Mindfulness Begins in the Body, Not the Mind

6 MIN READ

JAN. 29, 2026

BY HEATHER HURLOCK

A cautionary tale about living on autopilot, plus 5 practices to come home to your body.

When I was younger, I wasn't really *in* my body. I knew how to care for my body. How to be strong. I definitely learned how to judge it. I learned how to push through discomfort (or distract myself from it). But I didn't know how to *be in it*.

If you had asked me back then, I would have said of course I knew how to be in my body. I was in it every day. I played sports, ran trails, biked, hiked, swam, danced, played music, jumped out of airplanes. I was in my body!

And then I had kids.

When my children were toddlers, I began to notice something unsettling about myself. I was reactive in ways that didn't match who I thought I was. Turns out, having little bundles of my own creation running around could send me straight into overwhelm. I'm deeply grateful I noticed this when I did, because it changed my life (and my parenting).

That's when I found mindfulness. And that's when it became clear that I spent a lot of my time not actually in my body.

I was living in my head. Managing everything from there. Moving through my days in some blend of determination, autopilot, and low-grade fight-or-flight. So when my mindfulness practice asked me to pay attention to the sensations in my body, it surprised me how uncomfortable it was.

When I did manage to check in with my body, what I felt was tension. The clenched

jaw. The crunched shoulders. Was I even breathing regularly? I would stretch out my body and make it as big as possible and then relax every body part I could name.

While I was learning to be with my body, a quiet grief would sometimes arise. A realization of how much of my life I'd been shutting out. How much I'd been living on autopilot. At first, I turned that grief into self-criticism. How could I have ignored my body like this for so long? What else was I missing?

But over time, I understood something important.

What I was feeling wasn't failure.
It was the beginning of awareness.

It was the first time I was experiencing the gap between *thinking about* my body and *being present with* it.

That's what mindfulness actually is: being here, now. And that's why it begins in the body. Not because it's basic. But because it's where we already are.

Before thoughts.
Before stories.
Before interpretation.
Before reactivity.

Our body is here with us. And what a gift that is.

What Does it Mean to Be Embodied?

These bodies are how we access our aliveness. Our intuition. Our compassion. Our gratitude. Our capacity (or lack thereof!). Mindfulness of the body is not about fixing anything. It's about building a relationship with sensation *as it is*. It's about being embodied.

For a long time, the word *embodied* felt ethereal to me. Like something you float into or achieve once you're calm enough, wise enough, evolved enough. That was because it lived only as an idea in my mind, not as a lived experience.

Being embodied, I've come to learn, is much simpler than that.

It's being present with what's happening as it's happening.
Not hovering above it.
Not analyzing it.
Not trying to turn it into something else.
Not generating feelings about it.
Not trying to shift away from it.

Sensation is always here. Right now.

There's a line from Mary Oliver I return to often:
"You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves."

I adore this line because she says *let* the body. Not make it. Not change it. Just allow it to be what it already is.

Alive.
Responsive.
And sometimes brutally honest.

This is why mindfulness of the body matters so much. It's how we learn to hear (and listen to) our own wisdom.

What Does *Your* Body Know?

Neuroscientist Lisa Feldman Barrett explains in her book ***How Emotions Are Made*** that the brain is constantly processing signals from the body and making

predictions *before* we're consciously aware of them. In other words, sensation comes first, and conscious thought arrives later as the brain interprets what the body is already signaling.

We often assume insight comes from thinking harder or reflecting longer. But true discernment arrives when what you "know" finally meets up with what your body has been telling you all along.

When we slow down enough to listen to our body, we begin to learn our own internal language.

Ask yourself: Where do I brace when I'm stressed? Where do I soften when something feels aligned? What makes me hold my breath? Where do I carry old histories? Repeated patterns?

If these questions bring up discomfort, that's okay. For many of us, disconnection from the body was a necessary form of protection. Reconnecting isn't about forcing anything, it's about building safety, slowly, one small noticing at a time.

Listening to your body is one of the most intimate forms of self-compassion. It's also one of the doorways to relational intelligence. If you can soften enough to listen to your own body you can soften enough to listen to others.

A Short Practice List: Moments of Mindfulness of The Body

You don't need a cushion or a quiet room to begin. Try one of these today.

1. The One-Sensation Check-In

Pause once today and notice a single sensation. Your fingers on a mug or the sensation of water on your hands when you're washing them. The rise and fall of your breath. Just noticing. You can say something like, "right here," quietly to yourself to root in to your body.

2. The Breath You're Already Taking

Instead of changing your breath, feel the next inhale and exhale exactly as they are. Let the body lead. Your body is breathing all day. Take a moment to notice a few natural breaths.

3. The Body Question

When you feel stuck or reactive, ask quietly: *Where do I feel this in my body?* No analysis required. Just take note of where the feeling lives. Breathe and allow it to be for a moment.

4. The Unheld Moment

Notice when you're holding your breath. Gently let it go. That's the practice.

5. The Big Stretch

Stretch your body out as wide and big as possible: reach your arms out, spread your fingers, take up space. Then slowly relax each body part you can name: neck, arms, shoulders, belly, tongue, hands… Let each area soften as you name it.

Small moments like these build trust in your body awareness. And trust is what brings us home to our body.

The information provided in this article is for educational and informational purposes only and is not intended as health, medical, or financial advice. Do not use this information to diagnose or treat any health condition. Always consult a qualified

*healthcare provider regarding any questions you may have about a medical condition or health objectives.**Read our disclaimers**.*

WRITTEN BY:



Heather Hurlock