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**Mindfulness Practices for Women's Midlife Transition**

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May 2, 2021

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### **Mindfulness Practices for Women's Midlife Transition**

Every major period of life brings a unique set of opportunities and challenges. Midlife—the years between 40 and 60—remains a mostly uncharted territory in the field of human development. This critical stage of life has received relatively little attention from research, which has mostly focused on studying childhood, adolescence, or old age. There are some practical reasons for the limited work on women's midlife. The most common reason for researchers not to include middle-aged women is that it can be challenging to recruit them for research, given their busy lifestyles with multiple demands (Lachman et al., 2015). It is therefore possible that current assumptions about midlife are based on inaccurate and preconceived ideas that dictate how millions of people plan their lives. Women of middle age currently comprise over 17 % of the total population (Howden & Meyer, 2010) and this percentage is expected to increase. As such, it is essential that we seek a better understanding of middle age and what may or may not be beneficial during this stage of life.

The purpose of this work is to present a supportive academic rationale paper for a creative project consisting of a book with a journal component on mindfulness practices for finding ease and grace in the midst of midlife's changes. This paper is based in part on existing research in the field of mindfulness in relation to stress and overall well-being. It is my hope to make the benefits of mindfulness practices accessible to women who are able and inclined to explore mindfulness as a supportive tool during this important phase of life.

I begin this paper with a definition of midlife and a review of existing research on women's midlife experiences, particularly their challenging aspects. I then present a detailed definition of mindfulness, its history, and the research on the benefits of these practices for modern life. Deeper attention is given to studies that focus on informal mindfulness practices,

which are often easier to adopt and adhere to. Finally, the paper introduces foundational mindfulness concepts and practices that I consider to be most relevant or meaningful to women's experiences of midlife: mindful awareness, mindful intentionality, mindful presence, mindful gratitude, mindful movement, mindful communication, mindful eating, mindful awareness of impermanence, mindful compassion, and mindful acceptance and equanimity.

Because women are extremely diverse in their experiences, it is challenging to agree on a universal definition of "womanhood". We live in a world where gender roles are constantly changing and where gender and biological sex are understood as two distinct realms. As such, society no longer makes sense of what it means to be a woman through a set of physical characteristics, personality traits, ethnic origin, or fixed societal roles. As we continue to evolve toward a more open society where fewer boundaries dictate how a woman can identify, work, have a family, or live a free life, a crucial question remains unanswered: What does it mean to be a woman? This paper does not attempt to answer such an intricate question, but to provide an exploration of the challenges that some women may face during midlife transition and to offer mindfulness tools to support them during this stage of life.

My own perception of midlife transition is that it is an undoubtedly challenging time. Like many other middle-aged women, I am immersed in the incessant flow of family activities and obligations as a mother, a caregiver of aging parents, a supportive wife, and the main household manager. Moreover, following a period of increased self-reflection, I have been pursuing a career and attaining personal goals that were put on hold for over a decade to prioritize the many demands of motherhood. As a result, I now find myself in a very demanding position between family and career. One of the most helpful and supportive tools during this

challenging time of my life is my daily mindfulness practice. Through this project, I hope to share these beneficial tools with other women who may be experiencing midlife in a similar way.

### **Midlife and Well-being**

How do the demands of midlife affect women's well-being? The exploration of this question requires an understanding of the concept of well-being. There are multiple possible definitions and approaches to the investigation of well-being, a continuously challenging concept to clarify and measure due to its subjective nature (Dodge et al., 2012). Limited research to date has suggested two different but related factors of subjective well-being and psychological well-being (Linley et al. 2009). Subjective well-being includes a non-cognitive component of the balance between positive and negative affect, along with a cognitive component of beliefs about one's life satisfaction. Psychological well-being is conceptualized as having six components, including positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, self-acceptance, purpose in life and personal growth (Linley et al., 2009). Research has suggested that there are high positive correlations between happiness, psychological, and health domains of quality of life, life satisfaction, and positive affect (Medvedev & Landhuis, 2018). Social and environmental domains of quality of life are poor predictors of happiness and subjective well-being after controlling for psychological quality of life (Medvedev & Landhuis, 2018). This paper is based on my own conceptualization and experience of well-being as the presence of positive emotions and moods, the absence of negative emotions, and an overall satisfaction with life and its meaning (Dodge et al., 2012). Well-being also reflects optimum levels of mental, physical, and social functioning, with an overall positive perception of health.

Although a growing body of research has emerged on the relationship between stress, health, and well-being, there seems to be a gap in the literature regarding the effects of stress

among women during midlife. Past research has mostly focused on the physiological impact of menopause on health, with less attention given to the emotional and psychological impacts of the overall midlife experience on happiness and quality of life (Dennerstein et al., 1994).

Studies show mixed findings on the effects of midlife on women's well-being. Much of the existing research presented evidence to suggest that midlife is a significantly challenging time of tumultuous transition for most women (Jensen, 2018). On the other hand, a substantial number of studies have suggested that the idea of a challenging midlife has been largely deflated (Freund et al, 2009) and that midlife transition is an overall positive phase of life for many women. This disjunction between researchers' opposing views makes the subject of women's midlife transition a challenging, yet fascinating, topic to explore.

Despite the previously mentioned differences, there is consistent agreement throughout the literature that some hallmarks of midlife can bring deep dissatisfaction to many women (Drimalla, 2020), all of which can cause a waning of well-being. The most frequently reported challenge is the management of multiple stressors and responsibilities attributable to many women's numerous roles. Research by Woods and Mitchell (2005) revealed that a significant number of women identified the most demanding aspects of midlife to be shifts in family relations, reassessment of work-life balance, search for lost identity, maintenance of financial resources, and management of multidimensional stressors. During midlife, many women may be juggling the demands of being married or partnered, having children who may be transitioning out of the home, having job responsibilities, managing households with little additional help, and caring for aging parents. Some middle-aged women are confronted with co-occurring challenges like declining health, work-related issues, experiences of loss, and financial setbacks (Thomas et al., 2018). Family challenges include difficulties with adolescent children, separation from a



partner, and eldercare. Work problems include difficulty finding a job, high workplace demands, and changes in work-life balance. Many middle-aged women also report frustrated goal attainment, such as the inability to pursue academic endeavors or meaningful careers (Thomas et al., 2018). Financial stresses, such as difficulty paying college tuition for a child, are another common source of stress among middle-aged women. Kenney (2000) looked at stressors reported by 299 women aged 18–66 and confirmed findings that midlife women experience more challenges than women in other stages of life and that midlife women identified roles involving family, work, and aging parents as the main sources of stress. Previous research also showed that positive affect—a measure of positive mood and outlook—was significantly lower in midlife women than in younger or older women, with family stress and work-related stress again as the main causes of the observed dissatisfaction (Mroczek & Kolarz, 1998).

Another challenging aspect of women's midlife is the menopausal transition, a period beginning in the early 40s that marks reproductive decline, shifts in estrogen levels, and the cessation of the menstrual cycle. This period of transition can bring vasomotor and genitourinary symptoms, disrupted sleep cycles, mood dysregulation, and fluctuations of sex drive, all of which contribute to an increase in stress and a decrease in well-being (Thomas et al., 2018). The menopausal transition is experienced by 1.5 million women in the United States each year (Santoro et al., 2016). During perimenopause, some women may develop depressive symptoms and cognitive difficulties, which are more subtly and inconsistently linked to hormones (Santoro et al., 2016). Depression and cognitive impairment can be burdensome for some women and worsen the effects of medical illness. Interestingly, Santoro et al. (2016) found that although premenopausal symptoms were associated with greater perceived stress, the menopausal transition itself did not impact perceived stress (Santoro et al., 2016). Moreover, according to the study by

Santoro et al. (2016), it seems that the psychological factors of the menopause appear more strongly linked to well-being than physiological factors, such as menopausal stage and hot flush frequency. Research analyses have revealed few differences in well-being according to ethnicity, level of education, and work status (Jensen, 2018).

Highlighting the impact of education on the experience of menopause, one study looked at the psychological effects and health challenges of menopausal symptoms in middle-aged women in a rural community of Nigeria (Ide et al., 2014). Utilizing a random sampling technique, one hundred and twenty middle-aged women ( $N=120$ ) ages 40 to 55 years were recruited for the study. A semi structured questionnaire was used to obtain data from participants. Result showed that women experience various psychological challenges: 77 (64.2%) expressed feelings of sadness, and 68 (56.7%) felt easily irritated. Health challenges included hot flashes, night sweats, fatigue, low libido, dizziness, weight gain, irregular menstrual period, arthritis and heart problems. This study highlighted the need for women to be educated about this period of life. Likewise, health care providers should communicate optimally, as well as support and empower middle-aged women through this period of transition.

An important aspect of women's middle age transition is the physical change experienced during this time. Hofmeyer (2017) conducted a qualitative study of 1,849 middle-aged women to capture the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes that women have about their changing bodies and the experience of aging. An online open-ended question survey revealed four primary concerning themes: (a) the physical and psychological experience of aging; (b) the injustices, inequities, and challenges of aging; (c) the importance of self-care; and (d) a plea for recognition of the need to maintain a contributory role in society. Results highlighted the complexities of women's psychological and physical aspects of aging, and researchers encouraged further study of these

important topics in this growing population. Of particular concern is the increase in the number of middle-aged women presenting for inpatient eating disorder treatment (Ackard et al., 2013) and a rise in the prevalence of obesity in women over 50 (Flegal et al., 2010; Flegal et al., 2012). However, the understanding of women's experiences of body image in relation to the aging process is limited (Grogan, 2006), given that most of the previous body image research has focused on younger women and on their complex issues with weight and size. A better understanding of middle-aged women's experiences relative to body image and aging is essential in order to address these growing concerns. Saucier (2011) also investigated issues confronted by aging women in relation to ageism and body image and found that society played a major role in influencing women's perceptions of their bodies. The study suggested that, although body image is evident throughout most women's lives, women entering middle age are more affected by these concerns. Moreover, the results of the study strengthen the theory that a woman's realization that she no longer fits society's standards of youth and beauty can also cause low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety.

Despite the overall consensus among studies that highlight the challenges of women's midlife, some researchers have questioned the persistent cultural narrative provided for women at midlife, which they have claimed is either medical and menopause-oriented, or socially disparaging. Some researchers have claimed that without alternative portrayals, these disheartening stereotypes can become reality. McQuaide (1998) investigated the midlife experiences of a group of white women in the New York City area and identified factors related to successful negotiation of midlife transition. Although midlife was a challenging stage of life, 72.5 % of the women described themselves as happy or very happy. Factors predicting well-being at midlife included an annual family income above \$30,000, a confidante or a group of

women friends, good health, high self-esteem, aspirations for the future, a positive outlook on life, positive midlife role models, and positive feelings about one's appearance. Supporting those findings, Freund (2000) interviewed older people to determine what age they would most like to be again, and the majority of participants indicated their mid 40s to be their ideal age. Likewise, Jensen (2018) investigated diverse aspects of midlife well-being, including sources of enjoyment and stress. In a national sample of 834 American men and women ages 40–60, overall well-being was high. Most participants reported that time of life as being exciting (71%), a time of freedom (71%), and a time of possibilities (77%). They also viewed themselves as being in a time of life for self-realization (56%) and self-inquiry (55%). Despite those positive findings, the research also revealed challenges, with 65% of people who assessed this time of their lives as stressful, and many others who agreed that they often feel anxious (39%), depressed (25%), or that life is not going well (27%). In this case, regression analyses revealed no notable variations in well-being by gender, ethnicity, educational attainment, or relationship status. Overall, these studies suggest that well-being is generally high among Americans in midlife, even as it co-occurs with stress and other mental health challenges.

Notably, data on midlife and wellbeing during midlife is particularly limited from developing countries, where health improvements during this stage of life are critical to enhancing life expectancy and reducing disability (Harlow & Derby, 2015). Context-specific health risks that are more common in these settings, such as the impact of late childbirth and long-term malnutrition, should be taken into consideration for evaluation. Moreover, data regarding racial and ethnic differences in midlife health are lacking, as is the exploration of whether trajectories of change during the menopause transition differ among different demographics (Harlow & Derby, 2015). It is also important to note that cultures differ in their

levels of well-being and, to some extent, in the kinds of subjective and psychological well-being they value most (Diener et al., 2018). Furthermore, research on midlife lacks data to reflect both universal and unique predictors of subjective well-being in various societies (Diener et al., 2018). Future studies should also explore the stress experience for women by racial/ethnic identity and demographics. Given that this project is inspired by my own experience as a middle class white woman living in the Boston suburbs, the content may be more appealing to women of similar background.

Research focusing on transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) people is also limited. Although TGNC people have become more visible in the public consciousness in recent years, research is still needed to understand their unique set of experiences and challenges related to midlife and aging. Transgender and gender nonconforming individuals who are currently at midlife are more likely to be single and childfree, live alone, and/or have conflicted relationships with their family of origin than heterosexuals (Hajek, 2014; Wilkens, 2015). All of these factors can lead to a sense of isolation and lack of belonging. Another essential component of understanding the TGNC midlife experience is the prevalence and effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) (Anderson & Blosnich, 2013). Adverse childhood experiences include physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; neglect; exposure to domestic violence; familial mental illness; substance abuse; and incarceration and are linked to problems later in life, including risky health behaviors, chronic disease, and mental health disorders (Petrucci & Berman, 2019). The prevalence and effects of adverse childhood experiences may help explain TGNC health disparities in midlife, particularly depression, anxiety, and suicidal behavior (Tankersley et al., 2021). In general, the body of research dedicated to the TGNC experience is limited in number

and scope, and the number of studies dedicated to the TGNC midlife experience is diluted because it is often combined with earlier and later adulthood cohorts (Hajek, 2014).

In summary, understanding how middle-aged women cope with the demands of multiple roles can shed light on ways to enhance development throughout life. More research is needed to identify early warning signs for poor mental or physical health, which may possibly delay, minimize, or even prevent some of the issues in biological, psychological, and social functioning that usually occur later in life. Closing the research gap on women's midlife will also contribute to a better understanding of this largely understudied age period and inform possible interventions to promote their well-being. This can also have important implications for younger and older women who can gain valuable information regarding their own welfare.

### **Mindfulness**

Having provided an overview of the challenges related to midlife, I turn now to mindfulness as one method to navigate the challenges experienced by women during this time of their lives. Mindfulness is known in the Western world through mindfulness programs that involve different formal and informal practices. For the purposes of this paper, I will focus mostly on informal daily mindfulness practices. The following question guides this section: Is it possible that mindfulness practices—and the resulting awareness, acceptance, and equanimity—can encourage wisdom and improve happiness and quality of life during midlife? By offering an investigation of the mechanism of such practices, I hope to present a convincing theory that mindfulness and well-being are interdependent and vital ingredients for a meaningful midlife experience.

In the book *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, mindfulness meditation expert and author Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) stated, “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on

purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (p. 4). Christina Fieldman (2012), a leading senior meditation teacher, defined mindfulness as the willingness and capacity to be equally present with all events and experiences with discernment, curiosity, and kindness.

Mindfulness has been practiced and cultivated for thousands of years in various philosophies and religions. In the last decade, however, a more secular approach to mindfulness has brought the practice to many areas of day-to-day life. Mindfulness can be thought of as a state, a trait, or a practice. We can have a moment of mindfulness (state), or an overall individual “baseline” of mindfulness (trait), or a formal mindfulness practice that can be implemented through seated meditation, mindful walking, mindful eating, or other techniques (practice). Mindfulness is a process of deliberate, open, and nonjudgmental awareness. It involves benevolent qualities of awareness of the present moment with curiosity, kindness, and flexibility.

Existing empirical research has suggested that mindfulness-based interventions may reduce the effect of stress, improve psychological well-being, increase positive affect, ease anxiety and depression, prevent recurrence of major depressive disorder or substance abuse, and improve immune function in adults (Astin, 1997; Baer, 2003; Davidson et al., 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Lazar, 2005; Shapiro et al., 1998; Speca et al., 2000; Williams et al., 2001; Witkiewitz et al., 2005). Studies have shown that mindfulness-based interventions can strengthen interpersonal relations and stress-coping mechanism among couples (Carson et al. 2004, 2006). Moreover, mindfulness practices can improve metacognitive awareness for previously depressed adults (Ma & Teasdale, 2004; Teasdale et al., 2002), and enhance parenting satisfaction (Singh et al. 2006). Additional studies indicated that increased mindfulness is related to improved self-regulation and mental health (Baer et al., 2004, 2006, 2008; Brown & Ryan 2003, 2004; Brown et al., 2007a, 2007b). Particularly relevant to this study, research by Frisvold et al. (2011) concluded that the

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program may be a useful intervention for nurses in midlife to successfully handle stress and to improve their quality of life. Researchers conducted a cross-sectional study of 1744 women aged 40–65 and concluded that mindfulness may mitigate menopausal symptoms among midlife women (Sood et al., 2018). Although further studies are needed, these findings suggest that mindfulness-based interventions targeting women during midlife may enhance their ability to cope with the stressors of this transitional time.

When hearing about mindfulness, many people conjure up images of lengthy silent sitting meditation. While formal sitting meditation is one way of practicing mindfulness, there are other ways to embrace mindfulness in daily lives. Some studies have focused on investigating the benefits of short, informal mindfulness practices that are easier to adopt and adhere to. Although there are no widely agreed upon definitions of formal and informal mindfulness, formal mindfulness practices can be considered to take place when practitioners intentionally set aside time to engage in mindfulness meditation practices such as body scans, sitting meditations, and mindful movement (Birtwell et al. 2018). According to Birtwell et al., informal mindfulness practice involves infusing mindfulness into existing routines through engaging in mindful moments and bringing mindful awareness to everyday activities, such as washing dishes, walking in nature, communicating with others, showering, driving, parenting, exercising, practicing self-compassion, and breathing.

Most formal mindfulness practices can be adapted into informal practices for everyday mindfulness. Daily activities—when approached with intentionality and awareness—may enhance the state of mindfulness. Birtwell et al. (2019) investigated the associations between formal and informal mindfulness practices and well-being. In a cross-sectional study, 218 participants who were actively practicing mindfulness or had practiced in the past completed an



online survey about how they first began to practice mindfulness, difficulties and supportive factors for continuing the practice, current well-being, and psychological flexibility. The results suggest that frequency of informal mindfulness is more important for well-being and psychological flexibility than frequency or duration of formal mindfulness practice. Hanley (2015) explored the effects of using dishwashing, an everyday activity, as a mindfulness practice. Despite the brevity of both the mindfulness instruction and the dishwashing task (approximately 6 minutes), results show that mindfully washing dishes is positively associated with state mindfulness, promoted elements of positive affect, and decreased elements of negative affect. The effects of informal practice were most evident in the curiosity aspect of state mindfulness. The study results suggest that daily activities, when approached with intentionality and awareness, may increase the state of mindfulness. Brief mindfulness practices have also been found to immediately affect emotion, mood, stress, and anxiety in a short period of time. For example, Mohan et al. (2011) found that a 20-minute meditation session significantly lowered stress responses. Along those lines, Berghoff (2017) suggested that 10 minutes of daily practice had a similar effect to 20 minutes in decreasing stress, which may encourage and enhance adherence to mindfulness programs. Research has continued to accommodate the needs of people who aspire to engage with mindfulness interventions and practices. Examples of 5-minute mindfulness manipulations are seen throughout the literature as ways to improve well-being, such as decreasing heart rate and negative affect (Campbell-Sills, 2006) and increase socio-cognitive functioning and empathetic concern (Tan et al., 2014). More recent research has highlighted the key role of informal mindfulness in developing the ability to pay attention to internal and external experiences. Studies found that the frequency of informal practice predicted

the observing facet of mindfulness as measured by the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire (Cebolla et al. 2017).

These examples of researched informal mindfulness practices offer a promising movement toward more time-effective and manageable implementations that are comprehensive and realistic applications for different lifestyles. It is important to note that these findings on short and easy practices are simple implementations of longer and more demanding mindfulness programs. As with other research, there was a wide range of limitations in the studies presented in this literature review. Small sampling, not rigorous enough data collection, and potential biases suggest that more research is needed about the benefits of formal and informal mindfulness practices during women's midlife transition. Nevertheless, it is highly promising to learn that positive findings on the benefits of mindfulness were replicated in multiple studies.

### **Discussion**

In this section, I respond to the lack of research about mindfulness practices during women's midlife transition and build from the positive results of mindfulness identified in the research to offer a creative project. This creative project offers a way for me to share the benefits of mindfulness practices with other women who may be experiencing the common ups and downs of midlife transition. The project consists of a concise book that explores the main aspects of mindfulness as they pertain to everyday life. The language is intended to be friendly and informal, just like the mindfulness practices offered throughout the book. A portion of the book is dedicated to journal-writing for self-awareness. There will be daily prompts chosen for the purpose of expanding and enhancing the introspective journey during the writing experience. The name of the book will be "Mindful Midlife for Women: Practices for Finding Ease and Grace in the Midst of Change." Important to note in relation to positionality is that my project

may have been influenced by my own interest and work in the mindfulness field. Through my research, I have come to believe that mindfulness practices have the potential to enhance women's well-being during midlife. While this creative project is informed and shaped by academic and scientific literature, it is possible that my values, biases, and assumptions regarding mindfulness practices may have influenced how I interpreted the research. Moreover, my own midlife experience could have shaped my review and interpretation of the research. Through reflexivity and mindful awareness, I believe I was able to acknowledge the subtle influence of my own experiences and feelings as critical elements of the research process. It is my hope that this paper reflects as unbiased and objective position as possible.

Given that a significant portion of the book described in this rationale paper is dedicated to journal-writing for self-awareness, I would like to present existing research, although limited, on the benefits of journaling. The act of journaling is a mindfulness practice per se, as it invites the mind to be fully present with the writing experience (Baldwin, 2007). Mindful journaling, an area of research that has received limited exploration, could be described as a form of contemplative writing that allows self-reflection on personal emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. Mindful journaling also offers the opportunity to consider particular events from multiple perspectives. According to Dr. James Pennebaker (1998), a psychologist and leading expert in the field of Expressive Writing, journaling strengthens immune cells called T-lymphocytes and is associated with drops in depression and anxiety and increases in positive mood, social engagement, and quality of close relationships. Pennebaker ascertained that writing about stressful events helps individuals find closure with those events, acting as a stress management tool, thus reducing the impact of these stressors on physical health. Overall, journaling and expressive writing have been found to boost mood/affect, enhance a sense of well-being, reduce

symptoms of depression, reduce intrusion and avoidance symptoms post-trauma, and improve working memory (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). Further, journaling can help us shift from a negative mindset to a more positive one, especially about ourselves (Robinson, 2017). Research by avid journal writer and journalist Michael Grothaus (2015) has noted that there are studies suggesting journaling can strengthen the immune system, drop blood pressure, improve sleep, and generally enhance health. In 2016, Dr. Lynda Dimitroff studied the effects journaling had on the degree of compassion satisfaction, burnout, and trauma and compassion fatigue present in registered nurses. Improvements in all areas were statistically significant, and three positive themes were identified among participants: (a) journaling allowed them to express their deeper feelings, (b) journaling helped them to articulate and understand their feelings, and (c) journaling helped them make more reasonable decisions. Moreover, expressive writing and journaling can reduce symptoms of depression in women who are struggling with the aftermath of intimate partner violence (Koopman et al., 2005).

Of special interest to this study is the finding that journal writing can reduce physical symptoms, health problems, and anxiety in women (Niles et al., 2015). Journaling can also be beneficial in relation to the higher incidence of eating disorders in women going through midlife, as journal writing can offer a huge source of relief and healing by diminishing the distancing of oneself from problems, encouraging one to confront problems head-on, and reducing the obsessive component of eating disorders (Rabinor, 1991). As previously mentioned, midlife can bring painful experiences of loss for many women. When trying to recover from the death of a loved one and dealing with bereavement, journaling may help one process loss and reduce grief (Kalantari et al., 2012). Applying gratitude specifically through writing can contribute to most of the general benefits of increasing gratitude, and the outcomes reported from gratitude journaling

include boosting long-term well-being, encouraging exercise, reducing physical pain and symptoms, and increasing both length and quality of sleep (Emmons & McCullough, 2003). Moreover, gratitude journaling increases optimism (Froh et al., 2008), reduces symptoms of depression (Seligman et al., 2005), and contributes to goals achievement (Emmons & Mishra, 2011). Finally, gratitude journaling has also been found to make people more likely to engage in prosocial behaviors, which can enhance and expand social support network (Seligman et al., 2005). Although still in its infancy stages, enough research suggests that mindful journaling may be a beneficial practice for middle-aged women in relation to their stress management, depression, anxiety, relationship to food, and overall well-being. The journal portion of this book hopes to lead the reader through a process of mindful awareness and acceptance of their multidimensional reality. Journaling prompts are chosen for the purpose of expanding and enhancing writing choices. Themes are presented separately, although the reader is encouraged to let thoughts emerge and “mingle” together, as they naturally tend to do. Quotations from published materials will be included throughout the book to inspire and encourage the reader to explore deeper within.

The creative project begins with a basic exploration of mindful awareness. Although the English word *mindfulness* seems to highlight the mind component, awareness of the body is the first element needed to establish mindfulness. Mindfulness trains us to draw our attention to the sensations of the body, a much-needed skill that helps us be more present with our whole being beyond our thoughts. Mindful breath awareness meditation is one of the most widely used basic forms of meditation (Schone et al., 2018). It involves directing our attention to the sensations of the breath while observing the inevitable thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise without becoming fixated on them (Schone et al., 2018). No breath control or manipulation is required.

This kind of practice engages key components that are considered central to mindfulness meditation exercises: attentional stability combined with non-judgmental, open, and accepting awareness. Mindful awareness in body-oriented therapy develops specific interoceptive awareness capacities that help identify, access, and appraise internal bodily signals (Cameron, 2001) that are identified in physiological models as the critical components of interoception for emotional regulation (Craig, 2003).

It is equally important to be mindful of the emotional tone of our experience, as it informs our responses and activities in life. When we are not mindful, pleasant feelings can give rise to attachment, while unpleasant feelings can generate aversion. Mindful awareness increases tolerance of one's thoughts and feelings, particularly uncomfortable ones (Price & Hooven, 2018). Research by Pinna (2020) suggests that mindful breath awareness may improve attention and help curb impulsive behavior. Pinna's study concluded that awareness of physical sensations seems to be of central importance for the effective regulation of emotional responses. Meditation is a practice by which to cultivate mindfulness (Frisvold et al., 2012; Lee & Bang, 2010).

With the foundation of mindful awareness, my creative project continues onto an exploration of intentionality and presence as core components of all our actions and interactions. As we become more established and secure in our mindfulness practice, we begin to see clearly how intentions, more than goals, give rise to the ways in which we ultimately behave. Although participants may begin mindfulness courses expecting to achieve palpable outcomes, as mindfulness becomes more stable there is often a shift in understanding mindfulness as a way of being rather than a means to an end. Goals often shift from outcome to growth and from product to lifestyle (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; 1994). Through careful cultivation of intentionality and presence, kindness and wisdom become the source of actions. In this way, intentionality and presence

reflect not only what matters most to a person but also what matters most to loved ones, the community, and the world at large. This, in turn, helps people align actions with values while engaging in daily life. Mindful presence involves extending the quality of awareness to life beyond time spent meditating. When present with people or activities, one can relax into being fully available and receptive to the entire experience without the pull of pleasant or unpleasant reactions that may arise. Future models of mindfulness should include intentionality as a concept integral to understanding mindfulness practice and its effects (Field, 2015).

With more mindful awareness, intentionality, and presence, there may also be a deeper desire to engage in gratitude practices. Gratitude has been an essential component of traditions and religions throughout the world, and current scientific research has highlighted the physical and psychological benefits of gratitude practices. Gratitude invites individuals to embrace a deeper level of contentment through a deliberate appreciation of the life that sustains all beings. Research has suggested that gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness, as it helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; McCullough et al., 2001; Wood et al., 2010). Moreover, grateful people seem to be more helpful, supportive, forgiving, empathic, and agreeable (McCullough et al., 2004). Dr. Philip Watkins conducted a study in 2003 to evaluate the relationship between gratitude and subjective well-being. The findings confirmed that gratitude relates positively to various measures of subjective well-being and mood improvement, all of which contribute to an increase in positive affect and a decrease in negative affect and functioning. These findings occurred in diverse demographic groups, such as patients with neuromuscular disease, college students, hypertensive adults, and early adolescents (Wood, 2010). Overall, studies have found that more grateful people: report

better physical health (Hill et al., 2013; Krause & Hayward, 2014), are moderately more likely to report engaging in healthy activities (Hill et al., 2013), are more willing to seek help for health concerns (Hill et al., 2013), and sleep better and longer (Mills et al., 2015).

My creative project continues with an exploration of mindful communication. Many people wonder how interpersonal benefits can arise from mindfulness, an often personal and solitary practice developed through meditation. The answer to that question may be that mindfulness allows us to develop a refined attunement to both intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences. Jones and Hansen (2015) suggested that mindful supportive communication, which conveys care, empathy, and encouragement, plays a crucial role in how well people are able to cope with difficult emotions and aversive situations. An established form of interpersonal mindfulness is Insight Dialogue, a formal meditation practice explicitly evolved to take place in interpersonal relationships. It was created by Gregory Kramer (2007), and it is based on Vipassana, or Insight Meditation. At the core of the practice are six meditation guidelines that offer support for a receptive awareness of present experience amid the challenges of relationship. Insight Dialogue brings together three basic elements: meditative awareness, the teachings of the Buddha, and humans' natural relatedness. The practice aims to develop mindfulness, compassion, and liberating insight. This, in turn, may help counter limiting conditioning and habits often involved in interpersonal relationships. Mindfulness can benefit social relationships (Karremans et al., 2017) and can be practiced specifically within the context of social interactions (Kok & Singer, 2017). Being mindful while interacting with others is likely to foster effective communication (Burgoon et al. 2000), which is critical for the healthy functioning of close relationships, including friendships. Huston (2011) compared students taking an



introductory communication course that included a mindfulness component ( $n=20$ ) against a control group of students taking the same course without any mindfulness content ( $n=24$ ). Both groups improved in their positive reappraisal tendencies following communication training; however, the groups differed in how they positively reappraised situations. Only the mindfulness group demonstrated improved mindfulness scores following training, accounting for that group's increases in positive reappraisal and providing evidence for mindfulness training as one mechanism for reducing negative reactivity in communication.

Interpersonal mindfulness, a newly proposed construct, is conceptualized as mindfulness during interpersonal interactions (Pratscher et al., 2017). It includes awareness of self and others, accompanied with the qualities of nonjudgmental and nonreactive presence. A study by Pratscher (2017) showed that interpersonal mindfulness was correlated with friendship quality, while accounting for trait mindfulness. Pratscher identified and tested three possible mediators of the association between interpersonal mindfulness and friendship quality: perspective-taking, basic psychological need satisfaction, and empathy. In summary, the literature suggests that full presence, non-judgmental attention, and awareness of internal and external reactions can benefit everyday interactions and dialogues.

Another mindfulness practice explored in the creative project is mindful eating, which refers to an approach that focuses on individuals' sensual awareness of the food and their experiences of it (Nelson, 2017). In the book *Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food* (2009), author and expert in the field of mindful eating Dr. Jan Chozen Bayz (2009), described mindful eating as an experience that engages all senses through deep awareness of the colors, textures, aromas, tastes, and even sounds of drinking and eating. The purpose of mindful eating is not to lose weight, although it is highly

likely to reach that outcome. The intention behind mindful eating is to learn to savor the present moment and the food through full participation in the eating experience (Nelson, 2017).

Although much of the research continues to focus on the effectiveness of different diets, there is increasing interest in the role of mindfulness, mindful eating, and a newer concept of intuitive eating in modulating eating habits. Mindfulness appears to work by an increased awareness of internal, rather than external, cues to eat (Warren et al., 2017). Closely related to mindful eating is an approach called Health at Every Size (HAES), which has been proposed to address weight bias and stigma in individuals living with obesity and more recently articulated as a promising public health approach beyond the prevailing focus on weight status as a health outcome (Penney & Kirk, 2015). As an alternative, HAES embraces aspects of mindfulness and proposes that we (a) encourage body acceptance, (b) support intuitive eating, and (c) support active embodiment (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011). In a literature review by Bacon and Aphramor (2011), evidence from six randomized control trials indicated that the HAES approach is associated with statistically and clinically relevant improvements in physiological measures (e.g., blood pressure, blood lipids), health behaviors (e.g., physical activity, eating disorder pathology), and psychosocial outcomes (e.g., mood, self-esteem, body image). All studies reviewed by Bacon and Aphramor indicated significant improvements in psychological and behavioral outcomes as well as improvements in self-esteem and eating behaviors. No studies found adverse changes in any variables. Given that mindful awareness is a major component of HAES, mindful eating may offer much needed support for women as they face body image issues that result from physical changes associated with midlife.

In addition to living in the moment, a mindfulness practice unveils the realization of the nature of reality as impermanent. Change is a fact of life. It can bring excitement or anxiety,

happiness or sadness, attachment or aversion. An established mindfulness practice can help in finding more grace and ease in the midst of change. Mindfulness may play a beneficial role of shifting the way people respond to changes. Within Buddhism, impermanence refers to the fact that all phenomena are transient occurrences and are subject to dissolution (Kahn, 2018). The universal law of impermanence applies as much to psychological phenomena such as thoughts. In this line of thinking, one of the benefits of mindfulness is that people become more aware and accepting of the changing nature of all of their experiences (Aich, 2013). Research has suggested that people who practice mindfulness consistently tend to be better at coping with all types of difficult experiences, such as reminders of their own mortality (Brown et al., 2012; Niemiec et al., 2010). As women experience the many physical and psychological changes linked to midlife and aging, the concept of impermanence is extremely relevant.

The creative project continues the exploration of mindfulness as a practice that encourages an attitude of self-compassion, another important component of wellbeing in midlife. In the book *Self-Compassion: The Proven Power of Being Kind to Yourself*, author and pioneer in the field of self-compassion research Dr. Kristin Neff (2007) used self-compassion as a term to describe a benevolent and nurturing attitude toward oneself during situations that challenge one's adequacy. Self-compassion encourages a healthy recognition that being imperfect is part of the human experience. Growing evidence has indicated that self-compassion is related to a wide range of desirable psychological outcomes (Neff, 2007). According to Neff's research, individuals who are more self-compassionate tend to have greater happiness, life satisfaction, and motivation. They experience better relationships and physical health with less anxiety and depression, and they have more resilience to cope with stressful events such as divorce, health crisis, or failure. These findings suggest that self-compassion can be a tremendously beneficial

practice for women to implement during the challenging midlife years. Another study investigated the relationships between self-compassion and indicators of psychological adjustment as well as the moderating effect of self-compassion on self-rated health. Results indicated that self-compassion is positively correlated with age and uniquely related to psychological well-being and that it moderates the association between self-rated health and depression (Homan, 2015). As mentioned before, body dissatisfaction is a significant source of suffering among women during the middle years of life. One potential factor that could mitigate body dissatisfaction is self-compassion. A study by Albertson (2014) investigated whether a brief 3-week period of self-compassion meditation training would improve body satisfaction in a multigenerational group of women. Participants were randomized either to a meditation intervention group ( $n = 98$ ;  $M$  age = 38.42) or to a waitlist control group ( $n = 130$ ;  $M$  age = 36.42). Results suggested that, compared to the control group, intervention participants experienced significantly greater reductions in body dissatisfaction, body shame, and contingent self-worth based on appearance, as well as greater gains in self-compassion and body appreciation. All improvements were maintained when assessed 3 months later. Self-compassion meditation may be a useful and cost-effective means of improving body image in adult women.

Existing research also suggests that Loving Kindness Meditation and Compassion Meditation are associated with an increase in positive affect and a decrease in negative affect (Hoffman et al., 2011). Moreover, a review of existing literature from neuroendocrine studies also indicates that Compassion Meditation may reduce stress-induced subjective distress and immune responses (Hoffman et al., 2011). Likewise, neuroimaging studies have suggested that Loving Kindness Meditation and Compassion Meditation may enhance activation of brain areas involved in emotional processing and empathy. Such positive effects may in turn positively

influence stress responses and their impact on long-term physical and mental health outcomes in women going through midlife transition. Research on self-compassion and loving-kindness invites further exploration of their potential for women during midlife transition.

The creative project delves deeper into the concept of mindfulness by exploring the benefits of acceptance in life. In the context of mindfulness, mindful acceptance of ourselves and of whatever is happening does not mean passive resignation about the undesirable, nor does it mean detachment from reality. On the contrary, acceptance allows the mind to embrace the true, deep understanding of reality as is. Emotional regulation using mindful acceptance is associated with reductions in reported pain and negative affect, reduced amygdala responses to negative images, and reduced heat-evoked responses in medial and lateral pain systems (Kober et al., 2019). A study by Michalak (2011) addressed the question of whether non-judgmental acceptance toward experience moderates the relationship between self-esteem and depression. Results showed that people with low acceptance exhibited self-esteem that was more closely associated with depression than people with high degrees of acceptance. These findings suggest that accepting and non-judgmental attitudes towards present-moment experience might diminish the negative effects of low self-esteem on depression. Another beneficial aspect of mindfulness is equanimity, which can encourage an even-minded mental state or dispositional tendency toward all experiences, regardless of their origin or their affective nature (pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral).

### **Conclusion**

Midlife can be a tumultuous time of change and decreased well-being for many women. This work is an exploration of the challenges of midlife and the potential benefits of informal mindfulness practices as supportive tools. In order to encourage implementation and adherence

to the practice of mindfulness, the study introduces a variety of informal mindfulness exercises that can be integrated into and adapted to the demands of modern daily life.

One of the core teachings of mindfulness is the concept of impermanence and the everchanging nature of all phenomena. The idea that nothing in life is exempt from change seems to be of essential relevance to the topic of women's midlife transition, an often-challenging time of physical and emotional changes. Impermanence is a valuable reminder of the many gifts that changes can bring to women as they embark on a new phase of life with more awareness, more wisdom, and more grace.

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## **Mindful Midlife for Women**

*Practices for finding ease and grace in the midst of change*

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May 2, 2021



## Introduction

Every major period of life brings a unique set of opportunities and challenges. Midlife — the years between 40 to 60 — remains a mostly uncharted territory in the field of human development. This critical stage of life has received little attention from research, which has mostly focused on studying childhood, adolescence, or old age. Women of middle age currently comprise over 17 % of the total population, and this percentage is expected to increase. Because of that, it's important to understand what may or may not be beneficial during this stage of life<sup>1</sup>. This book is an exploration of the potential benefits of mindfulness practices as supportive tools during this time of transition. In the following pages, you will find short mindfulness exercises that can be practiced daily. This material is based on existing research in the field of mindfulness in relation to stress and overall well-being. Deeper attention will be given to informal mindfulness practices, which are often easier to adopt and adhere to.

My own perception of midlife transition is that it is an undoubtedly challenging time. Like many other women, I am immersed in the incessant flow of family activities and obligations as a mother, a caregiver of aging parents, a supportive wife, and the main household manager. Following a period of increased self-reflection, I have also embarked on the pursuit of personal and professional goals that were put on hold for over a decade to prioritize my role as a mother of three. As a result, I now find myself in a very demanding position between family and career. I know I'm not the only one. One of the most helpful and supportive tools during this challenging time of my life has been my daily mindfulness practice, something I would like to

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<sup>1</sup> Murphy, S. L., Xu, J., & Kochanek, K. D. (2013). Deaths: final data for 2010. *National Vital Statistics Reports: From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System*, 61(4), 1–117.

share with all of you. The following pages and accompanying journal are just a taste of mindfulness. I hope you will want to explore more of this world once you complete this book.

### **What exactly is Mindfulness?**

People often ask me, “What exactly is mindfulness?”, and I always find myself falling short of an answer that can do it justice. In theory, mindfulness is the basic human ability to be present with whatever we are doing. In practice, it is so much more than that! Mindfulness is a particular way of paying attention. It involves awareness of the present moment *and* a gentle attitude of acceptance and non-judgment to every experience. It’s more about the *quality* of attention that we bring to life than about the attention per se. Most of us live in a fast-paced and busy world that is flooded with information, distractions, and day-to-day stress. As a result, we often become disconnected from our true essence and from the things that really matter. Mindfulness reminds us to shift away from autopilot mode so we can experience and appreciate life instead of rushing through it. I am always careful not to portray mindfulness as the “magic pill”, but I am also passionate about sharing its transformative benefits. The practice of mindfulness does not make us perfect super-humans, but it certainly helps us navigate the highs and lows of this journey that we call life. Mindfulness is the gateway to a more peaceful, authentic, and conscious life!

Mindfulness can be thought of as a *state*, a *trait*, or a *practice*. We can have a moment of mindfulness (state), or an overall individual ‘baseline’ of mindfulness (trait). We can also have a formal mindfulness practice that can be implemented through seated meditation, mindful walking, mindful eating, or other techniques. In the book *Coming to Our Senses: Healing Ourselves and the World Through Mindfulness*, mindfulness meditation expert and author Jon Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness as paying attention, in a particular way, in the present

moment, and non-judgmentally. Christina Fieldman, a leading senior meditation teacher, defines mindfulness as the willingness and capacity to be equally present with all events and experiences with discernment, curiosity and kindness.

### **From East to West – The History of Mindfulness and Meditation**

Where did mindfulness originate? And how have so many people in the West recently become so interested in it? Mindfulness has been practiced and cultivated for thousands of years in various philosophies and religions—from Hinduism and Buddhism to yoga and, more recently, to non-religious meditation. In the last decade, a more secular approach to mindfulness has brought its practice to many areas of day-to-day life. In general, mindfulness arose in the East from religious and spiritual institutions, while its popularity in the West can be traced back to specific individuals and secular organizations. That said, even the secular tradition of mindfulness in the West has its roots in Eastern religions and traditions. It's important to note that some scholars believe mindfulness should not be exclusively attributed to Buddhism and Hinduism, as its practice was also part of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Mindfulness has been interwoven with Hinduism for millennia. From the famous Bhagavad Gita's discussions of yoga to the Vedic school of meditation, the history of Hinduism goes hand in hand with the history of mindfulness. Perhaps the most crucial player in the history of mindfulness, however, is Buddhism (although even Buddhism owes its birth to Hinduism). The concept of "mindfulness" traces to the Pali words *sati*, which in the Indian Buddhist tradition implies awareness, attention, or alertness, and *vipassana*, which means insight cultivated by meditation. Historically, only monks and nuns practiced meditation in Asian Buddhist cultures. Ordained people seeking enlightenment used meditation as a vehicle to experience enlightenment through asceticism, detachment, and renunciation. As trade with Asia increased during the mid-nineteenth century, Westerners began to show an interest in Buddhist teachings. Despite this initial interest, the focus on meditation did not arise in the West until the 1960s, when hundreds of thousands of Asians emigrated to the United States following

immigration reforms. During that time, several prominent Tibetan and Zen missionaries founded Buddhist institutions in the United States. Interestingly, university courses on Buddhism began to emerge and gain popularity among students seeking alternatives to Western cultural standards. Some of these students eventually traveled to South Asia to immerse themselves in Buddhist teachings and meditation practices. By the 1970s, the American “mindfulness movement” had begun. It was in that same decade that the Insight Meditation Center was founded in Massachusetts by Joseph Goldstein, Jack Kornfield, and Sharon Salzberg, all of whom had studied Buddhism in South Asia. In their teachings, Kornfield, Goldstein, and Salzberg embraced meditation and mindfulness practices that included elements of Western psychology. The rise of mindfulness in the West is also attributed to the Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Exiled from Vietnam, he gained admiration as an activist against war and as a promoter of mindfulness and meditation. Perhaps the most influential figure in the introduction of mindfulness as a secular practice in the West was Jon Kabat-Zinn, a professor emeritus of medicine at the University of Massachusetts. Inspired by Buddhist traditions that informed his own understanding of mindfulness, Kabat-Zinn developed a stress-reduction program named *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MBSR) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in 1979. The effectiveness of his program in decreasing stress and enhancing wellbeing has been supported by thousands of scientific research studies. This was the main driver of the increasing popularity of mindfulness in the United States, and eventually around the globe.

### Research on Mindfulness

As you've probably noticed, mindfulness is everywhere these days, and there is good reason for that. Scientific research is finally shedding light on the potential benefits of this ancient practice. If you want to dive deeper into the details of research on mindfulness, keep reading. Studies suggest that mindfulness practices may reduce the effect of stress, improve psychological well-being, ease anxiety and depression, prevent recurrence of major depressive disorder or substance abuse, and improve immune function in adults<sup>2</sup>. Research also show that mindfulness can strengthen and improve interpersonal relations, stress-coping mechanism among couples, and parenting satisfaction. In much of the existing literature, mindfulness has also been related to improved self-regulation and mental health. Although further studies are needed, these replicated findings suggest that mindfulness practices may help women have a better experience of midlife.

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<sup>2</sup> Astin, J. A. (1997). Stress reduction through mindfulness meditation. Effects on psychological symptomatology, sense of control, and spiritual experiences. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics*, 66(2), 97–106. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000289116>

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Lazar, S. (2005). Mindfulness research. In C. K. Germer, R. D. Siegel, & P. R. Fulton (Eds.), *Mindfulness and psychotherapy* (pp. 220–238). Guilford Press.

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### Informal Mindfulness Practices

When hearing about mindfulness, many of us conjure up images of lengthy silent sitting meditation. While formal sitting meditation is one way of practicing mindfulness, there are other ways to embrace mindfulness in daily lives. Some studies have focused on investigating the benefits of short, informal mindfulness practices that are easier to adopt and adhere to. Although there are no widely agreed definitions of “formal” and “informal” mindfulness, a formal practice can be considered to take place when practitioners intentionally set aside time to engage in mindfulness meditation practices such as body scans, sitting meditations, and mindful movement. Informal mindfulness practice involves infusing mindfulness into existing routines through engaging in mindful moments and bringing mindful awareness to everyday activities, such as washing dishes, walking in nature, communicating with others, showering, driving, parenting, exercising, practicing self-compassion, and breathing. Most formal mindfulness practices can be adapted into informal practices for everyday life. Research shows that brief mindfulness practices can immediately affect emotion, mood, stress, and anxiety in a short period of time<sup>3</sup>. Frequency of informal mindfulness is more important for well-being and psychological flexibility than frequency or duration of formal mindfulness practice. Scientists explored the effects of using dishwashing, an everyday activity, as a mindfulness practice. Results showed that mindfully washing dishes promoted positive emotions and decreased negative emotions<sup>4</sup>. This suggests that daily activities, when approached with intentionality and awareness, may increase the state of mindfulness. A 20-minute meditation session can

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<sup>3</sup> Birtwell, K. W., Van Marwijk, H., Armitage, C. J., & Sheffield, D. (2019). An exploration of formal and informal mindfulness practice and associations with well-being. *Mindfulness*, *10*(1), 89–99.

<sup>4</sup> Tan, L. B. G., Lo, B. C. Y., & Macrae, C. N. (2014). Brief mindfulness meditation improves mental state attribution and empathizing. *PLoS ONE*, *9*(10), e110510. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0110510>

significantly lower stress responses, and 10 minutes of daily practice have a similar effect to 20 minutes in decreasing stress. Research on mindfulness and meditation has continued to accommodate the needs of people who aspire to engage with mindfulness interventions and practices. Examples of 5-minute mindfulness manipulations are seen throughout the literature as ways to improve well-being. More recent research has highlighted the key role of informal mindfulness in developing the ability to pay attention to internal and external experiences<sup>5</sup>.

These examples of researched informal mindfulness practices encourage a promising movement toward more time-friendly and manageable implementations that are comprehensive and realistic applications for different lifestyles.

By now you may have downgraded “mindfulness” to a category of overused and trendy words, but don’t dismiss mindfulness just yet. As you read on, keep an open mind, try the practices presented, and see for yourself if this is something you might adopt. Mindfulness can help address many of the concerns that women our age face: stress management, physical changes, and wellbeing decline. Through mindfulness practices, we are better equipped to understand, accept, and even embrace this chapter of our lives. I hope you’ve read enough to want to give it a try! I know we all love a quick “how to”, but it’s important to understand that mindfulness is not something that emerges overnight. Think of it as both a daily and lifelong practice. If you are wondering why you should bother with this practice at all, I would say that mindfulness offers a richer appreciation of the present moment and of life in general.

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<sup>5</sup> Birtwell, K. W., Van Marwijk, H., Armitage, C. J., & Sheffield, D. (2019). An exploration of formal and informal mindfulness practice and associations with well-being. *Mindfulness*, 10(1), 89–99



### Why Mindfulness for Midlife

How do the demands of midlife affect women's well-being? Most people would agree that well-being is the presence of positive emotions and moods, the absence of negative emotions, and an overall satisfaction with life. Well-being also reflects optimum levels of mental, physical, and social functioning, with an overall positive perception of health. As you may have experienced by now, midlife doesn't always feel like a walk in the park. Through the ups and downs of this stage of life, mindfulness can be viewed as a helpful tool that can be accessed throughout the day, especially during stressful situations. Let's take a closer look at the research on midlife to better understand why it can be such a challenging time for so many of us. From that point, we can explore ways in which mindfulness practices can help us mitigate the challenges of midlife.

Although a growing body of research has emerged on the relationship between stress, health, and well-being, there seems to be a gap in the literature regarding the effects of stress among women during midlife. Past research has mostly focused on the physiological impact of menopause on health, with less attention given to the emotional and psychological impacts of the overall midlife experience on happiness and quality of life<sup>6</sup>. In general, there is consistent agreement that some hallmarks of midlife can bring deep dissatisfaction in many women, all of which can cause a waning of well-being. Positive mood and outlook are significantly lower in midlife women than in younger or older women. The most frequently reported challenge is the management of multiple stressors and responsibilities attributable to women's numerous roles<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas, A.J., Mitchell, E.S. & Woods, N.F. (2018). The challenges of midlife women: Themes from the Seattle midlife women's health study. *Women's Midlife Health* (4), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Kenney, J. W. (2000). Women's "inner-balance": A comparison of stressors, personality traits and health problems by age groups. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 31(3), 639–650. <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.2000.01331>

A significant number of women identify the most demanding aspects of midlife to be shifts in family relations, reassessment of work-life balance, search for lost identity, maintenance of financial resources, and management of multidimensional stressors<sup>8</sup>. This all makes sense! During midlife, most women have to juggle the demands of being married or partnered, having children who may be transitioning out of the home, having job responsibilities, managing households, and caring for aging parents. As such, women are confronted with co-occurring challenges. Many women also report frustrated goal attainment, such as the inability to pursue academic endeavors or meaningful careers. During perimenopause, women may also develop depressive symptoms and cognitive difficulties, which are more subtly and inconsistently linked to hormones. Depression and cognitive impairment can in turn worsen the demands of medical illness. As some of you may know, the menopausal transition can cause disrupted sleep cycles, mood dysregulation, and fluctuations of sex drive, all of which contribute to an increase in stress and a decrease in well-being<sup>9</sup>.

Another important aspect of middle age transition is the physical change experienced during this time. The understanding of women's experiences of body image in relation to the aging process is limited, given that most of the previous body image research has focused on younger women and on their complex issues with weight and size. Nonetheless, many of us experience difficult emotions in relation to the natural physical changes that happen as we age. Of particular concern is the increase in the number of middle-aged women presenting for inpatient eating disorder treatment and a rise in the prevalence of obesity in women over 50. Not surprisingly, experiences relative to body image and aging are deeply influenced by our society.

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<sup>8</sup> Woods, N. F., & Mitchell, E. S. (2005). Symptoms during the perimenopause: Prevalence, severity, trajectory, and significance in women's lives. *The American Journal of Medicine*, *118*(12), 1405–1406.

<sup>9</sup> Santoro, N., Epperson, C. N., & Mathews, S. B. (2015). Menopausal Symptoms and Their Management. *Endocrinology and metabolism clinics of North America*, *44*(3), 497–515. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecl.2015.05.001>

Although body image issues are present for women of any age, women entering middle age are more affected by these concerns<sup>10</sup>. Sadly, a woman's realization that she no longer fits society's distorted standards of youth and beauty are often the cause of low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety.

Overall, it's important to identify early warning signs of poor mental or physical health, which may possibly delay, minimize, or even prevent some of the issues in biological, psychological, and social functioning that usually occur later life.

The purpose of exploring midlife's challenges was not to discourage or frighten anyone, but to highlight the need for beneficial tools that can help during this tumultuous time. The skills involved in mindfulness are simple, but the practice itself is harder than you think because it requires deliberate awareness and implementation. Not only do you have to remember to do it, but you also have to come up with strategies to apply this practice to daily routine. That's where journaling comes into the equation.

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<sup>10</sup> Grogan, S. (2006). Body image and health. *Journal of Health Psychology, 11*(4), 523–530.

Saucier, M. G. (2004). Midlife and beyond: Issues for aging women. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 82*(4), 420–425

## Journaling

The act of journaling is a mindfulness practice per se, as it invites the mind to be fully present with the writing. Everything we know about humankind comes from the accumulated reflections that others have been willing to preserve through writing. Mindful journaling could be described as a form of contemplative writing that allows self-reflection on personal emotions, thoughts, and behaviors. This kind of journaling also offers the opportunity to consider particular events from multiple perspectives. In these pages, you are invited to engage in journal writing for self-awareness through a series of subjects regarding mindfulness for different aspects of life. The topics are chosen for the purpose of expanding and enhancing your writing experience. Although prompts are specific and presented individually, journal writing offers a blank canvas for colorful thoughts to mingle together spontaneously. Throughout the text, I include quotes from published materials that may inspire and encourage you to explore deeper within. Mindful journaling guides us through a process of awareness and acceptance of the multiple layers of our reality. It allows us to notice, embrace, or shift our perceptions, feelings, and reactions to life.

Journaling and expressive writing have been found to boost mood, enhance a sense of well-being, reduce symptoms of depression, and improve working memory. Journaling can help us shift from a negative mindset to a more positive one, especially about ourselves. On a physical level, journaling has been found to strengthen the immune system, drop blood pressure, improve sleep, and generally enhance health<sup>11</sup>.

The journal provides a total of 70 daily writing prompts divided into 10 weekly mindfulness practices. This format will offer you seven days to immerse yourself in each of the mindfulness topics. This journal was created to help you include mindfulness into your daily life.

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<sup>11</sup> Baikie, K. A., & Wilhelm, K. (2005). Emotional and physical health benefits of expressive writing. *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment, 11*(5), 338–346.

As you move through the practices offered in this book, take the time to reflect and write about your experiences. Allow for spontaneity and authenticity to emerge as you engage in the gift of contemplative writing. Journaling is a practical and accessible activity that transcends race, gender, age, religion, or income. We can all discover beautiful and unique ways to weave our own truth through journal writing.

### **Mindful Awareness**

*Awareness brings clarity*

*Clarity leads to wisdom.*

*Wisdom leads to purity*

*Mohanji*

Deliberate, nonjudgmental awareness is the foundation of mindfulness. Although a formal meditation practice is not the only way to infuse mindfulness into our daily lives, it certainly helps in creating a healthy habit, which in turn invites more and more mindful moments throughout our days. There is a misconception that mindful meditation requires constant concentration and a completely blank mind. If that was the case, there would be no meditators in the world. Our thoughts are not our enemies, and the goal of meditation is not to control the thinking that inevitably takes place in our minds. We are simply cultivating a benevolent awareness of whatever is happening within ourselves and within our environments. In doing so, we recognize that our thoughts are just thoughts, that they don't rule us, and that we can gently redirect our attention when we get stuck on habitual negative thinking. Mindful meditation has the "side effects" of improving our ability to relax, to focus, and to be more accepting of whatever is happening in the moment. Beyond the mental benefits, mindful meditation can have transformative effects on the physical body as well. For starters, we learn to use mindful breathing to soften physical tension and to better manage our bodies' responses to emotion and stress. As we become more familiar with mindful meditation and its qualities of acceptance and non-judgment, we also establish a healthier and more positive relationship with our bodies.

For most of us, the noise and activity inside our minds, along with an overscheduled life, feel like insurmountable obstacles to establishing a meditation practice. Yet, tuning into our busy thoughts is actually a good place to start. The struggle to focus is essential to the process of

learning how to regulate our emotions and find a sense of objectivity to bring us back into the present moment. If you've already dabbled into meditation, you know that awareness is the starting point. Mindfulness meditation emphasizes using the breath to stay present in the moment while nonjudgmentally recognizing thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise.

Although the English word *mindfulness* seems to highlight the mind component, mindfulness of the body is the first element needed to establish awareness. Mindfulness trains us to draw our attention to the sensations of the body, a much-needed skill to get out of our heads and become more present with our whole being. Mindful breath awareness meditation is one of the most widely used basic forms of meditation. It involves directing our attention to the sensations of the breath while observing thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise without becoming fixated on them. No breath control or manipulation is necessary. This kind of practice engages key components that are considered central to mindfulness meditation exercises: attentional stability with non-judgmental, open, and accepting awareness. Research suggests that mindful breath awareness may improve attention and help curb impulsive behavior. Awareness of physical sensations seems to also be of central importance for the effective regulation of emotional responses.

As we establish awareness of the breath, it is equally important to become mindful of the emotional tone of our experience, which often informs our responses and activities in life. When we are not mindful, pleasant feelings can quickly turn into unhealthy attachments, while unpleasant feelings can generate aversion. The benefits of mindfulness seem to be of particular relevance during midlife. By learning to sustain our attention through mindfulness, we can improve our overall ability to focus and maintain that same level of attention during everyday tasks. With the multiple roles and responsibilities typical of midlife, we could all benefit from

more focus. As we experience moods fluctuations due to hormonal changes, mindful meditation—and its resulting emotion regulation— can be a life saver. Once you become more comfortable with mindfulness meditation, you come to the profound realization that you're your thoughts and feelings are transient, that they come and go, and that you have a choice on how to respond to them. Likewise, when life difficulties arise and hover, you learn to look at them as passing dark clouds that eventually drift away. Most of us tend to identify with our thoughts and feelings, which leads us to lose perspective of what is true. In other words, we often allow our thoughts and feelings to run the show. Awareness helps us recognize the activity of the senses and thoughts, it helps us notice feelings like attachment and aversion, and it helps us see ourselves as separate from these thoughts, activities, and feelings. The philosophy and practice of mindfulness involves getting to know ourselves like the observers of all experiences. Through the lens of “the observer”, we learn to recognize negative thought patterns before they become overwhelming or unmanageable. As a result, we can feel more in control of our responses to life's inevitable ups and downs. It's important to emphasize that the mind does not exist in isolation from the body, and that there is a continuous exchange of communication between mind and body. Physical sensations can be a subtle reflection of our thoughts, emotions, and mental activity. Oftentimes, tight muscles, aching joints, and shallow breaths are trying to give us clues on what it is that we need. Through body awareness, you have the agency to release both physical and mental tension as you consciously breath ease and light into each part of your body. That's why the practice of mindfulness always starts with anchoring our awareness on a physical sensation like the breath, our “home base”.

What do you think? Are you ready to give it a try? Start by experimenting with the short mindful meditation included in the next pages and use the journaling prompts to reflect on you



experience. Gaining comfort and ease with meditation takes patience and practice. Give yourself time as you learn new ways to relate to your mind, thoughts, and feelings. Perhaps the most important thing when beginning a meditation practice is to meditate consistently, even if it's for just a few minutes each day. Try to remain free of expectation and attachments and remember that the path itself is the goal.

### Daily Mindful Meditation Practice

*“Attention to the human body brings healing and regeneration.  
Through awareness of the body, we remember who we really are”*

*Jack Kornfield*



1. **Space.** Find a quiet room where you can sit comfortably, with your spine erect, but not rigid. If possible, allow your spine to be self-supporting. Your feet can be flat on the floor. Close your eyes or lower your gaze. Establish an intention for your meditation practice.
2. **Settling.** Take a few deep breaths and allow your body to relax. Notice any physical sensations: warmth, tingling, vibration, comfort, discomfort...
3. **Awareness of breath:** Begin to bring your awareness to your breathing as it flows in and out of your body. Notice the different sensations of every inhale, every exhale, and every subtle pause in between. Simply observe the breath without trying to control or change anything about it. You are not looking for anything special to happen, you are simply encouraging awareness.
4. **Redirecting attention:** Each time you realize that your mind has wandered - and it will wander often - gently bring your attention back to the anchor of the breath. The act of realizing that your mind has wandered and bringing your attention back is central to the practice of mindfulness.
5. **Nonjudgmental Response:** Sounds, thoughts, and sensations will arise. Just allow them to come and go without getting caught up in them. As you notice how busy your mind is, allow some compassion towards yourself.
6. **Stillness:** Your mind may eventually settle and become still, or it may not. Whatever happens, just allow it to be as is. Remember that this is a practice of kindness, so be patient with yourself. You are practicing mindfulness each time you bring your attention back to the breath, again and again...

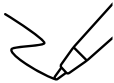
### Mindful Body Scan

*If you listen to your body when it whispers,  
you won't have to hear it when it screams.*

*Joyce Meyers*

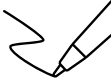


1. Lie down and rest on your back as allow your eyes to close. Take several long, slow, deep breaths.
2. Begin by bringing your attention to your feet and observing any sensation without judgment. You might imagine sending your breath down to your feet as if the breath could travel.
3. When you are ready, move your attention up to your ankles, calves, knees, and thighs. Observe the sensations you are experiencing throughout your legs. Become aware of any discomfort, pain, or stiffness. Notice how all sensations shift and change moment by moment.
4. Move your attention up your body to your lower back and pelvis. Softening and releasing as you breathe in and out.
5. Slowly continue to your back, becoming curious any subtle sensations in your muscles.
6. Very gently shift your focus to your stomach and all the internal organs here, perhaps feeling or imagining the process of digestion, noticing the belly rising and falling with each breath.
7. Continue to breathe and bring your awareness to the chest and heart region. Can you feel your heartbeat?
8. Move your attention to your hands, fingers, and up to your arms. Observe the sensations or lack of sensations. You might notice some difference between the left side and the right side of the body.
9. Continue to breathe and shift focus to the neck, shoulder, and throat region. This is an area where we often hold tension and tightness. Be with the sensations and try to soften.
10. On the next out-breath, shift your focus and direct your attention to the scalp, head, and face.
11. Now let your attention expand out to include the entire body as a whole and continue to feel the gentle rhythm of the breath moving through the body.
12. As you come to the end of this practice, take a full deep breath and absorb the energy of this practice.
13. When you are ready, open your eyes and return your attention to the present moment.



Write about your experience during the meditation. What did it feel like to follow the breath with such awareness? Did you notice any strong physical sensations pulling your attention?

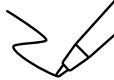
A series of horizontal lines provided for writing the response to the meditation experience question.



Write about the thoughts, emotions, and moods that emerged for you during meditation. Did you notice any patterns of rumination, worry, or negativity? Reflect on any pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral thoughts.

A series of horizontal lines provided for writing the response.





How did it feel to direct your attention to specific body parts during the body scan? What do you think of the mind/body connection that takes place during this exercise? Can you feel this connection throughout your life?

Lined writing area for notes.









### **Mindful Intentionality**

*“Live less out of habit and more out of intent.”*

*Anonymous*

With mindfulness, it becomes easier to maintain intention and presence as the basic elements of all our actions and interactions. As we become more established and secure in our mindfulness practice, we begin to see clearly how our intentions and thoughts give rise to the ways in which we ultimately behave. Through careful cultivation of intentionality and presence, we can act from a place of kindness and wisdom. In this way, intentionality and presence reflect not only on what matters most to us, but also what matters most to our loved ones, our community, and the world at large. This, in turn, helps us align our actions with our values as we engage in daily life. We practice mindful intentionality when the quality of awareness extends into our lives beyond time spent meditating. When we are intentional with people or activities in our lives, we relax into being fully available and receptive to the entire experience without the influence of pleasant or unpleasant pulls that may arise. When we awaken, it's helpful to pay full attention to your morning routine and activities, trying to bring yourself back to the present moment when it wanders into thinking about the rest of the day.

Very often, we find ourselves reaching for our phones first thing in the morning to instinctively check email, social media, weather, and more. Although the screen may be efficient in waking us up, it can also take us from calm to stress in a few seconds. Try to resist the urge to tune into something external as you begin your day. Instead, tune within. Imagine what your days would look like if you took 5 minutes each morning to pause and reflect on these kinds of questions: “How can I go through my day in a way that expresses my values? What can I do to nourish myself and give meaning to my day? How can I be helpful to others?” I think this one small habit can have transformational effects on our lives. Consciously choosing your intentions

each day will direct your focus and energy so that we stay centered, no matter what is happening around us.

By acknowledging what matters most each morning in this way, we can cultivate inner strength, clarity, and the calm we need to meet each day with the very best of ourselves.

### **Mindful Intention Setting**

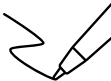
*Our intention creates our reality*

*Wayne Dyer*



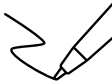
1. **Wake up mindfully.** Begin your day with a few deep breaths as you gently stretch your body. Be grateful for a new day and for what it may bring. Establish a connection of presence with your body and your mind.
2. **Set an intention.** Ask yourself: “How can I live this day in a way that reflects my values? What can I do to nourish myself and my loved ones? Think of an intention that can guide your actions throughout the day. This intention will serve the lighthouse you return to when things become stressful or challenging. The possibilities are endless, so try not to overthink it. Honor whatever emerges.
3. **Mindfully make your bed:** It may seem like a waste of time on a rushed morning, but there are many great reasons to adopt this simple habit. Mindfully making your bed in the morning can bring a subtle sense of well-being and set the tone for a positive day.
4. **Embrace a morning ritual.** Find ease and grace before you step out into the noisy world by truly savoring your morning ritual. Rather than stumbling to the coffee maker or teapot in a sleepy haze and slugging down that first cup, you can create a morning ritual around this daily habit. Mindfully enjoy your cup of coffee, listen to soft music, or use this journal for reflections. If needed, wake up a few minutes early to make room for these small mindful moments.
5. **Make it a daily practice.** Once you establish the habit, this simple practice can have profound effects in your life. Consistency will help you adhere to this powerful practice.





What kind of morning routine can you establish in order to encourage a more intentional and mindful start of the day?

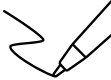
Lined area for writing an answer to the question.



The next time you practice mindful intention setting, focus on intentions on ways to nurture your mental and emotional state. Write about the intentions you came up with for this aspect of yourself.

Horizontal lines for writing.





What other areas of life could benefit from mindful intentionality? Write a list of mindful intentions for the most important areas of your life.

A series of horizontal lines provided for writing a list of mindful intentions.







### **Mindful Presence and The Myth of Multi-tasking**

*The key is to be here, fully connected to the moment,  
paying attention to the ordinary details of life.*

*Pema Chodron*

A vital element of being present in the moment is simply slowing down. When we rush from one thing to the next, we lose the sense of the joy and flow that come with the process. In a society that places high value on multitasking and productivity, slowing down might make us feel like we are not accomplishing enough. After all, we all pride ourselves as talented multitaskers who can efficiently juggle multiple things at once. That approach, thankfully, is quickly losing its glory as research continues to show that multi-tasking is not as efficient and beneficial as initially thought. It turns out that multitasking exhausts the mind and depletes cognitive resources. Chronic multitasking also increases levels of cortisol, the stress hormone, which can damage the memory region of the brain<sup>12</sup>. The brain is not designed to do multiple things at once. Instead, it goes back and forth from one task to the next. This constant bouncing between tasks can overload the brain and make it less efficient. In other words, multitasking is a recipe for disaster as thoughts remain on the surface level, which increases the chance for errors to occur. Despite all the evidence against multitasking, we can all agree that it is a difficult habit to break, especially as we are constantly connected to email, phones, and social media apps in pursuit of immediate satisfaction. The addicting release of dopamine in the brain perpetuates the need for speed and stimulation, making the cycle more difficult to break. Mindfulness and single

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<sup>12</sup> American Psychological Association. Is multitasking more efficient? Shifting mental gears costs time, especially when shifting to a less familiar task. August 5, 2001.

Rubenstein J. et al., 2001. Executive control of thought processes in task switching. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*. 27(4): 763-797.

tasking can lead to more quality work, increased peace, less stress, and more contentment. Now that we know that multitasking is less efficient than single tasking, let's take the steps to ease this chronic habit. Single tasking is the new multi-tasking!

### Mindful Single Tasking

*Concentrate all your thought upon the work at hand,  
the sun's rays do not burn until brought to a focus.*

*Alexander Graham Bell*



1. **Start with meditation.** With our 5 senses constantly being bombarded with stimuli, focusing on only one thing can be a challenge. Your meditation practice can help develop the concentration muscle. Consciously focus on your breath as your one anchor during meditation. This exercise will make it easier to focus on one thing at a time throughout your day.
2. **Organize.** Before you start on your single-tasking journey, take time to organize your environment. Clearing your physical space encourages a clear mind.
3. **Set your priorities.** Decide what task or action needs to be prioritized and focus on that. Take a deep breath, relax your body, and begin with your task. Try to notice the details and demands involved in this specific task. Notice your inner dialogue as you perform what is required of you.
4. **Handle distractions.** If something comes to your mind, feel free to jot down reminders for later, but avoid switching tasks or jumping on your email or phone. As with meditation, gently bring your attention back to the task at hand.
5. **Take breaks and breathe.** Pay attention to the breath, your body, your mind, and your movements. Notice when you need to stretch or when your mind needs a break. Gentle physical movement can clear mental clutter and improve creativity and productivity. Remember that a deep, full, cleansing breath is the most effective way to get back to the present.
6. **Make it a daily practice.** You may be tempted to slip back into your multi-tasking tendencies, but remember it's not going to make you complete your tasks any faster. Just like meditation, ease comes with a dedicated practice.

**Wash and fold with presence**

*Smile, breathe and go slowly.”*

*Thich Nhat Hanh*

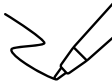


Practicing mindfulness while doing laundry or other house chores can reduce some of the mundane qualities involved in those tasks. The intention of this exercise is to cultivate awareness, and possibly even contentment, with the present. Instead of struggling with the task and constantly wishing it was over, become aware of every step and fully immerse yourself in the process.

1. Begin by taking a couple of deep breaths and settle before starting laundry.
2. Take a moment to notice and feel the texture of the fabrics. Notice the patterns and colors on each item of clothing. Perhaps there are stains or wrinkles that you can look at with curiosity.
3. Notice the sounds that are involved in the washing and drying of your clothes.
4. When clothes are fresh out of the dryer, feel the heat coming from the clothes, the fresh smell, the change in color or weight from when you first started.
5. Notice every detail as you fold each item. Bring awareness to the repetitive movements of your hands and to the steady pace of the process. If time allows it, try to slow down.
6. Take a cleansing breath after you finish, offering gratitude that you have clean clothes to fold and wear.
7. Offering gratitude for daily things that we typically take for granted can bring a whole new perspective and sense of joy in life.





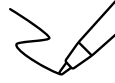


Oftentimes, our bodies reflect our state of mind. Impatience may bring physical tension, while acceptance may bring physical relaxation. Did you notice any physical sensations in response to your thoughts about the task?

A series of horizontal lines provided for writing a response to the text above.







Mindfulness practices help us minimize a sense of struggle. Find one task or chore that you dread doing and try to complete them with a mindful approach. Write about any shifts you may have noticed, if any.

A series of horizontal lines provided for writing the response.





### Mindful Gratitude

*When you arise in the morning, think of what a precious privilege it is to be alive,  
to breathe, to think, to enjoy love.*

*Marcus Aurelius*

Gratitude has been an essential component of traditions and religions throughout the world, and current scientific research is highlighting the physical and psychological benefits of gratitude practices. Gratitude invites us to embrace a deeper level of joy, compassion, and appreciation for the life that sustains us. Each time we begin our mornings with awareness that we have awakened to a new day, gratitude settles in. Cultivating a practice of gratitude reminds us to truly appreciate the positive aspects in our lives. Research suggests that gratitude is strongly and consistently associated with greater happiness through more positive emotions, more enjoyment of good experiences, improved health, enhanced responses to adversity, and stronger relationships<sup>13</sup>. Grateful people also seem to be more helpful, supportive, forgiving, empathic, and agreeable. All in all, gratitude relates positively to various measures of subjective well-being and mood improvement, all of which contributes to an increase in positive affect and a decrease in negative affect and functioning. These findings are noticed in diverse demographic groups, which makes this practice even more appealing<sup>14</sup>. Sometimes we forget to express gratitude to the people that are the closest to us. We assume they already know how much we appreciate them, but that's not always the case. Make a conscious choice to show gratitude towards your loved ones by telling them how thankful you are for them. Considerable evidence suggests that

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<sup>13</sup> McCullough, M. E., Kilpatrick, S. D., Emmons, R. A., & Larson, D. B. (2001). Is gratitude a moral affect? *Psychological Bulletin*, 127(2), 249–266. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.127.2.249>

<sup>14</sup> McCullough, M. E., Tsang, J.-A., & Emmons, R. A. (2004). Gratitude in intermediate affective terrain: links of grateful moods to individual differences and daily emotional experience. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 86(2), 295–309. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.86.2.295>



gratitude builds social resources by improving relationships and promoting prosocial actions.

Imagine how our experience of midlife could improve if we adopted gratitude practices on a daily basis. Let's give it a try!

### Senses Gratitude Practice

*When gratitude replaces judgment,  
peace spreads throughout your body.*

*Neale Donald Walsch*



1. **Anchor yourself in the present.** Take a deep breath, close your eyes, and relax your body. Let your senses settle and orient your attention toward gratitude.
2. **Sight gratitude.** Move through your senses and find appreciation for something that comes to you from the world of sight. It could be a color, an object, something in nature, or the memory of something pleasant. What do you see or recall? Can you be present with all the colors and shapes that capture your sight? Can you feel grateful that you get to see this?
3. **Scent Gratitude.** As you continue to work through your senses, contemplate appreciation for an aroma that is present in your environment or in your mind. Perhaps it's a familiar scent that brings you comfort and awakens you to the present moment, or maybe it's a scent that you've never noticed before. Can you feel appreciation and gratitude for your sense of smell and the different aromas it invites you to experience?
4. **Sound Gratitude.** Allow the world of smell to gently recede into the background as you tune into the world of sound. Become aware of the different sounds around you. Notice if they are close or far, obvious or subtle. Can you feel grateful that you're able to experience sound? Perhaps it would help to recall pleasant music, the sound of children laughing, or the sound of a loved one's voice. Can you perceive the sound of your own heartbeat?
5. **Touch Gratitude.** Embark on the world of touch and texture. Feel the contact of your skin with your clothes, the many textures that surround you, and the solid support of the earth beneath you. Think of a recent hug with a loved one and recall how it felt. Can you sense gratitude for the joy of human contact? Perhaps you

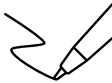
have a beautiful pet that you can stroke and cuddle. Let your sense of touch ignite your gratitude! Can you perceive the subtle movement of your own breath?

6. **Universal Gratitude.** End your exercise by noticing and appreciating the objects around you. Can you feel gratitude for all the effort and care that must have gone into creating the things you own or use? What do you feel when you truly appreciate all that makes your life a little easier and more pleasant?
7. **Gratitude to yourself.** As you end this practice, extend gratitude towards yourself for taking the time to be present and awake to the gifts of our senses. Can you carry this attitude of gratitude throughout the day?









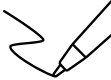
Reflect on all the life lessons you have learned through past experiences, pleasant or unpleasant.

As you journal, write about how these lessons helped you grow and evolve as a person?

Horizontal lines for journaling.







We tend to be our own worst critics. Think of all the things you have accomplished in your life. Reflect on all the good qualities you have cultivated over the years. Write yourself a letter of gratitude.

A series of horizontal lines provided for writing a letter of gratitude.



### Mindful Movement

*Movement is a medicine for creating change in a person's physical, emotional, and mental states.*

*Carol Welch*

Another informal mindfulness practice that can be adopted in day-to-day life is Mindful Movement. Mindful Movement is a new category of exercise defined by movement, awareness of the breath, and a calm state of mind with the aim to achieve deep states of relaxation. *Yoga*, *Qigong*, and *Tai Chi* are well-known forms of mindful movement, but there are many other ways to integrate the principles of mindful movement in daily life. Research on mindful movement suggests that mindfulness during movement is associated with less momentary negative emotions. Integrating mindfulness practices with daily movement may also lead to improved physical, emotional, and mental health<sup>15</sup>. *Yoga* is fairly effective and recommended to all women of menopausal age for its potential to provide health benefits to those who practice it with proper guidance<sup>16</sup>. Two central components of mindful movement, breathing and mindfulness, are vital mechanisms by which individuals learn to manage daily stressors, which may in turn reduce their risk of developing stress-related illness. Mindful movement in nature can also reduce negative mood and encourage a stronger and healing connection with the nature. As women of middle age experience the more typical physical challenges of aging, Mindful Movement may also offer a healthier and more positive way to relate to their changing bodies.

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<sup>15</sup> Clark, D., Schumann, F., & Mostofsky, S. H. (2015). Mindful movement and skilled attention. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 9. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fnhum.2015.00297>

<sup>16</sup> Hioki, C. (2018). Yoga for Menopausal Women. *Journal of Yoga & Physical Therapy*, 08(01). <https://doi.org/10.4172/2157-7595.1000285>

One easy and practical way to engage in Mindful Movement is to do some deliberate and mindful morning stretches at the start of the day. This practice can benefit both mind and body when we are intentional about the movement and breath involved. Our muscles lose tone and fluid when the body isn't moving much at night. Stretching first thing in the morning helps massage fluids back into the muscles and improve blood circulation.

Another wonderful way to infuse mindful movement into daily life is through mindful walking. A mindful walk is a lovely way to steady your mind and restore your sense of focus. Mindful walking can be a formal or informal mindfulness practice. Mindful walking meditation gives us an opportunity to gather our awareness, which so often becomes fragile when the mind is left to its own devices. Whether we are climbing stairs at home, walking in the city, or hiking in the woods, mindful walking is an opportunity to guide ourselves out of the distracted autopilot we live in most of the time. Practicing mindful walking in nature can have rejuvenating effects on the brain and create a sense of ease. Incorporate mindful walking into your life in as little as 5 minutes a day by using all of your senses — sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch — to bring awareness to your body and surroundings.

### Mindful Walking

*Walk as if you are kissing the Earth with your feet.*

*Thich Nhat Hanh*



1. **Find a quiet space to walk:** It could be outdoors, in a hallway, or even a large room where you can walk back and forth.
2. **Foundation:** Begin by just standing on the spot, becoming aware of your weight being transferred through the soles of your feet into the earth. With your arms at your side, begin to walk at a natural pace. If you find it useful, you can count steps up to 10. When you reach 10 steps, pause and, with intention, turn around.
3. **Focused Awareness:** With each step, pay attention to the movement of the foot as it lifts and falls, again and again. Notice the collective effort of your body muscles as they engage in walking. If thoughts or sounds capture your attention, notice them nonjudgmentally, and gently come back to the physical sensation of walking.
4. **Expanding Awareness:** Once you feel settled in the sensation of walking, expand your attention to sounds. Whether you're indoors, in the woods, or in a city, pay attention to sounds without getting caught up in whether you find them pleasant or unpleasant. Notice sounds as nothing more or less than sound.
5. **Physical Senses:** Shift your awareness to your sense of sight. Notice colors, objects, and whatever else you meet with your eyes. Patiently come back to the sense of sight each time something distracts you. Shift your awareness to your sense of smell. Again, simply notice, without manipulating anything, whatever you discover through the sense of smell. Now engage your awareness through your sense of hearing. What sounds do you notice around you?
6. **Open Awareness:** When you are ready, allow for open awareness of everything around you, wherever you are. Nothing to do, nothing to fix, nothing to change. Fully aware of every aspect of your walking.

7. **Refocus:** Gently come back to awareness of the physical sensations of walking whenever your mind drifts away throughout the practice. Notice your feet again touching the ground. Notice the movements in your body with each step.
8. **Pause and Reflect:** When you're ready to end your walking meditation, stand still for a moment again. Pausing, choose a moment to end the practice. As you finish, consider how you might bring this kind of awareness into the rest of your day.

















### **Mindful Communication in Daily Life**

*Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates.*

*At the first gate, ask yourself, "Is it true?"*

*At the second gate ask, "Is it necessary?"*

*At the third gate ask, "Is it kind?"*

*~ Rumi*

Mindful communication involves listening, speaking and using non-verbal communication with kindness, attention, compassion, and awareness. Many people wonder how interpersonal communication can benefit from mindfulness, an often personal and solitary practice developed through meditation. The answer to that question may be that mindfulness helps us develop an intimate attunement to both intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences. Most of us spend our days communicating with others through speaking, listening, texting, or emailing. Language is one of the main ways we connect with others and engage in relationship. Mindless communication habits and patterns are often deeply ingrained, but we can patiently bring attention to how our words and presence impact others. Because of the many roles and responsibilities women juggle during midlife, mindful communication is a necessary skill to cultivate. Mindless communication can ultimately lead to low morale, misunderstandings, missed opportunities, and mistrust. Mindful speech and empathic listening are based on the simple elements of mindfulness: full presence, non-judgmental attention, and awareness of internal and external experiences. The more we become aware of our own communication habits, the more we can develop authentic care, clarity, and flexibility in all of our life's relationships.

There are many ways to listen. The usual way we listen to each other is through "responsive listening", where we seek and opportunity to express our own point of view, to problem solve, and to create dialogue. While one person speaks, the other one forms thoughts

and responses that are often driven by automatic assessments and judgments, all of which can create a sense of separation. Through mindful communication, we work towards developing empathetic skills that allow us to listen with a nonjudgmental mind and an open heart. This kind of deep listening invites more meaningful connections. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that the practice of empathetic listening always begins with ourselves. As we go within, we cultivate the necessary awareness to truly understand our physical, mental, and emotional experiences. From that place of deep internal self-observation, we can then begin to practice deep listening with those around us.

### Turn Speaking and Listening into a Mindful Practice

*The single most powerful and transformative ingredient in dialogue  
is the intention to understand.*

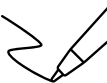
*Oren Jay Sofer*



During a conversation with someone, practice mindful listening by following these steps.

1. **Focus on the person talking.** Try to minimize distractions in order to fully focus on the person you're engaging with in conversation. Just like during sitting meditation, when you notice your mind wandering, bring it back to the interaction.
2. **Presence.** Be fully present with what the person is trying to communicate and tune out thoughts about anything irrelevant to the conversation.
3. **Nonjudgmental receptiveness.** Whether you agree with what is being said or not, allow and welcome the thoughts and message the other person is expressing. Offer facial expressions and body language that are neutral and warm. Simply be engaged in a loving, present, and inviting way.
4. **Resist interrupting.** As you listen, try to abstain from interrupting. There will be time for you to share your thoughts, offer advice, and share stories. As the listener, try to simply hold the space for the speaker and save your comments for later.
5. **Mindful Speaking.** When it's your turn to speak and share your thoughts, do so with care and consideration. Try to notice not just what you say but also the tone with which you say it.
6. **Notice:** See if you can sense the emotional residue your words create. Notice how you feel after certain remarks and notice how the other person reacts.
7. **Self-inquiry:** Ask yourself: "What makes me say what I say? Are there unexpressed emotions that may surface as exaggerations, lies, or sarcastic remarks? Am I being authentic as I express myself?"



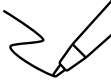


How did it feel in your mind and body to simply hold space for the speaker? Did you notice any mind wondering? If so, what was the source of distraction?

Horizontal lines for writing responses.







Can the practice of mindful communication improve your interpersonal relationships? Think of someone in your life with whom you can apply this selfless practice.

A series of horizontal lines for writing.







### **Mindful Eating**

*In this food,  
I see clearly the presence of the entire universe  
supporting my existence  
Thich Nhat Hanh*

Another mindfulness practice that can be adapted to daily life is mindful eating, an approach that focuses on sensual awareness of the food and the experiences of it. When was the last time you truly enjoyed and savored a meal with all your senses? In the book *Mindful Eating: A Guide to Rediscovering a Healthy and Joyful Relationship with Food*, author and expert in the field of mindful eating, Dr. Jan Chozen Bayz, describes mindful eating as an experience that engages all senses through deep awareness of the colors, textures, aromas, tastes, and even sounds of drinking and eating<sup>17</sup>. The purpose of mindful eating is not to lose weight, although it is a very possible outcome. The intention behind mindful eating is to learn to savor the present moment and the food through full participation in the eating experience. Mindful eating has been shown to encourage healthy eating habits through less impulsive eating, reduced calorie consumption, and healthier snack choices, even in the absence of specific instruction in mindful eating. Mindfulness and mindful eating have the potential to address problematic eating behaviors and the challenges that many women face with controlling their food intake. Given the challenges experienced by middle-aged women in relation to weight and body image, mindful eating can offer much needed support. Whether we realize it or not, our relationship with food is

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<sup>17</sup> Jan Chozen Bays. (2017). *Mindful eating : a guide to rediscovering a healthy and joyful relationship with food*. Shambhala.



often influenced by the diet culture that surrounds us. We are constantly pushed to start a new diet or weight-loss plan, as if being smaller could automatically make our lives better. Mindful eating allows us to take back our innate wisdom when it comes to food, adequate nourishment, and healthy pleasure. Our experience of hunger goes beyond our actual physiological need to eat. More often than we realize, there are subtle underlying levels of hunger that can arise when we feel tired, bored, lonely, anxious, or in search of pleasure. With mindfulness, we can learn to untangle and separate the different experiences of hunger so we can respond to each one of them in appropriate and healthy ways. As human beings, we know we take delight and pleasure in food through all our senses, but we often forget to acknowledge that we also experience food through our yearning heart. When our senses are turned on, it's easy for us to respond by automatically putting food in our mouths without giving it much thought. In order to be more mindful about our nourishment, we need to introduce a moment of reflection, a quick mindful pause, before we bite into whatever food is in front of us. Throughout the day, it helps to check in with whatever is happening within ourselves so we can tune into our true sources of hunger. One of the best ways to engage in mindful eating is to begin meals with conscious and deliberate awareness by taking some deep breaths or pausing for a few moments to express gratitude. Once you begin with your meal or snack, take a few breaks in between bites and try to savor every aspect of the eating experience: the flavors, the aromas, the textures, and all of the sensations involved. This kind of approach to eating can make a huge difference in the levels of enjoyment and satisfaction you derive from your food. Mindful eating is a better way to nourish yourself, both physically and emotionally. It's important to keep in mind that there is room for both enjoyment and nourishment when it comes to mindful eating. *How* we eat is more important than *what* we eat. For example, you could have a carefully chosen and lovingly cooked meal, but if

you eat it while worrying about gaining weight, that worry will create an unpleasant eating experience. As you embrace mindful eating, you will notice that the inner perfectionist within you will soften its grip and desire for an unrealistic skinny body. You will be less concerned about the model ideal, and more accepting of your perfect imperfections. Many people attribute their improved relationship with food to mindful eating. Let's give it a try.

### The Mindful Treat

*Mindful eating is a way to become acquainted  
with the guidance of our internal nutritionist.*

*Dr. Jan Chozen Bayz*



Approach the exercise with an open mind and a gentle curiosity.

1. **Choose a wrapped chocolate** and place it in the palm of your hand. Notice the colors and shapes on the wrapper. Feel the weight of it in your hand and examine it closely, noticing all of the colors and light reflections on the wrapper. If your mind starts to wander, that's ok. Simply notice the thoughts and bring your attention back to the chocolate.
2. **Slowly open the wrapper**, listening to the sounds that arise. Notice the movement of your hand, fingers, and arm muscles as you open the chocolate. Raise the chocolate to your nose and smell it, slowly breathing in and focusing on the different smells. Does smelling the chocolate trigger anything else in your body? Is your mouth watering? Are you feeling impatience?
3. **Take a small bite** of the chocolate, without chewing or swallow it. Notice the feeling and taste of the chocolate melting in your mouth. How does it feel? Notice the taste and sensations of the chocolate on your tongue as you move it around in your mouth.
4. **Slowly swallow the chocolate**, focusing and enjoying the sensations that arise. Notice any lingering taste or cravings for more.
5. **Reflect:** How was this different from your normal way of eating? What did you learn during this exercise? How can you apply these principles to eating or other areas of your life?

### The Mindful Meal



This exercise offers a more practical and manageable form of mindful eating for daily life.

1. **Set the stage.** Turn off or silence your electronic devices to help minimize distractions. This will help you relax and enjoy your food without all the interruptions.
2. **Appreciate.** Take a moment to appreciate the food that's in front of you. Think of all the people and steps involved in making it possible for you to enjoy the food you're about to eat.
3. **Senses Awareness.** Remember that mindful eating involves all of your senses, so notice and appreciate the appearance, aroma, textures, flavors, and sounds of your food.
4. **Name the Flavors.** As you eat your meal or snack, consider the basic tastes that you are experiencing. Is the food sweet, salty, sour, bitter? Sometimes foods contain more than one flavor— can you tell the difference? What appeals to you the most?
5. **Notice the Texture.** Is the bite crunchy or soft? Is it dry or creamy? Orienting your attention in this way with each bite can make your eating experience more intentional and enjoyable.
6. **Notice the effect.** Is the food nourishing both your hunger and your senses? Is it satisfying any other unmet needs? Take some time to think about your choice of food and its effects on your mind and body.
7. **Set Down the Fork.** In between bites, try to place your utensils down on your plate to help slow your pace. Mindful eating is an experience, not a race!

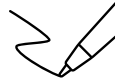












An important aspect of mindful eating is becoming more aware of the eating patterns and habits we've developed throughout our lives. What can you learn about your conditioning around food?

Series of horizontal lines for writing.





### **Impermanence and change**

*Thanks to impermanence,  
everything is possible.  
Thich Nhat Hanh*

Change is a fact of life. It can bring excitement or anxiety, happiness or sadness, attachment or aversion. The idea that nothing in life is exempt from change seems to be of essential relevance to the topic of women's midlife transition, a tumultuous time of physical and emotional changes. An established mindfulness practice helps us find more grace and ease in the midst of change. According to the Buddhist principle of impermanence, all worldly phenomena—even those that seem permanent—actually consist of constant change. The environment around us may appear solid and unchanging, but the entire universe is in a constant process of fluidity. If we are mindful, we can enjoy the benefits of witnessing this magical process. Mindfulness may help us become more aware and accepting of the changing nature of all of experience, even when it brings discomfort. Research suggests that people who practice mindfulness consistently tend to be better at coping with all types of difficult shifts, including reminders of their own mortality<sup>18</sup>. Meditations on impermanence invite us to investigate the ever-changing nature of our breath, physical sensations, shifting thoughts, and transformations in the natural world. Aging is undoubtedly the most apparent and unavoidable manifestation of impermanence in our lives. Yet, aging is only one of the many changes women experience in midlife. During perimenopause and menopause, changing hormones can cause a havoc. According to Mayo Clinic doctors, declining estrogen and progesterone levels can interfere with

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<sup>18</sup> Brown, K. W., Weinstein, N., Creswell, J. D. (2012). Trait mindfulness modulates neuroendocrine and affective responses to social evaluative threat. *Psychoneuroendocrinology*, 37(12), 2037–2041. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psyneuen.2012.04.003>

your sleep, cause mood swings, and reduce your energy levels. Menopause can also cause memory loss, anxiety, weight gain, and decreased interest in things you used to enjoy<sup>19</sup>. This list may seem to be too much to overcome with simple mindfulness exercises, but the idea is to apply mindfulness concepts and practices to soften the intensity around the changes we experience during midlife. It helps to remember that anything that feels unpleasant or disturbing won't last forever. Likewise, anything that feels joyful or pleasant will also eventually change and disappear, so we can't expect it to give us lasting happiness. Paradoxically, this realization can help us appreciate more the impermanent beauty of our lives, our bodies, our moods, our relationships, and the world at large. Impermanence is also a valuable reminder of the many gifts that change can bring to women as they embark on a new phase of life with more awareness, more wisdom, and more grace. If we can bring ourselves to embrace change as our true teacher, we can learn to find more ease as we let go of attachments.

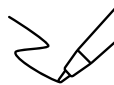
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<sup>19</sup> Santoro, N., Epperson, C. N., & Mathews, S. B. (2015). Menopausal symptoms and their management. *Endocrinology and Metabolism Clinics of North America*, 44(3), 497–515. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecl.2015.05.001>

### The Window of Change



1. **Find a window.** Stand in front of a window and bring attention to your stance. Feel the weight of your body evenly distributed between both feet. Notice the subtle internal movements of your body even as you stand still.
2. **Observe:** Depending on where you are, you may be looking at a busy city street or at a green park. Look at everything you see, starting with the things that are closer to you and then, progressively, moving your focus to those that are farther away. Take it all in!
3. **Recognize changes:** Avoid judging or labeling what you see. Simply focus on the shapes, colors, or movements. Notice any shifts or changes happening: a tree responding to the wind, a squirrel running around, people crossing a street, traffic lights changing colors, clouds drifting in the sky. Recognize that everything around you is in a constant and natural state of change and fluidity.
4. **Explore within:** Notice any changes within you during the window exercise. Perhaps you recognize your breath evening, your body relaxing, your mood shifting. It may also be that you feel tension and impatience at the slow pace and stillness of the exercise. Whatever it is, simply notice the impermanence of every moment that comes and goes.
5. **Reflect.** Bring your attention to the reality of impermanence in everything. Accept the changes in your body, your mind, and every experience. Can you find appreciation for the fact that you are alive to witness these changes?



Take a moment to reflect on your physical and mental responses to this practice. Did you feel impatience and frustration? Did you feel a connection with your environment?

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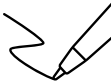












Use this space freely for reflective writing.

Lined area for reflective writing.

### **Mindful Compassion Towards Self and Others**

*Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries.*

*Without them, humanity cannot survive*

*Dalai Lama*

Underneath many of our emotional challenges is the struggle for self-acceptance. When we don't feel worthy, the resulting suffering affects our ability to be present with ourselves and others. Self-worth is such an essential ingredient of wellbeing. When we don't love ourselves, we compromise every other aspect of our lives and our ability to fulfill our potential. Lacking self-acceptance can manifest as anxiety, neediness, defensiveness, hypersensitivity, self-sabotaging behaviors, perfectionism, inauthenticity, and poor social skills. Through gentle awareness of our feelings of low self-esteem and their expression, we can make more conscious choices about how we perceive and treat ourselves.

Self-compassion is a term used to describe a benevolent and nurturing attitude toward oneself during situations that challenge one's adequacy<sup>20</sup>. In other words, self-compassion encourages a healthy recognition that being imperfect is part of the human experience. Author and pioneer in the field of self-compassion research, Dr. Kristin Neff, indicates that self-compassion is related to a wide range of desirable psychological outcomes: greater happiness, life satisfaction, and motivation<sup>21</sup>. Individuals with high self-compassion experience better relationships, better physical health, less anxiety and depression, and more resilience to cope with stressful events such as divorce, health crisis, or failure. These findings suggest that self-

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<sup>20</sup> Neff, K. D. (2009). The role of self-compassion in development: A healthier way to relate to oneself. *Human Development*, 52(4), 211–214. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000215071>

<sup>21</sup> Neff, K. (2003). Self-compassion: An alternative conceptualization of a healthy attitude toward oneself. *Self & Identity*, 2(2), 85. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.1080/15298860309032>

compassion can be a tremendously beneficial practice for women to implement during the challenging midlife years. As mentioned before, body dissatisfaction is a significant source of suffering among women during the middle years of life. Research agrees that self-compassion is an important factor that could mitigate body dissatisfaction, which is also related to significant reductions in body shame and contingent self-worth based on appearance, as well increase in body appreciation<sup>22</sup>. Neuroimaging studies suggest that compassion meditation may enhance activation of brain areas involved in emotional processing and empathy. As we go through midlife, the positive effect of compassion can bring a whole new level of engaging in the world with more kindness, more generosity, and more empathy.

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<sup>22</sup> Albertson, E. R., Neff, K. D., & Dill-Shackleford, K. E. (2014). Self-Compassion and Body Dissatisfaction in Women: A Randomized Controlled Trial of a Brief Meditation Intervention. *Mindfulness*, 6(3), 444–454. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-014-0277-3>

### Loving-Kindness Meditation



Find a comfortable position and allow your eyes to gently close. Take a few moments to establish concentration and help your mind settle.

1. **Self-Compassion:** Begin the practice by bringing yourself to mind as you are right now. Tune into your own deepest intentions for happiness, ease, and safety. Simply connect with that natural human desire to be in peace. Nourish your heart's desire for wellbeing by silently offering yourself some phrases of loving kindness. Repeat these phrases slowly and silently in your mind:

*"May I be happy." "May I be healthy." "May I be safe." "May I be at ease."*

2. **Compassion towards a loved one:** You can now bring to mind a good friend. This may be a loved one, a friend, a mentor, or even a pet. Connect with the natural desire to see this person also happy and at ease. Recognize that this person also wants to be happy, to feel safe, and to be at ease. Cultivate this intention of kindness by offering this person the same phrases of loving kindness:

*"May you be happy." "May you be healthy." "May you be safe." "May you be at ease."*

3. **Compassion towards a neutral person:** Now bring to mind a neutral person. It can be someone you see regularly, but don't know very well. Perhaps somebody who works in a store you visit often, a coworker, or a neighbor. Although you don't know this person well, you can recognize that this person also wants to be happy and safe. Again, offer this person the same phrases of loving-kindness, connecting with the intention to care about their wellbeing.

*"May you be happy." "May you be healthy." "May you be safe." "May you be at ease."*

4. **Compassion towards a difficult person:** Now bring to mind somebody you find difficult or challenging. By bringing awareness to this person, you recognize once again your shared human desire for happiness and ease. Offer the same phrases of loving-kindness, trying to connect with an intention to care about their wellbeing too.

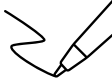
*"May you be happy." "May you be healthy." "May you be safe." "May you be at ease."*











Use this space to reflect on your evolving practices of self-compassion and compassion. Notice any shifts that arise as a result of these practices.

A series of horizontal lines providing space for reflection.

### **Mindful Acceptance and Equanimity**

*What would it be like if I could accept life – accept this moment – exactly as it is?*

*Tara Brach*

Is there such a thing as peace of mind? It seems to me that the mind is in constant conflict between what is good and what is bad, what is pleasant and unpleasant, what it wants and what it rejects. Perhaps the only thing that allows us to attain contentment is a healthy independence from what is happening in the mind. A few years ago, I came across the word “equanimity”, a new term that would forever change my approach to life. In very simple terms, equanimity is the capacity to remain calm and balanced even in a difficult situation. Equanimity is a state of being that arises from the power of nonjudgmental observation—the ability to experience reality without getting overwhelmed or caught up in it. When well established, equanimity power gives rise to a great sense of peace and ease. Within the context of mindfulness, acceptance of whatever is happening does not mean passive resignation of the undesirable, nor does it mean detachment from reality. On the contrary, acceptance allows the mind to receive the true, deep understanding of reality just as it is. According to research, mindful acceptance –and its resulting emotion regulation– is associated with reductions in reported pain, negative emotions, and responses to stress. People with low acceptance, on the other hand, exhibit self-esteem that is closely associated with depression<sup>23</sup>.

As we face the challenges and changes of midlife, maybe we can soften our yearning for things to be different than they are. Through conscious awareness, we can foster an attitude that

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<sup>23</sup> Michalak, J., Teismann, T., Heidenreich, T., Ströhle, G., & Vocks, S. (2011). Buffering low self-esteem: The effect of mindful acceptance on the relationship between self-esteem and depression. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 50(5), 751–754.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2010.11.029>

helps us accept, and perhaps even welcome and take positive action in the midst of discomfort.

With intention, we can cultivate the evenness, steadiness, and compassion that lead to equanimity, mindfulness' most precious gift.

**Rain Meditation**

Modified version of Tara Brach’s RAIN Meditation

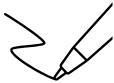


R	A	I	N
<p>Recognizing means consciously observing the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are affecting us. Recognize what is happening within you. As you recall a challenging experience that elicits difficult emotions, ask yourself “What is happening inside me? Which sensations and emotions am I most aware of? Is my mind filled with ruminating thoughts?” Take a moment to rest in this awareness. Can you feel how the experience is living in your heart, body and mind?</p>	<p>Allowing means letting any thoughts, emotions, feelings, or sensations we recognize simply be there. Find in yourself the willingness to pause and accept your reality in this moment. Notice what is true and endeavor not to judge, reject, or control what is happening. As you do that, notice if there is any softening in the body and mind. Can you sense more opening and space? Can you befriend your thoughts and emotions in this moment?</p>	<p>Investigating means tapping into our natural curiosity and desire to understand reality. Investigation allows a more focused attention on the present. Use your inner voice to pose questions with an attitude of kindness. “What aspect of this experience is inviting my attention?” “What are my beliefs of this experience and the responses it elicits in me?” Notice where in your body you feel this experience most distinctly. Are you aware of any tension, heat, discomfort, tingling? Once you find the most intense part of your physical experience, see if you can bring some softness and acceptance.</p>	<p>Non-identification means that our view of who we are is not entangled with limiting emotions, sensations, or stories. Through this response, natural loving awareness settles within. We begin to appreciate and live from a place of receptivity and love that is the innermost truth of who you really are.</p>





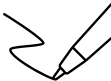




In what ways are you lacking self-acceptance? Are there specific aspects of you that you reject or dislike? Reflect on ways in which you can increase acceptance of all of you.

A series of horizontal lines provided for writing a response to the reflection prompt.





Acceptance is an active process that benefits from conscious practice. Acceptance and its resulting equanimity can extend to experiences, people, appearance, emotions, ideas, and more.

Which one of these areas are you called to focus on, and why?

A series of horizontal lines provided for the user to write their response to the question above.

### **Conclusion**

May this book be only the beginning of your journey into the world of mindfulness and its many benefits. I encourage you to revisit your journal reflections to celebrate your growth in mindful living. Remember that mindfulness, like any other practice, benefits from consistency and repetition. Choose any of the mindfulness practices that you particularly enjoyed and turn them into daily habits. I hope you can enjoy the “now” as much as possible and continue to explore these simple mindfulness practices with gentle curiosity and flexibility.