

Walk For Your Life_ Mindfulness Practices for Difficult Times

Walk For Your Life: Mindfulness Practices for Difficult Times

By Jason Dilg, B.A.¹

“Practice mindfulness meditation a type of energy that you perceive in reality for yourself.
- Thich Giac Chinh, Chief Editor.

“An early morning walk is a blessing for the whole day.” Henry David Thoreau

Perhaps when you think of practicing mindfulness, you think of sitting on a cushion by yourself. Or maybe you think of going on a retreat. But there are many ways to practice mindfulness.

It is well established that a good mindfulness practice includes just three simple elements: 1) to pay attention to something present, 2) on purpose, and 3) without being distracted by whatever comes into our field of awareness -- judgement, thoughts, emotions, or other things going on.

In sitting practice, we may choose to pay attention to the feeling of the breath moving in and out through our nose or mouth, or the belly expanding and tightening as it invites the breath in and out, or the rising and falling of

our chest. Or maybe we just sit and count breaths, one to ten, and then start again at one.

But when we experience stress, there is often a sense of agitation that comes with it which can make sitting less comfortable, less pleasant. So much so, that we may choose not to practice.

Walking the path of mindfulness we always seek the middle way. In practice, we want to compassionately accept whatever resistance we might find in ourselves, while not giving up too easily because of difficult mind states.

When we find ourselves in difficult circumstances, our mind can become like a caged tiger: agitated and pacing. Seeking the way out. Ruminating over threats and their possible solutions. Or depressed and listless, without hope for the future. I imagine that we can agree that this is an exhausting way to live.

We want to find the middle way between working with uncomfortable sensations and emotions like these, but we don't want to force ourselves too hard when we find the practice difficult. To do so can lead to even more stress, and maybe giving up on our practice all together.

Ideally, mindfulness practice does the opposite of this. A wholesome mindfulness practice helps us develop a sense of refuge in ourselves, while revitalizing our body and spirit.

The past year has been especially stressful for many of us. We are living through the first major global pandemic in 100 years. Unusual

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weather, fires, floods, and freezing temperatures remind us that climate change threatens our very existence on the planet. Financial insecurity, hunger, and human rights abuses are tinder for social unrest bursting into flames of violence around the world. All this on top of whatever other daily stresses we are exposed to: challenges at work or in our relationships. Overexposure to technology and its alarms, alerts, pings, chimes, snaps and tic-toks.

Who would want to sit with any of this on their shoulders?

In times like these, we can be grateful for walking meditation! The very act of taking a walk itself can be liberating; Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh wrote, "We have to walk so that we have happiness, so that we can be a free person."²

Feeling the air on our skin, and noticing whatever comes along during a walk become the objects that help us intentionally "change the channel" in our brains enough that perhaps we return to our worries with fresh insights and a broader perspective.

Countless studies show this practice can reduce anxiety³ and depression, while providing benefits to the cardiovascular and immune

systems.⁴ Ferris Jabr notes in *Scientific American* that giving ourselves this kind of mental downtime "replenishes the brain's stores of attention and motivation, encourages productivity and creativity, and is essential to both achieve our highest levels of performance and simply form stable memories in everyday life," and "may even be necessary to keep one's moral compass in working order and maintain a sense of self."⁵

The alternate stimulation of each side of the body that our bipedal walking motion creates can have the same effects as therapeutic techniques designed to work with traumatic experiences like PTSD, depression, panic attacks, and ADHD. Health economist Jennifer Tennant notes that while we don't fully understand the links between the bilateral stimulation of the body and healing trauma, but that the creator of EMDR, Francine Shapiro, "was walking in a park when she realized that her eye movements were minimizing her own negative thoughts and feelings related to difficult memories."⁶

We can go even deeper into mindful walking to find profound tools to build a practice that can

² Thich Nhat Hanh on Walking Meditation. Lion's Roar. May 31, 2019. <https://www.lionsroar.com/how-to-meditate-thich-nhat-hanh-on-walking-meditation/>

³ Gotink, R.A., Hermans, K.S., Geschwind, N. et al. Mindfulness and mood stimulate each other in an upward spiral: a mindful walking intervention using experience sampling. *Mindfulness* 7, 1114–1122 (2016). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-016-0550-8>

⁴ Effects of Buddhism Walking Meditation on Depression, Functional Fitness, and Endothelium-Dependent Vasodilation in Depressed Elderly. Susaree Prakhinkit, Siriluck Suppakitorn, Hirofumi Tanaka, and Daroonwan Suksom. *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine* 2014 20:5, 411-416

⁵ Jabr, Ferris. Why Your Brain Needs More Downtime. *Scientific American*. SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN, a Division of Springer Nature America, Inc. Oct 15, 2013

⁶ Tennant, Jennifer. Walking Myself Home: How the body walks through trauma. *The Smart Set*. March 7, 2019

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meet us where we are, any time. Here are several techniques I like to use whenever I need to take a mindful walk. You can do any of them for as long as you like. Decide before you start, and pick your path with this time constraint in mind so you don't have to worry about it while you're practicing.

Walking With Fresh Eyes

In working with my own trauma, I learned that in the midst of a panic attack, simply noticing and naming the colors that I saw in the room around me helped me relax and calm down. This technique can be easily adapted to walking meditation, and is probably one of the easiest ways I know to practice mindfulness under stress.

With an intention to talk a walk with fresh eyes, make sure you're dressed so you will be comfortable outside for a little while. Imagine a route where you will feel safe.

As you step outside, imagine that you have never seen anything in color before. This invites a sense of curiosity and openness. As you move along your route, simply name to yourself the colors that you notice along the way. Variety is not important, just name what you see. Keep it simple. Your pace is not important. You can walk quickly or slowly, just don't run into anything (or anyone)!

A variation on this practice is to name a color in your mind and allow your "mind's eye" to notice all the places in your field of vision that this color shows up.

When you are distracted by motion, light, sound, thoughts, or maybe even a sense of

boredom, just notice, and return to the exercise for the time you have set aside for this activity.

Noticing the Feet

In this exercise, the sensations of our feet while we walk is the object of our attention. This can easily be done outdoors, and can be done indoors if you have enough room. Simply notice what you feel in your feet as you take each step.

You can do this exercise walking relatively quickly, if that feels good. Keep your attention on the sensation of the bottom of the foot on the ground.

As the foot touches the ground, you can make a mental note of which foot is touching down. "Right, left, right, left," becomes a pleasant rhythm that brings us into the present, away from our worries and stressors.

Thich Nhat Hanh offers counting our steps tied with our breath as a modification to this practice: "Don't try to control your breathing. Allow your lungs as much time and air as they need, and simply notice how many steps you take as your lungs fill up and how many you take as they empty, mindful of both your breath and your steps."⁷

When you notice that your mind has wandered away from the soles of the feet, be glad you noticed, and come back to the exercise.

Slow Walking

⁷ Thich Nhat Hanh on Walking Meditation. Lion's Roar. May 31, 2019. <https://www.lionsroar.com/how-to-meditate-thich-nhat-hanh-on-walking-meditation/>

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This is similar to the basic walking instructions many of us may have learned adapted from Jon Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program,⁸ which was itself adapted from Buddhist mindfulness practices.⁹

Find a relatively private, peaceful place to practice this exercise. You'll be moving pretty slowly, and you might find yourself thinking that you look weird to anyone who might see you. I most often do this exercise indoors, in a place where I can take at least 10 steps in one direction unobstructed. I live in a house that allows me also to walk in a circle around all the rooms on one floor.

Begin standing in place. Take a deep breath in. Let it out.

Gently lift a knee, raising a foot off the floor. Make the mental note "lift."

Extend the foot forward. Think "extend."

Place the heel on the ground in front of you. Think "place."

Rock your weight onto the forward foot as the rest of the foot touches the ground. Think "rock."

Repeat for the other foot, lifting it from behind you and gently swinging it past the standing foot, out in front of you.

When you get to the end of your path (if you're not walking in a circle), step your feet together, and then use the same technique but turning the first step 90 degrees, bring the feet together with the next step, and repeat this so you are now facing the opposite direction, back down the path you just came.

You can also do this exercise without labeling each phase of the step, but simply lifting the foot on the in-breath, not placing the foot back on the ground until we've reached the very top of the in-breath and have started to breath out. On the out-breath, we transfer our weight to the forward foot. Repeat.

When you are focused on the feet and walking very slowly, you can get very curious about the many sensations available to notice. The way our muscles in our feet receive the weight of our body; how they work to keep us balanced. How there are places that we can feel very easily; some areas of the foot we may not notice much going on at all. We might notice the pressure on the ball of the foot or the edge of the heel as we walk.

Whatever you notice is OK. Even if it's a little pain, or an uncomfortable feeling in the feet, or the legs, or anywhere else in the body, it's ok for now. Just notice, and come back to the exercise.

Do this for at least 10 minutes.

Walking With Peripheral Vision

When I was doing research on applying mindfulness to help improve pilot safety, I learned that when pilots are under extreme

⁸ Kabat-Zinn, Jon. Full Catastrophe Living : Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness. New York :Bantam Books, 2013. pp 114-119.

⁹ Jon Kabat-Zinn (2011) Some reflections on the origins of MBSR, skillful means, and the trouble with maps, Contemporary Buddhism, 12:1, 281-306, DOI: 10.1080/14639947.2011.564844

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stress, they can get tunnel vision; their field of vision becomes very narrow and they can't see anything other than what is at the very center of their field of vision.

My colleague AnneMarie Rossi told me she had read about an exercise adapted from a Hawaiian mindfulness practice called Hakalau, which invites us literally to practice opening our field of vision, expanding our perspective. She's a baseball fanatic, and had read that batting coaches had been using it to improve player performance.

After teaching this practice, and using it myself ever since, I can say that it's very simple, and surprisingly effective.

The basic Hakalau practice is to find a spot just above the horizon upon which we can fix our gaze. As we do this, we invite our attention to notice what is at the periphery, or edges, of our field of vision, without moving our gaze. We can notice shapes, or colors, or objects.

That's it.

Not long after I learned this practice I found myself in airports at least twice a week, flying from my home to the headquarters of the largest airline in the world, where I was teaching this practice.

I wondered what would happen if I tried using a kind of Hakalau as I walked through airports. I thought that it would feel awkward, or that I might run into someone or something. I thought that I might miss a turn on the way to my gate. Nothing of the sort happened.

Instead, I found that I could navigate my way through crowds of people going this way and that, past the kiosks and the signs, with ease. I was aware of so much more than if I was just walking in the river of people just looking at what was right in front of me. The sense of ease and fluidity surprised me.

The only distraction I encountered was when my mind perceived that someone was approaching me. I noticed an irresistible push to shift my gaze to the person's face. As soon as I saw that they were not trying to get my attention and were not going to run into me, I could easily return my attention to the objects in my peripheral vision. Not only could I turn airport time into mindfulness practice time, this practice was pretty fun.

You don't have to be in an airport to do this. Just take a walk along a familiar route, and follow your intention to notice the shapes, objects and objects in the periphery of your vision. When something distracts you, just notice (or change your course should you need to) and then come back to the exercise.

Three Channel Walking Practice

At the beginning of the pandemic, I noticed my stress levels were very high. I was worrying about things that might happen in the future: How can I stay safe? What tools do I need? What would happen to me if I got sick? Would my loved ones be ok if they got sick? Who might I pass it on to? Would my livelihood as a mindfulness instructor and coach be compromised by social distancing? Would any of my loved ones be threatened?

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This is a normal response to a dangerous situation. Our minds are primed to detect threats, and to sort through solutions to resolve or prevent them -- thank goodness!

But this kind of rumination unchecked robs us of peaceful downtime, creativity, insight, and executive function.¹⁰ We also know that constant stress over an extended period of time is as harmful to our mental and physical health as experiencing a single traumatic event like the death of a loved one.¹¹ And I was focused on these threats almost constantly.

I felt a deep need for a practice that would help calm my mind and bring it back to the present moment. Something that would give me a break from the constant worry about things that might happen in the future.

Yes, protecting myself and my loved ones from a pandemic is important, but that day was a pleasantly crisp spring day. My wife and I were both healthy, and we had the financial resources to help stay that way. Right now, everything was fine.

Realizing that our lived, present experience encompasses many separate stimuli, I decided to experiment with focusing on three different channels of my experience walking that day. I would try to keep my attention on the

sensation of my feet touching the Earth; the feeling of the cool air on my face; and on my awareness of the sounds that were coming from all around me as I walked.

To be honest, I wasn't sure that I could do it. But I did know that trying would be much more fun than thinking about coronavirus!

As I set out, I found that it was indeed possible to be aware of all three of these experiences at the same time -- but only if I walked very slowly, and there was nothing else in my field of awareness that was competing for my attention. If I started walking too fast, or if I saw someone else and started wondering if they would think I looked weird walking so slowly, one of the channels dropped out.

I would just notice, and start again. Over and over. For about a half an hour.

When I was finished, I felt deeply refreshed and calmed. I was amazed. It was just what the doctor ordered.

This exercise is best performed in a place outdoors where you can feel enveloped by sound, and free from any need to respond to anything other than your own intention. I like doing this in parks or forests where I'm not likely to encounter others, or where I can rely on other folks keeping to themselves.

Begin with the instructions for Noticing the Feet.

Once you have made a good connection with your feet, see if you can notice the sensation of whatever the temperature of the air, or the

¹⁰ Ajilchi B, Nejati V. Executive Functions in Students With Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Symptoms. *Basic Clin Neurosci*. 2017;8(3):223-232. doi:10.18869/nirp.bcn.8.3.223

¹¹ American Psychological Association. Stress effects on the body. Nov. 1, 2018, <https://www.apa.org/topics/stress/body> accessed March 7, 2021

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feeling of a breeze touching your skin, without losing the awareness of your feet moving.

Once you've got that, broaden your awareness to include the sounds that are coming to you. This can be tricky. Trying to label or make notes about what sounds you hear will likely pull you away from the other two channels of awareness.

In this exercise, the line between focused attention and awareness can get a little blurry. What helps me is to remember my intention is to pay attention to the *experience* of being aware of walking, feeling my face, and hearing the sounds around me at the same time.

Be gentle with yourself when you find that one or more of the channels have dropped. Or that your mind has wandered to judging your experience as frustrating, exciting, or whatever else comes up. In my experience, holding all three aspects of this exercise is difficult to do for very long.

But those moments of holding our awareness broadly open, experiencing our vitality and presence through the movement of our body, a connection to the fresh air, and the sounds of the birds and breezes, voices rising and falling, the bustle of life, can bring a deep, authentic appreciation of what it is to be alive.

These exercises are just some of the ways we can apply the essence of mindful walking and our intention to care for ourselves -- psychologically, physically, and spiritually -- by transforming the suffering of anxiety into a

sense of playful joy and appreciation for all of life that is present within and around us.

Finally, remember that you can just walk. You can walk with the intention to walk whenever and wherever you are walking. To allow our mind to just notice how it feels to be walking in that flowing moment of presence, wherever we are. Or, as Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, "Wherever we walk, whether it's the railway station or the supermarket, we are walking on the earth and so we are in a holy sanctuary. If we remember to walk like that, we can be nourished and find solidity with each step."¹²

¹² Thich Nhat Hanh on Walking Meditation. Lion's Roar. May 31, 2019. <https://www.lionsroar.com/how-to-meditate-thich-nhat-hanh-on-walking-meditation/>