enter the room and take over the situation. If your boss threw open the door to the office with the same attitude and posture, how would you respond? If they just walked in and, in a situation where you truly needed help figuring something out, took over without including you?

Your children are an equal part of the equation. You may speak in the wisest, calmest manner possible but they still yell and scream or

refuse your help. But you can't control that right now. What you can do is manage your own response. What would best get this problem handled? What's a skillful approach for dealing with this confrontation?

As with any aspect of life, habits develop. An "easy" child without ADHD may grow up with positive feedback and endless latitude to debate rules and explore options. A challenging child may face strictness, demands, and criticism. Or you may treat the world one way, and your family another, reining yourself in outside the house, letting loose when you're home. Or vice versa.

Your child may chronically lose stuff. As they get older, the list becomes less trivial—first it was parts of toys and now it's jackets, a cell phone, the house keys. You try reasoning. You try yelling. Nothing changes, and this time their entire backpack is missing. Gone, all their books and half-completed homework and an expensive pair of running shoes.

You storm into their room to confront them. "*How could this happen again? We've talked about it over and over. Can't you see how much this costs us? Doesn't it matter to you that you have to do all your homework again? That's it. You're grounded until you've caught up on all the work you lost. Maybe now you'll get it.*"

What's been communicated beyond your words? How close to a solution have you gotten? You've judged the situation and solved it, and your child hasn't even spoken yet. Or maybe they protested or made excuses. But then they probably started on their heels, off balance.

What back story have you created that is guiding this discussion? How open are you to other pictures of their future, or about yourself? You cannot get inside their brain and control them like a puppet. You may be frustrated, at wit's end, or feel lost. Acknowledging all that, what skillful action can you take next? What do you do habitually that has been useful, or not so useful?

You allow yourself a different way of responding when you create space between your thoughts and emotions and your reaction to them. Monitor all the frustration and tension in your body, and whatever is going on in your mind. Noticing any pressure from judgment and expectation and moving it to the side, pausing, what decision could you make next that might facilitate a different outcome?

Wherever your mind runs off to, past or future, you can practice noticing the diversion and coming back to the experience at hand. Right now, you're trying to figure out how to manage the lost backpack. You

may absolutely need a new and improved long-term plan as well. But how would you advise a friend to act, *tonight?*

Clear communication with a child with ADHD starts with a recognition of their biology. ADHD itself affects communication. It might seem intuitive that when we speak, the person we're addressing listens. ADHD often gets in the way of that simple transaction.

Attention-shifting problems prevent you from being heard as a parent—literally. If you don't make sure you have the full attention of a child with ADHD before you make a request, they probably won't hear you. Distractibility may come across as disinterest, or an attempt to tune a parent out.

Impulsivity may lead to things being said by a child without thinking. With ADHD, listening quietly—taking turns in conversation while a parent speaks—becomes immensely challenging. It may seem like disrespectful interruptions or willful ignoring, but much of it is driven by ADHD.

As the grown-up in the room, you adjust your expectations. You pause and collect yourself. But even if you're calmly starting at your best, you will still blow up at times. Pushed by a tantrum or silence, you'll be harsher or louder than you meant to be. Perfection is unattainable, but the possibility of honest reflection and following up to clarify ourselves is always available, and represent perhaps the keystone of skillful communication.

Communication with Grown-Ups

The art of communicating with teachers and people in the community raises the bar for staying calm and compassionate. Parents naturally want to see the best in their children. Loving them without reservation they may focus on easy moments and deny what the rest of the world is saying. *My child is wonderful and smart and well-rounded, and we have a great time building Legos,* even though his teacher says he cannot sit through class, or is too physical with his classmates. It may feel protective to make excuses. *I'm sure he'll grow out of it, he's a boy. That teacher is too harsh. My husband was the same way when he was a kid and he's doing fine.*

Your experiences and observations may be completely true, but maybe theirs are as well. And if there is an overall pattern, hiding from it doesn't help anyone. Again, early intervention is vital to child development, and erring on the side of seeking advice may avoid issues down the road.

Getting bad feedback from a teacher is upsetting. When you hear it, pause. Notice any tendency to circle the wagons. The adrenaline flows and mentally you recoil. *How dare you say anything about my child?* Focus on your breath. How much of what is being said could be true? Notice your feelings of reactivity, the mind shutting down in a haze of emotion. Is there even one sentence in the midst of the conversation that offers something useful?

Ask for a moment to collect yourself. And then listen. Seek clarification. Reflect on the conversation, and if you are too enmeshed to be rational, run it by someone who will provide you sound, truthful advice. Find someone without the self-protective instinct you have for your child, someone supportive but willing to give honest, direct feedback.

CONVERSATION MEDITATION

Communication expands on the mindfulness techniques you have started practicing—stepping out of autopilot, becoming less reactive, and learning your own mental tendencies. With any conversation or interaction, our expectations of the outcome influence how we hold ourselves, our choice of words, and our tone of voice. Pausing and listening, not forcing an immediate solution, we allow other plausible outcomes to emerge.

The path of any conversation is steered by much more than our words alone. Before we open our mouths to speak we often anticipate how the discussion will go, which affects what we choose to say and how we say it. Our nonverbal language, such as facial expression or posture, generally develops without our awareness and may tell more about our intention than the words we choose. We're offering an opportunity for explanation, but our skepticism is etched in our faces. Our ability to listen and respond is affected by our acute mental and physical states, as well as by years of experience through which we filter our lives. We'll hear things quite

differently while we're relaxed and on vacation than when we're harried and walking in the door from work.

A communication style where you accept everything you hear and never state your needs is not the point. You're angry—that's real. There is a serious problem that needs solving—that's real as well. Communicating mindfully doesn't involve rolling over and giving up, it means keeping your own perspective yet empathetically noticing the viewpoint of another.

Somewhere in the middle is an opportunity to listen, to creatively problem solve, to engage your child in the discussion without escalating their fear. As always, underneath their anger, withdrawn sullen silence, or seeming apathy, below all of it they want what you want. They'd like to be happy and at ease, and that's what you picture for them as well.

A communication checklist:

- Pause and listen first
- Monitor your body language and tone
- Monitor your expectations and any predictions of what will come next
- When needed, take a few breaths—or take a break
- Pay full attention and create a situation where whomever you are talking to can do the same; stay away from other people, television, phones, computers, etc. while engaging in discussion.

Decisions, Decisions

So much has changed. I've stopped expecting that there's always something more to do. He's doing so much better in so many ways, it's easy to always think we have to work on something else, to push him more. It's easy to forget to be happy with everything we've accomplished already.

And I'm trusting him more. I'm letting him make more choices—and make mistakes, when I can. Sometimes I have to tell him what to do, of course. But a lot of the time I give him a chance. He messes up and we discuss what happened. Sometimes he gets in trouble and he doesn't argue the same way. He realizes there was a problem, and expects the consequence.

But even more often, he gets around to better choices. It may take him a while, but he gets there.

From any single difficult behavior arises a string of choices: How do I manage it at home, at the grocery store, or at grandma's house? The answers are not always black and white, creating ambiguity which often escalates the tension, but some basic guidelines generally hold true. As a bottom line, all we can do each time we make a new decision is pause and make the best choice we see, with the tools and information we have at our disposal; when the moment has passed, reflect on what's happened; and then if needed, make adjustments, or make amends.

You're in the store and realize something needs to change. You're the one whose child is running around holding the gold-plated fishing pole. Now what? How do you start using mindfulness in your life? With the beginning exercises, pausing and paying attention. Without any direct effort, practicing these skills affects your moment to moment experience.

You start by settling yourself. Stressed, you're less likely to be at your best. You're also less likely to solve problems creatively. When simply aware, without entanglement, answers often become clear.

You seek the reality of the moment, cutting yourself some slack, and cutting your kids as much. Maybe there's something different to be done in your parenting, at school, or in medical treatment. Maybe there's something you can teach your children, some new concept or new approach that will help build their ability to self-regulate.

With awareness of your inner state, you don't react wildly, compelled by unconscious impulses. You become more aware of what is going on in your mind. When you're irritated, you know you're irritated, and when you're anxious, you know you're anxious. There's nothing forced about this, but there is an assumption that when you are more conscious of these inner experiences, you'll handle them with more skill.

You practice patience. When you grab for a solution without pausing, you often find the same one you've always tried, forcing a square peg in a round hole. Or maybe you try to motivate with honey, or with a big stick, when motivation isn't the underlying problem at all. Or blindly miss another option that might work better that has been staring you in the face all along.

At any time in life, you can notice your judgments, opinions, and constructions—the thumbnail sketches you've written about yourself, your family, or a situation. These thoughts might be true, and they might not. Noticing them, you let them go without getting stuck, and come back to your immediate reality.

You begin to observe, with clarity, conflicts with your child and her ADHD. Have you explored the difference between what you believe *should be* and what actually *is*? What are her true strengths and vulnerabilities? What are yours?

The long-term goal of helping build skills, manage ADHD, create relationships—all that stays the same. You're not giving up. But what are the basics facts, right now? Wanting your child to be motivated or less impulsive or more organized cannot alter anything this moment.

So you took a step. You let a behavior slide this time, or you took away TV time, or you resolved to call a family therapist for help. You made the best choice you could have right then, with the resources you had at your disposal and the information you understood. What happened next?

Mindfulness is not about doing anything *better* or *worse* than before. You can't do anything better *yesterday*. The following day you may realize it wasn't such a great way to act, or that the end result was not what you had hoped. You may believe it turned out to be just about the least skillful way you could have responded.

Some plan hasn't been working so far. You still argue all the time about school. Or maybe you get along great at home, but he still battles with other children. Remain open to the possibility that this time the outcome could be different. Maybe with patience the exact same routine leads somewhere completely different this time around, the lesson learned. And then again, maybe a wiser option would be choosing a new path entirely. Observe the outcomes of your behaviors and actions with all the compassion and objectivity you can muster, and then resolve to move forward again.

Meditation is a technique to help see clearly. Our vision is distorted by all the random thoughts, reactions, emotions, fantasies, memories, and day-to-day chaos of our ordinary lives. Would you want to invest in an

expensive stock based on such skewed information? Instead, we try to see past our filters and fog.

Having intention to do something without any expectation of a particular outcome is a somewhat quirky concept. I'm going to sit in meditation, do my best to stay focused, expect distractions endlessly, and I may or may not find myself relaxed this time around. You can try it out with commonplace activities, too. For example, you might be working toward your child making his bed every morning. You create a plan, observe, and take a breath when the bed is, yet again, a complete mess. And then come back to the goal, make an adjustment, and try again.

Train a sense that you'll continue to persevere to find solutions and, at the same time, let go of any expectations that everything will fall instantly into place. There's no guarantee that *this* plan will change everything right now. Each step of the way, aiming to be aware and accepting of the ups and downs of life, without expecting anything different.

Mindfulness Tools in Everyday Life

I'm a screamer, and I come from generations of screamers. But I'm working on it. Now I pause and try to remember to take a breath. Most of the time, I catch myself. And my household is so much quieter. My kids are less argumentative. Instead of shouting ourselves in circles, we talk. Even when they get in trouble, they don't argue so much.

While you'll still encounter moments of joy, sorrow, stress, and relaxation throughout your life, practicing mindfulness allows a fresh perspective. Through steady attention and self-care, you'll cultivate a new way of living for yourself and your family. The most specific goal of mindfulness has been said to be the elimination of suffering, or, rather, the promotion of happiness and well-being—which will mean something different to every family.

Practicing mindfulness and an increased sense of well-being go together for people. How come? Various psychological characteristics have been teased out of the mix by researchers, specific traits that

correlate with the benefits people report. These traits help explain the nuances of what people develop as they practice mindfulness consistently. They also represent qualities that enhance parenting, especially when dealing with a child with ADHD, and have reciprocal benefits for the entire family. Here's a summary of some skills that can develop if you continue with the exercises:[5]

- Paying attention to moment-to-moment experiences.
- Getting out of autopilot.
- Noticing and labeling internal states as they happen.
- Responding instead of reacting to experience.
- Moving beyond reactive judgment and bias.
- Acting with intention.

Not everything is going to change in a day, after reading one chapter explaining mindfulness. You still may find yourself herding children toward the door, but thinking about what you need to do after the kids leave for school. Or maybe doing your chores, but planning what you'll say to your spouse at dinner. Or while you're eating dinner with your family, you may be thinking about a problem at work... all of which, on a basic level, means you likely miss out on a lot of fun stuff in life and with your kids. But through your growing mindfulness practice, maybe you'll notice yourself off planning or ruminating earlier than before and once or twice even catch yourself and return.

Pausing, you also can choose to respond, rather than react out of uncontrolled frustration. Lost in distraction, living on autopilot, means you are not paying full attention to the infinite choices you're making every day. You now have the opportunity to cultivate the ability to address day-to-day challenges calmly and proactively, instead of falling back on habitual reactions. When you practice meditation, you develop the capacity to notice an emotional reaction—I'm feeling angry—and not act on it immediately. You have started to create a space to find your own clarity, and while you may still decide to do the exact same thing you've always done, perhaps you will choose otherwise.

You can select where to place your attention. You might start with your child, focusing only on him a few minutes each day, pulling your mind out of distraction. Behavioral change often follows when parents pay dedicated attention for a little time each day.

Through mindfulness, you have the opportunity to cultivate less habitual judging of things, the endlessly categorizing of experiences into good, bad, better, or worse. This ability, as we reviewed, contrasts with discernment. You set goals and try to change things, but without as much internal angst. It doesn't matter what you *should* have done *before;* all you can control is what you do *next.*

You continue to seek the reality or the "bare facts" of a situation, without adding biases or reactive judgments. Problems that seemed concrete often turn out to be fluid. Thoughts like *my child will never, ever be different than this,* or *there is nothing I can do to change this behavior* feel like unblinking reality. However, neither statement is necessarily true. What feels solid and fixed often originates from unconscious rumination and mental habit. With an ability to be more responsive, and without falling back on old habits, you instead pause and make conscious, skillful choices. New possibilities begin to exist.

When fear rules your thoughts, it controls your attention. It grabs hold and won't let go. All you see are the unsettling fantasies, nothing more. You say and do things to modulate the emotions, to try and make it better—even when the event itself is long gone, or yet to come.

Treating your kids and yourself with compassion in the deepest sense is a recognition that not every slipup and misbehavior stems from actual intent. Difficult behaviors related to ADHD—from overt impulsivity, to trouble with teachers, to more subtle challenges with disorganization, motivation, time management, and misplacing belongings—are almost certainly not intentional. Once again, your children are trying to find some peace and well-being, and ADHD is thwarting their efforts.

Left unattended, the daily chaos of life perpetuates itself. Short of a crisis, when do you decide to stop, make a proactive decision, and try something new? How you live, how you behave, how much TV you watch, how you eat—as hard as these patterns are to change it's your choice to continue the status quo or not.

You may choose to pick up the tools of mindfulness at any time. But don't blame yourself for what you've felt or done before, or what you feel now. You've been happy or sad because you've been happy or sad.

You've made the best choices you could, with the knowledge you had. That's all any of us does, every day.

Most children need some extra help or behavioral modification at some point in their lives. It doesn't mean you screwed up. *I should have handled that better, my child shouldn't act that way, that person over there thinks I'm the worst parent ever.* Noticing any of that type of thinking, you practice letting it go—that's the voice of judgment again, not reality.

However as much you are struggling, however much you feel like you messed up, your motivation was true. Whatever step—or misstep—you took you were trying your best. Let go of any effort to force your life into a perfect picture. Maybe you're stressed. Maybe your child has ADHD. Those are simple facts. Try to address each with all the compassion you can muster. And then use the mindfulness tools to find ease in life and in your family.

Standing in place, we subtly but endlessly shift our weight to remain upright. There is a constant need for corrections to maintain balance. And so it is in life—exploring when to lean forward or duck back, and myriad other moment-to-moment adjustments. Cultivating a dynamic platform of strength and stability, you make clear-sighted, proactive choices that build your own resilience, your child's ability to self-regulate, and a foundation for a family full of health and well-being.

Explore the exercises offered throughout this chapter at your own pace. Return to them whenever you'd like, perhaps trying one out for several days or weeks. Set aside a specific time each day, such as when your kids are getting on the bus, or you have a lunch break, or right after bedtime. Create an electronic reminder for yourself, or make a note on your calendar.

The following six-week program exploring mindfulness reflects the way the mindfulness-based stress reduction program is typically taught. Each week, exercises from the book are referenced for your review. Do your best to follow the suggested outline, and when you lose track or forget, come back to it again. It is adapted from the original program offered at the University of Massachusetts, as well as a parent-specific version created by Amy Saltzman, M.D. (who mentored me in

starting my own classes). This outline is meant as an overview. Teachers also offer in-person programs throughout the country, and the world; a partial list is available at the Center for Mindfulness, University of Massachusetts website.

Week 1:

- Spend dedicated time with your children once each day, focused only on an activity as it happens (page 57).
- Sitting or lying down, guide yourself through a body scan meditation (page 82) once daily. Commit to a time, scheduling it when you are alert and less likely to fall asleep.
- Pay attention to the "voice of judgment" as you encounter it throughout the week, internal commentaries about your own thoughts or behavior, or comparing something in the world to how it "should" be, or any other place you stumble over it (page 94).
- Once during the week—or once a day—eat a snack or meal with similar attention, focusing on eating, pausing, and deciding when to move to the next bite instead of mindlessly consuming your food (page 91).

Week 2:

- Continue to spend time with your children each day in which they lead the activity and you follow. As well, find one pleasurable experience each day and bring your full attention to it, choosing anything from your first sip of coffee in the morning to a date night with your spouse.
- Focus on your breath during daily meditation (page 67). Without trying to force yourself to relax, or expecting yourself to block out all thoughts, practice sitting and letting your mind quiet down. Release any sense of effort or judgment for these few minutes, as best you can.
- Pay attention to your schedule, and how you use your time each day this week. What could be juggled to carve out a few minutes for yourself? Where are you overscheduled in ways that you can change? How would you like to be spending your time? If you cannot change your schedule, could you find even a moment to pause and step out of the mental chaos? (page 83)

Week 3:

- While continuing to focus on simple, pleasurable experiences in life and with your children, start to pay attention to unpleasant or stressful experiences. Observe how you feel emotionally and physically. And perhaps notice when your thoughts run into the future, or remain caught in the past. Without forcing or repairing anything, staying focused on the unfolding of your experience as it happens, and your responses.
- Continue your daily meditation, focusing on the breath. As you sit, pay attention to body sensations, emotions, and thoughts as they arise. Notice your reaction to them, any urge to move away or fix them or reject them out of hand. And then, for these few minutes, return to simply observing (page 174).
- Schedule pauses several times during the day. Create them as reminders in your calendar, or post yourself notes in one or two places in the house. Or stop for a moment each day before leaving home, and before entering the front door again. Or choose whatever else fits for you (page 98).

Week 4:

- Practice pausing throughout each day. Instead of reacting instantly, out of habit, take a breath. Stop. Notice what's actually going on around you. And then, with intention, choose a next step (page 98).
- Pay attention to how you feel and act when stressed. How does your body feel? What effect does stress have on your mind, or on your emotional state, and how long does it all continue? (page 64)
- Focus on compassion, in life and in your meditation (page 103). Choose concepts that feel natural to you and even in a stressful moment, use them to bring yourself back. *My child is making a scene, I'm getting embarrassed and frustrated. In spite of the mess, and regardless of how it looks from the outside, we're both trying our best to be settled and at ease.* Start with yourself, and then move outward with thoughts for people in the world around you.

Week 5:

- Continue to practice pausing. When you feel yourself revved up or mentally out of control in the midst of a crazy day, step aside. Even for just a minute—for ten or fifteen breaths—let your mind settle again.
- Focus on communication with your children (page 109). Notice any expectations (*I'm going to say this, and then he's going to say...*) or compulsions to create a particular outcome. While maintaining a clear sense of your role as a parent, also notice how you carry yourself, and your own habits and perceptions. Pay attention to what you model for them in conversation, and in conflict resolution. Strive each time to listen, pause, and only then respond.
- Continue to focus on compassion in your daily meditation. You deserve to feel happy, strong, and at ease. Everyone else does, too. Even while protecting yourself, or emphatically disagreeing with someone, recognizing that behind even an ill-conceived action typically is a desire for well-being (page 103).

Week 6:

- In ending your formal six week schedule, choose whatever meditation fits for you to practice. Sitting, walking, or standing (page 154). Breathing or focusing on compassion. Practicing yoga. Whatever you select, commit to your chosen activity once daily. Or maybe take ten minutes a few times a day to meditate, to manage your stress, settle your mind, and cultivate self-awareness and compassion.
- Protect time to take care of yourself. Go for a run—but focus only on the run. Play tennis, read a book, or go to a movie. Do the dishes and focus on the dishes, not on the to-do list. Cultivate equanimity and well-being in yourself, and you bring those benefits to the family.
- Pay attention to smooth and pleasant family time. Protect it, schedule it, and, if needed, create it, fifteen minutes or half an hour during which your child chooses the activity, and you follow.
- Continue to practice pausing and responding, instead of reacting out of habit, when stressed or facing challenges.

- Commit to a plan for the future that includes daily meditation and a general focus on mindfulness. Place a reminder on your calendar several months out to see if you've kept up. Find a couple of words, maybe two or three, that represent the traits you'd like to develop. Calmness. Wisdom. Humor. Strength. Compassion. Joy. Write them down somewhere, and when tumult takes over in life, return to them.

The Foundations of ADHD Care

So now we move forward to intervention for ADHD. What can you offer a child with ADHD that manages the symptoms and builds a sense of well-being? How do you develop your own strength and resilience? And what can you do for your family?

Support for children with ADHD falls into three broad areas of life—home, school, and medical approaches. In any of these areas, decisions become clearer with an understanding of ADHD, from its underlying biology to the effects of executive function and impulse control problems on children.

First we'll talk about life at home. Research shows that children with ADHD are more likely to thrive when receiving positive rather than negative feedback—but it can be difficult to balance positive discipline with the needs of a child with ADHD. They require clear limit setting and an emphasis on routines. They require that adults scale down their expectations and develop long-term goals balanced by a clear view of a child's actual abilities.

When it comes to school, we cannot expect kids with ADHD to manage their schoolwork, sit in a chaotic classroom, or learn new information at the same pace and with the same supports as peers. Instead, we need to create alternative methods to help children excel.

Last are medical interventions. ADHD is a biological condition, and medications address an inherent physical difference in the brain. ADHD medication improves self-regulation, and, in spite of how they are often portrayed, side effects tend to be less significant than the risks inherent in untreated ADHD. Various alternative interventions have some evidence behind them as well, but not as replacements for ADHD medication.

Reviewing all these different possibilities, some of which you may have encountered, many of which you may have strong beliefs about,

may be stressful for you. Changing a belief or a personal habit is hard. Trying new things at home can be disruptive and difficult. School may be a constant battle, and you may feel that the system is not on your side. Medications may feel uniquely terrifying.

Using the mindfulness tools, pause as you feel your stress level rise. Notice any escalating thoughts and emotions. Notice when your mind leaps into the future with fantasies of what might happen next. Notice reflexive reactions or beliefs. *Routines will never work, we already tried rewards, his teacher doesn't listen to me, medications will change him forever.* Instead of getting snagged, focus back on your breathing, for a minute, or for five or fifteen. Step by step, come back to this moment only, choosing what seems like the best *next* step, nothing more.