



101: Mindfulness Foundations

Week 3: Mindfulness of Emotions

Objectives

In Week 3 you will:

- Explore awareness of your emotions.
- Expand your emotional vocabulary into the subtler realms of emotion.
- Learn how to apply mindfulness to all kinds of emotional states by inviting a mindful pause and creating space between the emotion and the reaction.
- Define basic models of emotional regulation.
- Begin to identify when you are dysregulated and start utilizing practices to bring yourself back into equilibrium.
- Explore compassion for others and compassion for self.

Core Practices

In Week 3 our core practice is heartfulness. You will practice:

- A regulation practice
- A kindness practice
- Savoring pleasant states

Assignments:

Your Week 3 assignments are:

- Continuing with your daily mindfulness practice
- Experimenting with informal mindfulness practices
- Reflecting on your practice (required post at end of week 3)

Mindfulness of Emotions

Given the root word “mind,” mindfulness can sound like a purely cognitive practice. For most Westerners, the word “mind” takes us right up into our head. Yet as we explored last week, the truth is that the quality of mindfulness itself is as much an embodied awareness as anything mental. An integral part of this awareness is our emotional landscape.

We likely already have a variety of ways of noticing and relating to our emotions. At times, we are deeply in touch with our emotions. Sometimes, even as we are aware of our emotions, we struggle with regulating the many emotional states that move through us every day. At other times, we are mostly unaware of our emotions, as so many other experiences compete for our attention every day. We might only become aware of an emotion once it becomes overwhelming, and then find ourselves “acting out.” Bringing mindfulness—this curious, kind awareness—to our emotions can yield incredible discoveries as we explore ways to work with all kinds of emotional states, and respond with a wise and open heart, rather than habitually reacting to every mood that moves through us.

[Click here to access the Feeling Wheel from the Gottman Institute.](#) Right now, you might take a few breaths, notice any sounds around you, and then look on the wheel to identify how you’re feeling emotionally in this moment. You’ll notice that the center of the wheel has a few core emotions, and the outer circles contain more subtle or precise emotional descriptors. The wheel is also organized to indicate which feelings are opposite each other. This of course is somewhat subjective, but how they’re organized is a decent starting point for us. Expanding our emotional vocabulary beyond “I feel good, or bad, fine, okay, tired, stressed, happy, or mad” and into the subtler realms of emotion can be a powerful practice.

As you’re checking in with your emotions, we encourage you to use the body for clues, rather than trying to “think” about how you’re feeling. Just as your stomach signals to you when it’s time to eat, the sensations of your body act as signals of your emotional well-being. For instance, you may notice that tension and anxiety often show up in your shoulders, and you can mindfully check there to catch the mounting tightness that signals worry.

The Power of the Pause

“Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” – often attributed to Victor Frankl

Strong emotions can be tricky to navigate. When we are experiencing a powerful emotion like anger, we often fall into our habitual patterns of reaction. These reactions might take the form of lashing out, retreating, being in denial, overreacting, sulking, or bullying. Often, we recognize these patterns as our own, but feel helpless to change them. In fact, it may be hard to differentiate between the emotion we feel and our reaction to it.

Sometimes the reactions to our emotions can happen so quickly and unconsciously that it might not be until after we have reacted that we feel remorse. As we begin to strengthen our mindful awareness and start to apply it to these intense emotional situations, we create space between the emotion and the reaction. This is sometimes referred to as the **Mindful Pause**.

This space might just be a couple of seconds or it might be a whole day of reflection. Either way, it gives us the choice to **respond** to the situation rather than just **react**. As we begin to strengthen this ability, we might first notice that we still react in our familiar old ways, but we are now more aware of ourselves as we react.

Here’s an example of this in action:

Imagine it’s the end of your day and you need a few things from the store before you go home. The lines are long and you’re feeling tired and maybe a little agitated. Your mind is producing thoughts like, “Why do I always pick the slowest line?” You suddenly remember to use your mindfulness and start bringing your attention into your feet and legs. You take some deep breaths and notice how you are feeling. You realize you’re tired, and that there’s nothing to do now but wait. Now that you’re present you start to appreciate what’s happening around you. The cashier is having a funny conversation with the person in front of you. A couple of kids giggle in the next line.

You notice how you're ready to get home but feel okay about being in line at the grocery store. You might even notice some gratitude that you have delicious food items in your cart that you'll be enjoying at home soon. You relax the muscles in your face and continue paying attention to the sounds around you, or your breath and body sensations. Overall the experience is now richer, and even a bit pleasant.

This is an example of how using mindfulness can have a subtle impact on how you are interacting with the world. Instead of distracting yourself or inflaming feelings of agitation with mental chatter while in line, you have the choice to refocus your attention. Being mindful doesn't mean you're always going to have a positive outlook, but when you bring awareness to a situation you may find that you are able to choose a different way of being present for what's happening.

Keep in mind that this is a learning process and it might take several tries before you break some of those old habits. Most of your habits have been with you since childhood; imagine how long you've been perfecting them! Of course, it will take time to "un-perfect" them—so be kind and patient with yourself.

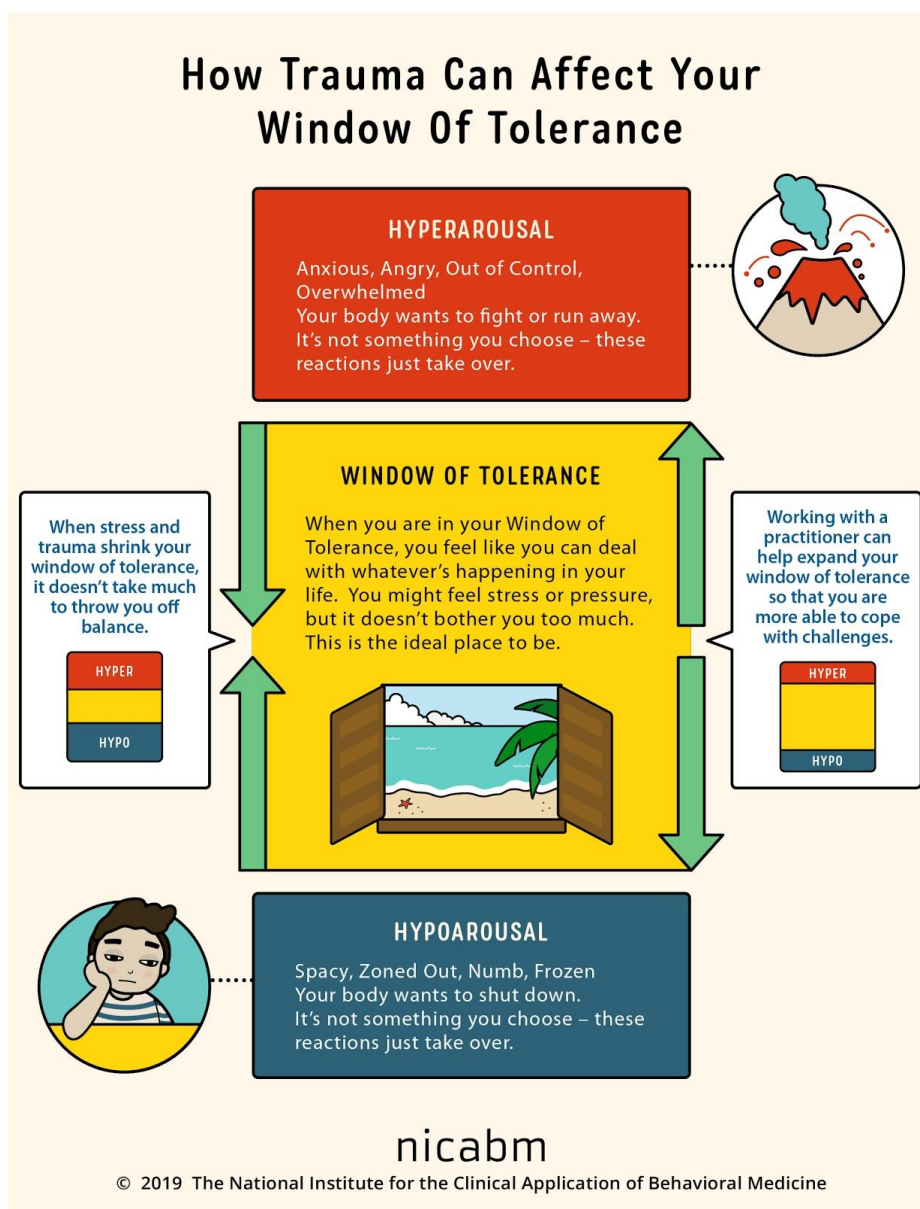
Practicing Balance With Mindfulness: The Window of Tolerance

It's important to state that we are not trying to get rid of anger, sadness, anxiety, or any unpleasant emotion. All of these feelings are important and are often justified. Anger, sadness, and fear can be completely appropriate responses to what we face in our lives. But grounding ourselves first, regulating our systems, and then bringing awareness to our emotions will allow us to respond with much greater clarity and effectiveness. Let's try a regulation practice right now.

Many regulation practices are aimed at up-regulating or down-regulating our energy so that we can find an optimal zone of operation, within our "window of tolerance." We often need to begin here, especially if we're dealing with chronic stress and personal and collective trauma. Mindfulness is a profound practice for identifying when we are dysregulated and offers tools to bring ourselves back into equilibrium.

The graphic below illustrates this concept of the window of tolerance, including:

- how we might feel when we're *inside* our window of tolerance
- how we might feel when we're *outside* our window of tolerance, either in a state of hyperarousal or hypoarousal
- how trauma, stress, and other factors can impact how wide or narrow our window is at a given time



You can access a free printable image of this graphic here:

<https://www.nicabm.com/trauma-how-to-help-your-clients-understand-their-window-of-tolerance/>

Emotional Regulation with RAIN

R Recognize

A Allow

I Investigate with Kindness

N Nurture + Non-identify

Working With Intense Emotions

Strong or difficult emotions often get a bad rap. They easily get judged as wrong or bad or inappropriate because they are potent and might make others uncomfortable. In mindfulness practice it's important to understand that we are just observing these emotions without needing to add extra judgment. If judgment comes, no problem; notice the judgment.

There is something to be said for and even celebrated about strong or difficult emotions, as they can serve as important motivators, calling us to action in challenging circumstances--for example, when we see someone acting in a way that causes harm to ourselves or others, or when we observe oppression or injustice in the world. When mindful awareness is carefully coupled with these strong emotions, they can be a powerful guiding force toward effective action. It's often when mindfulness is not part of the equation that we see strong emotions only creating destructive and harmful reactions.

Strong pleasant emotions, such as exuberance, when coupled with mindfulness, can be incredibly contagious. For some, however, intense joy or happiness feels uncomfortable and is therefore suppressed. For others still, powerful emotions like elation may come easy, but overwhelm the people they are trying to connect with. If this last sentence rings true for you, this week you may want to concentrate your practice on finding a balance of expression by simply checking in with your body and truest intentions behind sharing your exuberance.

Recognizing our emotional state—and creating the space to be present with it—increases our capacity to be with emotions that feel intense or uncomfortable. This capacity creates confidence to act appropriately during any emotional experience instead of letting the experience control us. This is one of the most precious gifts of having a mindfulness practice!

With resilience, we can enter into difficult conversations and actions without getting as triggered, or at least we can be aware of the triggers so they don't knock us off our balance beam. Our mindfulness practice first helps us to identify when we have been taken over by fear and anger, and then can motivate us to embrace those feelings with awareness and care, giving ourselves enough space to navigate from clarity.

**There is no controlling life.
Try corralling a lightning bolt,
containing a tornado. Dam a
stream and it will create a new
channel. Resist, and the tide
will sweep you off your feet.
Allow, and grace will carry
you to higher ground. The only
safety lies in letting it all in –
the wild and the weak; fear,
fantasies, failures and success.
When loss rips off the doors of
the heart, or sadness veils your
vision with despair, practice
becomes simply bearing the truth.
In the choice to let go of your
known way of being, the whole
world is revealed to your new eyes.**

– Danna Faulds

Compassion for Others, Compassion for Ourselves

When cultivating mindfulness, sometimes we become keenly aware of the places where we are not interacting well with others. Through first-hand experience, you may have noticed times when a lack of awareness of emotion or thought easily led to acting poorly toward someone else. Maybe you've experienced a time or two when you were in an argument with someone, aware the whole time that you were reacting in a way that you would later regret. We've all been there. Often all we can do is watch as we fling insensitive remarks at the other person while wishing we hadn't done so! Our compassion for others can motivate us to at the very least make amends and take responsibility for when this happens, and mindfulness invites us to go further and take a preventative pause.

When we notice this type of behavior in ourselves, it is an example of when awareness is present but not strong enough to stop or change our habits of reaction. Sometimes the habits of how we interact and react to certain circumstances and people can be so strongly rooted that all we can do is watch and apologize soon after. The regretful, "It was not my intention to hurt you," is a start, but also shows that we may have acted in a way that truly did not consider the other person. With a mindfulness practice, our relationships with our community, colleagues, family, and friends become the ultimate training ground for our awareness and willingness to stay openhearted.

Another component we can bring to this type of behavior is self-compassion. Self-compassion means treating oneself with patience, kindness, and understanding. When we practice self-compassion, we use our mistakes as opportunities to soften and be vulnerable. Instead of beating ourselves up, we can respond to negative thought patterns with self-kindness. We can learn to utilize compassion, rather than self-criticism, as a more effective motivator. Research conducted by Juliana Breines and Serena Chen has shown that when we show ourselves compassion after a setback, we are more likely to take action toward improving in the future.¹

¹Juliana G. Breines, and Serena Chen, "Self-Compassion Increases Self-Improvement Motivation," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38, no. 9 (September 2012): 1133–43, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167212445599>.

Practicing Heartfulness

As we shared in Week 1, the qualities that comprise heartfulness—like kindness, gratitude, and generosity—are beneficial states in and of themselves, leading to greater well-being and happiness. They are also essential supports for mindfulness practice, because they help us be more open to what we notice about our present experience.

By deliberately cultivating these qualities, we nurture an inner dialogue that is less judgmental, less reactive, and more receptive to what arises in any given moment. This supports our own resilience and also changes how we show up in our relationships with others.

We can practice heartfulness in two ways: first, by bringing a quality of care and empathy to whatever is happening, internally or externally; second, by actively and intentionally strengthening specific qualities of the heart. Whether it is kindness, gratitude, generosity, or compassion, cultivation consists of three main components: initiating the quality, sustaining attention, and savoring its effects.

On the face, it seems like heartfulness should be all about opening the heart, but that is only one aspect of the practice. We could call that aspect the 'cultivation' side of heartfulness. We are cultivating or accessing feelings of warmth, connection, tenderness, joy, and kindness.

Interestingly, and perhaps surprisingly, this type of practice can also bring the opposite feelings to center stage. We think we're supposed to be feeling love, but we feel only anger or fear or sadness. It's important to remember that this doesn't mean you're doing anything wrong.

We can also think about the heartfulness practice as a 'digestion' practice, where we can work through the obstacles to open-heartedness. This practice tends to highlight all that is un-grieved in the heart. We make peace with our past, and absorb our experiences into a more integrated whole.

Sometimes you say the phrases and feel nothing—no warmth, no sadness, nothing. That's okay too. We never want to force ourselves to feel a certain way. Heartfulness

can simply be a concentration practice where we pour all of the attention in the phrases and simply notice what happens in our experience. In this sense, the heartfulness phrases can simply function like any of the other anchors of attention we've learned previously like breathing or listening to sounds.

The Benefits of Heartfulness

Research has shown that kindness meditation produces an increase in certain emotions such as amusement, contentment, joy, gratitude, hope, interest, and love, which leads to a wide range of benefits, from increased sense of purpose and satisfaction in life, to reduction in depression and illness symptoms.² However, one doesn't need a scientific study to know that it feels good to give and receive kindness! Just think of the last time you smiled at a friend, received a heartfelt compliment, or were met with genuine warmth. How did that feel? Kindness brings happiness and well-being directly into our lives.

Initially, the quality of kindness is an occurrence (or state) in our lives—something that happens occasionally depending on certain conditions. With repeated and steady practice, kindness can develop more into an attitude or orientation to life (a trait), something that characterizes the very way we experience and relate to ourselves and the world around us. In *Altered Traits*, Daniel Goleman and Richard Davidson point out that practicing compassion and kindness for just seven hours “over the course of two weeks leads to increased connectivity in circuits important for empathy and positive feelings.” Over the long term, these practices enhance our “resonance with another person’s suffering, along with concern and a greater likelihood of actually helping.”³

Finally, for us to create a meaningful change and a more equitable society, we need to learn about bias, how it shows up for us, and how it's influencing our viewpoints and actions. We'll talk about that more in Week 4, but we want to name here the important role that tending to our emotions plays in equity and anti-bias work. Ruth King, an

² B. L. Fredrickson, M. A. Cohn, K. A. Coffey, J. Pek, & S. M. Finkel, S. M., “Open hearts build lives: positive emotions, induced through loving-kindness meditation, build consequential personal resources,” *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 95(5), 1045, 2008, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3156028/pdf/nihms304992.pdf>

³ Daniel Goleman and Richard J. Davidson, *Altered Traits: Science Reveals How Meditation Changes Your Mind, Brain, and Body* (New York: Avery, 2017), 250-252.

international insight meditation teacher and leadership coach of diversity awareness says that “racism is a heart disease. How we think and respond is at the core of racial suffering and racial healing. If we cannot think clearly and respond wisely, we will continue to damage the world’s heart.”⁴ Healing the world’s heart begins with healing our own. We also need to learn to bring heartfulness to our feelings, to acknowledge our experiences of trauma, and begin to heal.

“This is always the measure of mindful practice—whether we can create the conditions for love and peace in circumstances that are difficult, whether we can stop resisting and surrender, working with what we have, where we are.

Fundamentally, the practice of love begins with acceptance—the recognition that wherever we are is the appropriate place to practice, that the present moment is the appropriate time. But for so many of us our longing to love and be loved has always been about a time to come, a space in the future when it will just happen, when our hungry hearts will finally be fed, when we will find love.”

– bell hooks⁵

⁴ Ruth King, *Mindful of Race: Transforming Race from the Inside Out* (Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 2018), 4.

⁵ bell hooks, “Toward a Worldwide Culture of Love,” *Lion’s Roar*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.lionsroar.com/toward-a-worldwide-culture-of-love/>.

Practical Steps to Incline Toward Heartfulness

Heartfulness may feel easy when things are going well, but what about when they aren't? What if you are in a bad mood or feeling stressed? With mindfulness we can actually learn to hold those contracting or unpleasant experiences with the same quality of openness we feel when we're content. The following are steps to help incline yourself toward heartfulness in those challenging moments:

1. **Observe:** notice how you are feeling in your body and mind.
2. **Recognize:** know what it is you are experiencing. For example: anger, discomfort, sadness, confusion, anxiety. Use anchor words to label your experience.
3. **Accept:** acknowledge that this is how you are feeling in that moment without extra judgment or needing to change it.
4. **Breathe:** allow yourself to really feel that emotion for several breaths. With each breath, give the emotion space by imagining it being held not only by you but by the whole world. The purpose of this image is to allow the feeling of contraction to loosen up.
5. **Care:** intentionally add qualities of kindness, the way you would with a friend or a small child who came to you during a challenging moment of their own.

You may find that the feeling of warmth and love flow easier when wishing kindness toward people that naturally evoke those feelings. Use this practice to deeply reflect on that feeling of connection and love.

Note that we're not trying to change our preferences in this practice. Sometimes, it can feel like heartfulness is an attempt to manufacture certain feelings. We encourage you to explore this exercise as a way to hold difficult experiences with kindness, and to offer yourself comfort, instead of as a way to manipulate your experience.

A helpful example is the following exchange that a student had with their mindfulness teacher. The student was describing how much she was irritated with a particular

person she found difficult and frustrating. She was trying to use her mindfulness practice and not simply act out her anger. Still, she found herself struggling and asked her teacher how to turn her interactions with this difficult person into a productive practice, rather than just a struggle.

Regarding the difficult person, the teacher said, "You don't have to like him, you just have to love him." That's such a good line! We might interpret it to mean that we can have our preferences—we like some people and don't like others. Those preferences are okay. We don't have to try to create feelings of attraction or the wish to spend time with someone. Yet, it's possible for us to not **like** them, and still open our heart to the fullness of their situation, to see deeply the causes of their behavior, to see how they—just like us—long to be happy. We can love them, even though we may not like them.

**wish pure love and soft peace
upon the ones
who've been unkind to you
and keep moving forward**

-this will free you both

(from rupi kaur's the sun and her flowers)

Week 3 Practice Options

We recommend that you practice one of the formal practices each day, and choose an option (or two) from the informal practices to focus on this week. The key is not where you practice or how well you do it—it's that you make the commitment and practice every day.

If you haven't already, try increasing your time to 10 minutes a day, and remember to check in with your buddy and/or your Online Course Guide for support.

Formal Practice	Informal Practice
<p>For your 10 minutes of formal practice, you could use one of the videos in the Online Classroom, or you could set a timer for 10 minutes.</p> <p>Guided Practices in the Online Classroom:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emotional Regulation Practice Kindness Practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nourish your heart by savoring pleasant states. As human beings, we need more than food, air, water, and shelter. In each of us lies a powerful need for the heart to be nourished. Just as a plant will wither without adequate water, so too our hearts can lose a certain quality of buoyancy, moisture, and brightness without adequate nourishment. You might <ul style="list-style-type: none"> make a gratitude list or enjoy for three breaths the feeling of connection after talking to a friend on the phone Set an intention to take a mindful pause the next time you feel a strong emotional state. Remember, we are trying to create space between our emotions and our reactions. Then, when you do act, try to do so with a spirit of compassion for yourselves or others. Self-regulate in conversations by slowing down. Even one or two extra moments in a hard conversation can help us give ourselves and others our full attention.

Other Ideas for Supporting Yourself in Practice This Week

- Plant reminders to practice self-compassion. Re-watch the video in the self-compassion section. What is one line you want to remember from the video? Write it down and keep it somewhere you'll see it often, like your phone or microwave.
- Connect with your Practice Buddy.
- Join (or watch the recording of) our Live Session.
- We often tell the youth we teach that mindfulness is our personal laboratory where we get to explore new ways of being. We encourage you to see your practice in the same way. It's not about getting something right but rather an opportunity to be with yourself and your experiences in different ways. This practice is the foundation for everything we do in the classroom as mindful educators. As we said before, your nervous system is an important intervention for all those you work with. We wish you a kind and curious exploration.

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