What Is the Definition of Mindfulness?

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What is mindfulness? There are a lot of definitions out there.

Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), defines mindfulness as “the awareness that arises from paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”

Spiritual leader Thich Nhat Hanh describes it as “being aware of what is happening inside and around you in the present moment.”

The Greater Good Science Center says it’s “maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment, through a gentle, nurturing lens.”

Turns out, there’s no single definition of mindfulness. That’s because mindfulness is an innate human capacity—and there are as many ways to be mindful as there are minds on the planet.

As the former editor-in-chief of *Mindful* magazine, I’ve been talking to people about mindfulness, reading about it, and writing about it for the better part of the last decade.

Now, in these times when the world feels both on fire and deeply tender, I’m making the choice to begin training as a mindfulness teacher. It’s not a flashy choice. It’s a quiet one. But it feels like the most radical, loving thing I can do.

Why I’m Defining Mindfulness

I’m enrolled in a two-year teacher training program led by some of my favorite

teachers: Tara Brach, Jack Kornfield, Rhonda Magee, Sebene Selassie, and more. The program has just begun, but in a world that feels increasingly fractured and fast, learning how to hold space for healing, for myself, my family, and my community, feels like the right next step.

And while I'm a little nervous, I'm stepping forward to become a teacher because I believe mindfulness and meditation are essential tools for our collective freedom and thriving.

One of the first things Jack asked us to do in the early days of the program was to define what mindfulness means to us. So I sat with the question: What is my definition of mindfulness?

Here's what I've come up with so far:
Mindfulness is the ability to stay close to the source of your own embodied wisdom—to become courageously intimate with what you know in your heart to be true and let it inform your actions.

This definition will probably change. But I wonder, what's your definition? Sit with that for a moment. What comes up for you?

I'd love to hear about it. **Write and tell me if you feel so inclined**.

Holding Space

My personal practice is an anchor for me. It helps me listen to my inner knowing, keeps me grounded when life feels chaotic, and helps me return to wise-ish action when my inner trickster is looking for a little mischief or when the world is so heavy I don't know where to begin. But like so many on this path, I grapple with self-doubt, with the voice of the inner critic that whispers, "You're not ready to hold space for others."

And yet, through years of sitting with gifted teachers, I've learned that teaching isn't about having all the answers. It's about creating brave space so others can hear their own wisdom.

And the more I reflect, the more I see I've been doing this all along. As a parent, holding space for my teenagers as they navigate the highs and lows of growing up in a complex world. As a friend, listening and showing up when my circle of ladies needs an ear. As an editor, guiding writers to see the gems hidden inside their brilliant ideas. Even as a musician, planting my feet on stage to share a song that invites strangers into a shared emotional journey.

These things remind me that holding space is about practicing presence, watching thoughts and judgments arise, and letting them pass. It's about actively listening, again and again. I imagine you can think of many times when you've held mindful space for others.

The Crack Where the Light Gets In

One of the most important parts of the practice, to me, is that imperfection is part of the process and where the real journey begins. How do you handle moments when tension arises? What do you do when you realize that your mind has wandered and you're stuck in a thought spiral? That's where the true gift of mindfulness lives. Because there's a crack in everything, and that's how the light gets in! (Thanks, Leonard Cohen)

I've been lucky. I've sat with Sharon Salzberg and watched how her simple, real approach makes meditation and mindfulness accessible to everyone. Begin again, she always says. I've witnessed Frank Ostaseski hold space with such fierce clarity that the invitation to be present can't be ignored. I've learned from Vinny Ferraro, whose big, kind heart can be felt in every word he speaks, softening the practice space before you even begin. I've sat with Tara Brach, whose gentle compassion and brilliant

insights have given me a deeper understanding of acceptance. And I've learned body-based presence from Michele Maldonado, whose body mapping practice helped me listen to the parts of my body that hold my history—the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful.

These teachers remind me: the work is about returning. To the breath. To the body. To the truth that we're human and flawed and worthy of care. When I think about offering space to others, I think about how the practice of mindfulness feels like belonging. To the Earth. To each other. It feels like home.

What I Want to Hold Space For

As I prepare to step more fully into the role of teacher, I've been asking myself just how I want to hold space and what I want to hold space for.

- **For love and compassion**—for the way tenderness shows up in the body like a softening, an allowing, an intimate remembering. Can you feel it? Can you come home to the quiet rhythm of your breath? To the steady beat of care that's always available?
- **For difficult emotions like loneliness and grief**—for the heaviness that settles in the bones, the ache of missing what once was. Take a breath. Let your shoulders drop. You belong here, just as you are.
- **For women's rage** (this one always surprises people when I share it). But there's a sacred fire that burns beneath the centuries of silence women have endured. In practice, how big can we let it be? Can it stretch across the sky like a dragon of love, fierce and protective? When we allow our biggest emotions to take up space with compassion, we honor the fullness of our humanity.
- **For marginalized voices.** In a time when diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging are being weaponized, I want to create a space of psychological safety where people's perspectives are valued so that we can connect more deeply to the human experience. **?**

- **For gratitude**—Not the kind of gratitude that compares your suffering to someone else's in order to feel better, like being grateful you have food on the table when others don't. But the kind of gratitude that reminds you that you carry generations' worth of wisdom inside, and when you remember, you help others remember, too. The kind of embodied gratitude that resounds from within, proclaiming: You are not separate from the suffering of others.

I want to help others touch into their own spark of clarity, truth, and belonging that mindfulness can allow. Not polished or perfect. But real, spacious, and rooted in presence.

I don't know exactly where this teaching path will lead, but I know it will require consistency, community, humility, and love. Because the journey of a teacher is, first and always, the journey of a student. And, if you're on a similar journey, I'd love to hear how your practice has shaped you. Because, as bell hooks says, "Rarely, if ever, are any of us healed in isolation. Healing is an act of communion."

And I'm ready to begin. And begin again.

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