

TROUBLESHOOTING GUIDE FOR

MINDFULNESS MEDITATION



■ FOREWORD

Do you ever find yourself telling others about the amazing benefits of meditation while you secretly struggle to practice it yourself? Do you find yourself pitching mindfulness meditation while you can't even seem to sit down with your eyes closed for 10 minutes? Weird, right?

It seems so hard for us to really ingrain mindfulness meditation in our lives. To practice as we preach. Well, good news.

There are numerous reasons for this and ways of getting ourselves out of this predicament that we will be sharing with you in this Troubleshooting Guide that you're reading.

Some people have asked me:

"Isn't it counterproductive to give people advice on their meditation practice? They might get even more lost in their thoughts by wanting to do it right and feel even worse when they fail at it."

There a sense in which this is true. But there's also a sense in which meditation is a skill and that, like with any other skill, one needs instructions and feedback to get better at it. There are also some common hurdles that you might experience when you're starting out or when you haven't practiced it in a while.

(Those who practice Transcendental Meditation for instance know how important it is to master the technique of meditation with the help of a personal instructor before you go out and practice it on your own.)

This guide will help you in overcoming those hurdles and in making your mindfulness meditation practice frustration-free, it will also help you in helping other people with their practice.

If you are a practitioner and you're serious about helping your clients, students or colleagues with mindfulness and meditation, there's an offer we would like to make you at the end of this manual.

But let's first take a deep dive together...

■ BACKGROUND

Even though clients can be convinced that meditation has important benefits, integrating meditation in their daily life is often a challenging task. Meditation can be boring or frustrating. It can cause physical discomfort, and it may be difficult to fit in a busy schedule. This guide was designed to tackle the most common challenges in cultivating a meditation practice.

This guide addresses the problems with boredom, restlessness, sleepiness, breath control, low levels of enthusiasm, distractions, unusual experiences, tension, impatience, physical discomfort, and unhelpful thoughts.

▶ BOREDOM

Meditation is often perceived as daunting, as a mundane task that is a waste of time. Our fast-paced society where numerous stimuli draw our attention influences this false perception. Phone alerts, overwhelming inboxes, and television advertisements take us away from embracing the here and now. The more we are conditioned to respond instantly to all the distractions in our lives, the more easily bored we become when deprived of these stimuli.

When the sense of boredom arises, the meditator is not fully mindful and in the moment. Boredom causes the mind to wander. A wandering mind commonly focuses on the past or future. It is important to bring attention to the fact that we are breathing. Whenever during meditation the mind slips into boredom or starts wandering, we have the opportunity to gently practice the following techniques to help bring our attention back to the moment:

1. *Acknowledge the Feeling*
When the feeling of boredom arises, accept that it has occurred and let it be.
2. *Awareness of Thoughts*
Become aware of the thoughts that relate to boredom, which include:
 - “What’s the point of doing this?”
 - “When is it over?”
 - “I can’t be bothered.”
 - “This is a waste of time.”
3. *Become Interested in the Sensation*
Allow the curiosity of where the boredom came from, where it is going, where it is felt in the body, and how it is guiding behavior (e.g., the urge to fall asleep).
4. *Focus on the Breath*
Notice the breath and observe the change in boredom.

5. *Take a Step Back*

There is a difference between being bored as compared to simply observing it. Take this third-party perspective and observe the boredom within you as if it were separate from the self.

▶ **RESTLESSNESS**

While similar to boredom, restlessness is different in that it is associated with high energy levels and a common mental state. Day to day activities cause the mind to race. Meditation helps us diffuse this excessive energy. Try the following two tips to address restlessness:

- *Begin with Mindful Movement*
To calm the mind for a seated or lying down meditation, begin with movement of some kind (e.g., mindful walking or mindful yoga).
- *Observe without Reaction*
Observe the feeling without reaction. Notice what the mind wants, but continue to sit. This practice disciplines the mind. You are in control of your mind, not the other way around.

▶ **SLEEPINESS**

Becoming fatigued during meditation is a normal occurrence. The urge to sleep is a clever way for the mind to avoid practicing. Meditation is meant to heighten awareness while sleep allows awareness to rest at a low level of consciousness. Normal daily consciousness is somewhere between sleep and meditation. Below are some tips that help the mind stay awake during meditation:

- *Get Enough Sleep*
Getting enough sleep will prevent increased drowsiness during meditation.
- *Have a Small Snack, Not a Meal*
If hunger arises pre-meditation, have a small snack instead of a full meal
- *Intermittent Standing Postures*
Include small breaks from sitting or lying down by practicing mindful stretching, mindful yoga, mindful tai chi, or mindful walking.
- *Time of Day*
Experiment with meditating at various times of the day. Some people are more alert in the mornings while other people are more alert in the evenings. Experiment to find the time that is right.
- *Eyes Open*
Opening the eyes during meditation can help ground us and stay alert, but adopt a mindful-gaze. Look through the eyes with a relaxed gaze to avoid

being distracted by the surroundings.

- *Recognize the Feeling*
The act of noticing drowsiness can help the mind refocus. Adopt the observing state of mind.

► CONTROLLING THE BREATH

In some cases, focusing on the breath can cause the breathing to become uncomfortable. In its mildest forms, one might feel a sense of stiffness or awkwardness about the breathing, but in more extreme cases, hyperventilation and/or dizziness may occur. This is often caused by an attempt to control the automatic process of breathing. Rather than trying to control the breath, mindfulness meditation is about observing the breath without attempting to change it. You can deal with this problem in three ways:

1. You may try to focus a bit more on the exhale rather than inhale. Notice the brief pause that takes place directly after the exhale. Instead of breathing in again, breathe in when your body feels ready for the breath. Breathe as shallowly or deeply as your body seems to need. Notice how the breath returns to your body again. When pausing after each inhale, the air goes out again automatically.
2. Try to inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Repeat five to ten times. This can ease breathing, as the automatic process of breathing takes over again.
3. In some cases, trying to control the breath results from the belief that one must perform the meditation in the “right” way. Expectancies, like “becoming relaxed” or “clearing the mind”, can cause a form of rigid concentration that is in sharp contrast to the open and kind awareness that meditation aims to cultivate. If this is the case, try to lighten up by being playful in meditation.
4. Remember that meditation is not about achieving particular results. It is about being in the present moment with a kind and open attitude.

► LOW LEVELS OF ENTHUSIAM

Like any routine, the act of performing the same meditation every day or every week becomes mundane. Making a habit of practicing meditation is very helpful, but becomes less effective if done so in a mechanical way. If there is a lack of purpose to the meditation, or if there is a pattern of falling asleep, then recharging enthusiasm can be helpful. Use the following ideas to recharge your enthusiasm:

- *Mix it Up*
Choose a different meditation practice for each time you meditate.

- *Find Companions*
Join a meditation group.
- *Spice it Up*
Attend a retreat, course, or workshop.
- *Embody your Practice*
Use different meditation postures- standing, walking, sitting, lying down.
- *Step out of the Ordinary*
Change the time of the day that you meditate.
- *Dive in and Submerge Yourself*
Have a full day of mindfulness. Treat yourself to a full day of practice, from the time your eyes open to the time that they close at night. Let the day unfold as it will, without the need to control it or have a set agenda. This can be a refreshing way to spend a day of relaxation and attend to what you feel like doing in the moment.
- *Get Educated*
Contact a mindfulness meditation teacher for advice.
- *Seek Guidance*
Find a mentor with whom you will practice and discuss meditation.

While enthusiasm for the practice may fluctuate, continue to practice to reap the long-term benefits. You may be surprised with what you can discover through the commitment.

► DISTRACTIONS

Internal and external distractions are a natural part of meditating. Distractions can certainly be irritating, but they provide an opportunity to observe the feeling and to be okay with the fact that the feeling is there. When noticed, we can bring the feeling into the practice and lovingly guide our attention back to what we are focusing on. If we do not notice feelings of distraction and our reaction of frustration, we might be unaware of this harmful reaction forming a mind pattern. By quickly noticing instead of reacting, the mind can act against this pattern formation. Expect that frustration will arise and focus on coping or leaning into it instead of reacting or running away. To reduce the probability of both external and internal distractions, the following preventive measures can be taken:

External

- Turn off all electronics: phones, computers, televisions, anything that can buzz or beep.
- Ask everyone in the household to respect your quiet time.
- Reducing distractions can be very helpful when practicing. If distractions still arise, remember that it's okay. Incorporate the distraction into the meditation

by simply noticing whatever sounds the distraction creates.

Internal

- Dealing with an urgent or important matter before meditating can allow the mind to be at ease.
- Act as though thoughts are separate from the self. You can do this by experiencing the thoughts in the mind like clouds moving through the sky. Notice what this separation from thoughts feels like.
- Embrace the thoughts you have as if they were guests to your house party. Welcome them and notice how you feel.
- Be patient with yourself as the mind thinks. Say “thinking” or “planning” to yourself when a thought occurs. Then gently bring attention back to the focus of the meditation.

Remember that distractions provide opportunities to take action and bring the attention back to the objects of your focus. In other words, distractions provide opportunities to strengthen your “attention muscle”. Looking at distractions from this point of view can help diminish a negative attitude towards them.

► UNUSUAL EXPERIENCES

Meditation is experiencing what is happening right now without attachment to any outcome or experience. Happiness, pain, frustration, anger, all these things come and go like a breeze. The same holds true for odd or unexpected experiences. Meditation taps into the unconscious mind, which unlocks a realm of possible thoughts and experiences. Whatever experiences arise, always come back to the now by focusing on the breath, without judging or analyzing them. This can be very challenging at times, as the unknown can stimulate anxiety or specific fears. If the fear occupies your attention by tapping deep into your feelings, calmly guide yourself out of the meditation and come back to it at a later time.

Another technique helpful in these kinds of situations involves guiding your mind towards different sensations that may currently be imperceptible in this exact moment. For instance, guide yourself to the sounds you hear or the sensations you feel in different body parts (e.g., hands, feet, the tip of your nose).

► TENSION

Relaxing during meditation means accepting the tension, stress, or anxiety instead of fighting or avoiding it. The following tips can be used to accept tension, stress, or anxiety:

1. *Awareness*
Become aware of where the tension, stress, or anxiety is being held in the body.
2. *Observing & Naming*
Name a color, shape, size, and texture of the tension, stress, or anxiety that you feel.
3. *Curiosity*
Be curious and see what the feeling is trying to tell you. This can be anything. There isn't a right answer.
4. *Breathe*
Breathe into the tension, stress, or anxiety. Let yourself feel it deeply, as it is, without pushing it away. Fighting it will only make it come back ten times stronger. Acceptance will allow it to pass right through you.

► IMPATIENCE

Patience is not something people possess naturally; it is not a black and white concept. Instead, it is like any skill or muscle; it needs to be practiced and worked to be built and strengthened. If impatience arises during meditation and the mind is able to observe the impatience without reacting while subsequently moving on to the next experience, the mind is training the "patience muscle." When working out, muscles get sore, but as they get stronger, they grow. The same holds true for patience. While there may be pain, over time, the muscle will be built and you will be able to quickly respond when impatience arises.

Many beginning meditators expect to get immediate results from the practice of meditating. It takes time, effort, and practice to get results. Decide on how long and when you're going to practice and incorporate a meditation schedule into your daily routine. Stick to the routine while switching the focus of meditation.

► PHYSICAL DISCOMFORT

The body may feel aches and pains when sitting for long periods of time. To help with the physical discomfort, below are some options with which you can experiment:

- *Comfortable Discomfort*
Sit on a pillow on the ground and try cushions of different sizes. If seated in a chair, place a cushion behind the back to release pressure or tension.
- *Mindful movement*
Stretch the legs by mindfully standing up, stretching, and sitting back down.
- *Elevate*
While sitting on a chair, raise the legs by placing them on another chair or on

- a pile of books.
- *Centered Balance*
If sitting in an angle, lean forwards and backwards to find the midpoint.
- *Posture Perfect*
Have a friend, family member, or mentor check your posture to see if your back is straight.
- *Relaxed Posture*
Sit straight without straining.

► DIFFICULT EMOTIONS

For many, mindfulness is a last resort for handling difficult emotions, which include depression, anxiety, work-related stress, and burnout. To cope with these emotions, mindfulness uses the process of allowing emotions to be there and letting them go instead of fighting them. While often described as a simple concept, mindfulness can be very challenging. However, once positive outcomes are experienced, trust in the process builds and a new way of coping emerges. When difficult emotions arise, the following exercise can be helpful:

1. Sit straight without straining your back.
2. Feel whatever emotion you are feeling at the moment.
3. What emotions are you experiencing? What thoughts are going through your mind?
4. Now try to focus on your body. Often, emotions are represented in our body. What feelings arise in your body? Simply observe what you feel in your body. Maybe you feel tension or other sensations. Perhaps you experience a tightness in your stomach, around your heart or neck. Whatever you experience, try to stay with the sensations and be gentle on yourself.
5. You can use the breath as a vehicle to do this. Direct your awareness to the part of the body where those sensations are strongest. 'Breathe into' that part of the body on the in-breath.
6. Rather than pushing this experience away, try to let it be. In silence, you can say to the feeling: "It is ok, you are allowed to be here." "Whatever it is, it's OK. Let me feel it." See what happens if you allow yourself to experience whatever you experience in this moment. Just stay aware of these bodily sensations and your relationship with them, breathe with them, accept them, and let them be. You can repeat "It's OK. Whatever it is, it's OK."
7. Perhaps you notice that the feeling gets more intense. Maybe the feeling will stay the same or diminish. It may also "move" in your body. For instance, at first, you may notice a sensation in your chest. After a while, the sensation is more strongly felt in your belly. Whatever happens, it is ok. Simply allow it to be. Observe what happens. Remember to stay with the experience with

- curiosity and kindness. You are experiencing sensations without reacting.
8. Often, thoughts can distract us from the present moment experience. That is ok. Simply notice when your attention is focused on thoughts and then kindly direct your attention back to your experience in the present moment.
 9. Continue to discover what happens within your body and mind without tightening or resisting it. You can try to hold both the sensations in your body and the sense of the breath in your awareness, breathing with the sensations. When you notice that the bodily sensations are no longer requiring your attention, simply return fully to your breath and continue with that as your primary object of attention.

By focusing on the emotion, it may feel very intense and overwhelming at first. This is okay. Try not to run away, but instead, stick with it. Over time, the emotion will change and you may discover how the emotion is not set in stone, as you may have once believed.

► UNHELPFUL THOUGHTS

We all have limiting beliefs that prevent us from taking action to do or get what we desire. Similarly, some people have unhelpful attitudes, which prevent them from meditating. On the next page is a list of preventative thoughts with commentary to diffuse the belief.

- *“I can’t stop my thoughts”*
Meditation does not require you to stop your thoughts; instead, it is about increasing awareness of thought with a third-party (detached) perspective.
- *“I can’t sit still”*
Meditation does not require stillness. Strategies have been developed to incorporate movement into meditation.
- *“I don’t have the patience”*
Try practicing for at least a month to build patience. Patience comes with practice.
- *“This isn’t for me”*
How do you know? Is once or twice enough of a try? Try practicing consistently for at least a month before determining if it is right for you.
- *“This isn’t helping me”*
Take note of the thought and go back to the breath. Remember, to get the benefits, it takes time.
- *“This is a waste of my time”*
Is it? Many studies have reported the positive benefits of mindfulness meditation. With the right mindset, you can become aware of the benefits, which prove that it is not a waste of time. Once again, to gain results, mindfulness takes time.

■ DO YOU WANT TO TEACH MINDFULNESS?

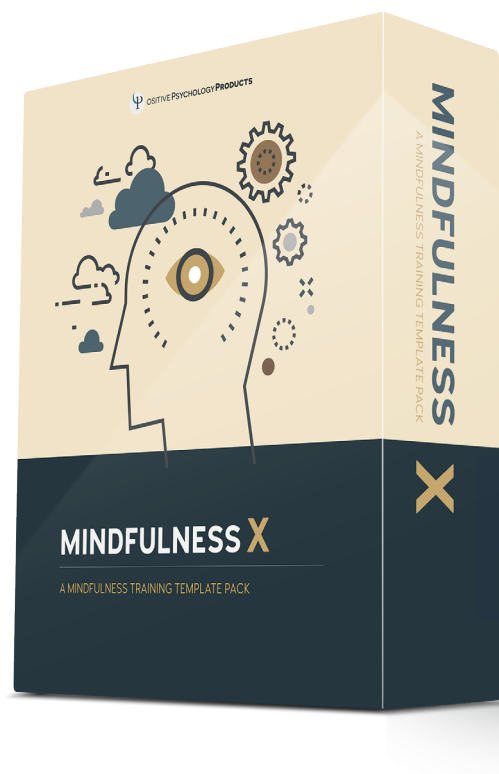
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