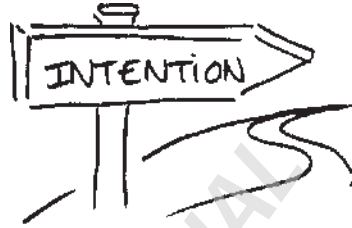

Chapter 1

Intention



*May what I do flow from me like a river,
no forcing and no holding back,
the way it is with children.*

*Then in these swelling and ebbing currents,
these deepening tides moving out, returning,
I will sing you as no one ever has,
streaming through widening channels
into the open sea.*

Rainer Maria Rilke¹

This poem might be speaking about learning to be mindful in the context of cancer. A small river is always flowing and changing. Sometimes it is bright and dancing, sometimes agitated and busy, and sometimes depleted and low. Yet, streams and rivers can fascinate in their movement, flow, and inevitable journey to the sea. Do you have a river near you? Could you go and watch it with this idea of flow and change in mind?

Rilke is speaking of his intention, 'May what I do flow from me like a river'. I think he is inviting the possibility of being entirely how he is, moment by moment – inspired by the river that has no way of being anything else. We so often try to be braver and better. Is it possible to be the river that you are?

Intention

The intentions we set ourselves remind us of what is important. It is like having an internal compass. When we form the intention to be more mindful, that intention focuses and shapes our choices and actions.

Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn²

Intention is the first of our four movements, underpinning all the others. Consciously cultivating intention may not be a familiar process – but if we identify and stay connected with what matters to us, it will support us well. Maybe, we can then use our time to make space to enjoy what is precious. We can choose to stop delaying living – and allow an experience of illness to motivate choices of wellness. What might that mean to you? There may be lots of reasons why this may not seem possible, but let us see what unfolds from the process of cultivating mindful intention.

We consider this in a number of ways that are practical, reflective and practice-based. Later, we follow a Body Scan, and introduce two short practices. At the end of this chapter, we look at the implications of being diagnosed with cancer, and learn a ‘first aid’ mindfulness practice.

Preparing the ground³

Cultivating intention is the first step in bringing mindfulness into your life. It links you to your vision for what you hope mindfulness may offer.

We might bring to mind some intentions made in the past that started well, but did not last. Like New Year’s Resolutions, they often focus on giving something up, rather than putting something in place. The motivation behind them is what seems to count. Cultivating an ‘ought to’ intention is likely to become irritating and guilt inducing. At the other extreme, we might be tempted to frame our intention in meaningful significance that is writ large! This can prove exhausting to sustain.

Our world tends to motivate us towards hard work and constant busyness. We end up driven to get more and more done. When someone becomes ill, their productivity is inevitably diminished and this can feel very difficult, for the universe tends to define us by what we do – as we do ourselves.

Instead can we look at intentions that support a simpler and kinder way of being? Can we find ways of fostering a commitment to enjoy and appreciate all that we love in our lives? Can we put meaning into the detail of ‘living’ rather than the ‘doing’ of it? This is what mindfulness has to offer us.

Intention

Intention has a vital role in ‘co-opting’ your mind to come onboard as an ally and a friend.

When mindfulness is harnessed with conscious intention, we can align to those choices that support well-being and offer skilful responses to difficulty.

Developing a new skill takes practice. Starting mindfulness is a bit like learning to play a musical instrument. It takes time before you can make a decent sound – but with a commitment to practice regularly, it starts to feel more natural.

Every action involves some form of intention. It might be vague – an almost *mindless* or unconscious intention – such as when we stand up to make a hot drink, or walk upstairs to fetch something and then forget half way up what we wanted!

At the other end of the scale, there are *overarching* intentions that are formed to support what is wholesome – and what we hold dear. These then become *specific* when translated into everyday actions. They guide the choices we make.

Jennifer was going to be 40 and had finished treatment for breast cancer two years before. She decided to enter her first ever mini triathlon to prove to herself that she was now well and not yet ‘over the hill’ (her **overarching intention**). She made some **specific intentions** to train regularly in all three activities. She didn’t do as much as she planned, but she was thrilled to be able to complete the course.

Clarifying Your Intention

We look now at cultivating a personal overarching intention. There are three steps to follow, which you will be guided through. This may seem a bit mechanical for something that connects you with what you hold dear, so you might reflect on some of this on a walk, while listening to some lovely music, or in conversation with a friend.

It will help to record your reflections and the answers to your questions, in your notebook if you like – so that you can refer back to them later.

- The **first step** focuses on how you are now and what has drawn you to mindfulness.
- The **second step** invites you to explore your personal vision, values and aspirations. These are the things in your life that you care most about.
- Finally, **in the third step**, you will be guided through an intention practice. This will help you identify your overarching intentions in the light of the previous two steps.

Following this process may make all the difference to what you get from the approach in this book.

The first step

What draws you to mindfulness?

Recording how things are now gives you a reference point for the future.

Current levels of stress

What impact has cancer diagnosis and treatment had on you?

- How stressed have you felt over the last few weeks? Is this generally more or less than over the last few months?
- Give yourself a score from 1–10 (10 is highest stress – 1 is lowest) relating to how you are now.
- What are the key signs of stress currently (sleeping? eating? physical symptoms? mood? energy? emotions? troubling thoughts?)? Be as detailed as you can, recording what gives you most trouble and how.
- Record today's date alongside these answers.

Specific hopes

EITHER

You encountered mindfulness before you were diagnosed and may have (or have had) an existing practice.

OR

You are new to mindfulness, but have heard or read about it, and want to know more.

What do you hope that the mindfulness approach in this book will offer you? Be as specific as you can.

Mindfulness and cancer

Knowing how mindfulness has benefited others can help you to develop trust in this approach – even though everyone gets something different.

There are two perspectives on offer to you. Having taught mindfulness to many people with cancer, in 8 week courses and also one-to-one, I often notice that those who commit to the practices as fully as they can, positively benefit from the process. It is never possible to predict the shape and form of this, but as you will read, some people's experience of life is greatly changed for the better after learning mindfulness. My colleagues see similar outcomes with people with cancer. Learning to live more mindfully enables people to develop and use tools that help them manage their challenging feelings. As a result, they feel more content.

Another perspective can be drawn from the research. Evidence of the benefits of mindfulness for people with cancer is established and growing. Linda Carlson and her team in Canada have extensively researched this over many years.⁴ Mindfulness-based approaches have been found to be effective for people with cancer across a range of outcomes, including stress symptoms, mood, fatigue, quality of life, and sleep symptoms. Overall levels of anxiety and depression were found to reduce and overall levels of well-being were found to increase. Researchers have much more to discover, but there are some early findings that suggest some physical benefits from practicing mindfulness that relate to biomarkers, which may link with the impact of stress on the immune system.

The second step

Personal vision, values and aspirations

We start by asking a key question and inviting you to reflect on it.

What really matters to me?

Time rushes by and another year passes. We seem to experience chunks of life almost as if half asleep – existing much of the time in automatic mode.

Sometimes, getting cancer can illuminate this. Mindfulness helps people with cancer find more meaning and purpose in their lives – often through a greater sense of interconnectedness with others. It is vital that we relate to the things that matter most to us. If we fail to do this, they will pass us by. We will not realize their significance or make choices that are aligned to them.

Jack Kornfield voices this in his book *A Path with Heart*:

In the stress and complexity of our lives, we may forget our deepest intentions. But when people come to the end of their life and look back, the questions they most often ask are not usually, 'How much is in my bank account?'... or 'What did I build?' or the like.The questions such a person asks are very simple: 'Did I love well?' Did I live fully?'⁵

Dr. Atul Gawande, surgeon and author, makes a similar point in a different context, as he challenges medicine and his medical colleagues:

We've been wrong about what our job is in medicine. We think our job is to ensure health and survival. But really it is larger than that. It is to enable well-being. And well-being is about the reasons one wishes to be alive.⁶

What really matters to me?

Sitting and breathing with this question – and maybe walking with it. Encouraging you to pause and take your time to shape your answer to this.

Miriam had been treated for cancer for several years and found sadly that her life now felt much reduced. However, when she thought about what really mattered to her, she found so much. 'I had to put things in groups, or my list would have been too long to remember', she told me. 'Beauty really matters, and nature, and the walnut tree in the garden that looks like a Bedouin tent – and of course my family, especially my children – and when I thought about it, I realized how important laughter is to me, especially with my five special friends. We share such a sense of the ridiculous!' she finished, sounding happy and animated.

When you have reflected and written as much as you want, move on to step three.

The third step

Now is the time to follow the intentions practice from the website. After this you will be invited to write a letter to yourself.

The words below are simply for guidance. They are very similar to those on the website recording.



An intentions practice

Settling into a comfortable position ... Imagining that you are standing or sitting beside a body of water – a lake, or a stream or the ocean itself. The water beside you is very clear and you can see all the way down to the bottom. Choosing an imaginary pebble, holding it in your hand, and then tossing it gently into the water – watching it sink very, very, slowly (much more slowly than it actually would). Asking yourself ...

- ‘What really matters to me?’
- ‘What do I most wish for myself?’
- ‘What is my intention in relation to mindfulness and this book?’

Not being concerned if answers don’t come, just continuing to ask gently, opening to the possibility of something emerging from within you – maybe some thoughts, maybe some feelings – perhaps some inner wisdom. Keep asking as you imagine that you see the pebble gently sink through the water. Eventually the pebble comes to rest ...

Intentions letter

EITHER

- Write yourself a kindly letter, describing the intentions that emerged for you during the practice.
- OR
- If your best friend was talking to you about mindfulness and what this book might offer you, what wise advice and gentle encouragement might s/he offer?

Intentions Letter

Dear Me,

*Love
From
Me!*

Here are three examples of intentions letters. They were all written at the start of mindfulness journeys – and much later, the authors of the letters kindly offered to share them for this book.

Intention

Kate was caring for her husband who had incurable cancer. Both his daughters also had cancer. She had the tendency to get angry when she was under pressure. Her intentions letter speaks of this:

I hope I grow in wisdom. I hope I find a way to walk beside this family with love and kindness. I hope I find ways to cool the heat of my rage. I hope I find the strength to live alone without him and have no regrets for the way we share this time.

June had recently finished treatment for breast cancer when she started her course. A devoted grandmother, she was surrounded by a busy extended family, yet she often felt alone with her fears:

I hope mindfulness will give me the courage to be stronger in moments of despair. I want to live life to the full without being overwhelmed by the fears and worries that surround the thoughts of cancer and what is happening inside my body. I will give this course my total commitment to that end.

George, an elderly man with terminal cancer, was in a very anxious place when he started mindfulness. His letter speaks of the courage he wants to cultivate and of what and who matters most to him:

I've embarked on this to learn to be braver in the face of my illness. I want to be able to attain some stillness (Be still my soul!) and be thankful for all life has given me over the years. I want especially not to burden my family with destructive self-pity and to show them how much I love them and appreciate their love of me. Can I learn to love myself despite everything?

Specific intentions

Later, we will learn to translate the overarching intentions that you write about in your letter, into specific commitments. By linking regularly with intention, we let what matters to us underpin our actions and practices. We will learn to pause regularly, as this gives us time to remember.

There might be some special contexts or moments that need particular intentions – such as when you go to clinic or are waiting to receive results. You will learn some practices that support waiting and treatment times, later in the book.

For now, having written your letter and reflected on each of the steps, you have made a good start. You have laid down some significant foundations that will hold and support you as you bring mindfulness into your life.

Three skilful intentions

There are three powerful partners in cultivating mindfulness: *kindness*, *compassion* and *being with*.

Kindness

Mindfulness practice is infused with a quality of *kindness*. This is very different to the attitude of mind that habitually judges and takes things personally. When we bring a friendly attention to what is happening, this spills over into how we are with others, and how we experience our world.

Sheila found it helped her to connect with kindness when she brought to mind how she was with her children, and how her mother was with her. This helped her develop kindness towards herself. It was not an easy process for her, but she got more and more glimpses of it as she practiced.

Compassion

Is a kindly way of meeting pain and suffering. Instead of closing down and tightening against it, we learn to gently open to what is there – whether it is emotional distress, or physical pain, in us or in others. We learn that it is not so much *my* pain, but *the* pain that anyone in this situation might feel. Compassion is sometimes called the ‘trembling of the heart’. It enables us to take the action that is needed, inspired by a wish to ease suffering.

Jane got to know many of the others who regularly had chemo with her. She cared about them and what happened to them. Later in the mindfulness course, she brought them to mind and how it had been. 'I really feel for everyone who has to go through chemo as we did', she said, 'It helped me so much to have others there, experiencing the same as me. Feeling for them, I could somehow be more patient and caring with myself.'

Being with

Helps us to cultivate a wiser and less reactive way of being. By coming back to the resonance of sensations in the body, we notice when troublesome thoughts and emotions arise. Instead of getting stuck in deepening loops of negativity, we can acknowledge the struggle and hold it gently in the body. We are cultivating the possibility of freeing the mind in the moment, from the stuck places that state, 'I am (or it is) always like this' – and suggesting that in the midst of it all, we can be with it in awareness, kindness and compassion.

Everything new needs to be held, needs a place into which it can be born.⁷

Concluding

Cultivating and clarifying intentions for living mindfully is time well spent, however long this takes you. If you have not reflected on your intentions yet, it is worth going back, before moving on to the next section, where we learn to bring mindfulness into the context of living with cancer.

My Late Night Visitor

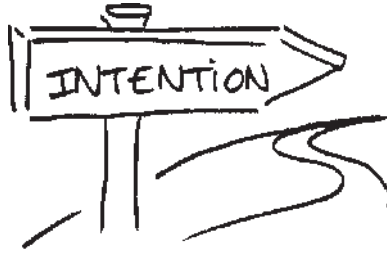
*I sit propped up in my bed
comfortable, relaxed.
Pen in hand I am trying to write a poem.*

*“Can I get into your bed?”
No pause for my possible reply
Teddy under one arm, pillow under the other
She climbs across me to the other side of the bed.
She arranges her pillow to her satisfaction,
Settles herself with teddy and goes straight to sleep.
We have not spoken a word.*

*I put down my pen and give in to the moment.
I watch her sleep, I count her breaths.
Have those freckles always been there across her nose?
Her face is beautiful and the more I examine it
The less I seem to know it.
Did my mother gaze like this at me when I was five?
Will my daughter in turn gaze at her daughter when she is five?
I feel a sense of my place in the grand scheme of things
It feels right, it feels good.*

*She opens her eyes and gives me a steady look.
With a sleepy half smile she turns over and faces the wall.
I pick up my pen.*

Liz



The Practice of Mindfulness

Overview

We begin with a traditional introduction to mindfulness – and then go on to encounter one of the key practices, which become part of your daily menu for the next weeks. We also explore ways of approaching home practice – so that your intentions are put to good use in everyday routines.

Two groups of people travel with you throughout this book. There are those who have been on similar journeys themselves, and know the lie of the land. They share some practice stories with you.

The others are your fellow travellers, reading as you read, and practicing as you practice. Together, you form a community of mindfulness practitioners with cancer. You can wish them well, now at the start and at any other time along the way – just as you can be sure that they wish you well. You may never see their faces, but as time passes and your understanding and practice deepens, you will know that they too lie awake worrying just like you; and they too feel the sun on their backs and experience the joy of being alive, just like you. We are so different in so many ways, yet we share so much in the landscape of what we find distressing and what gives us joy. Strangely, when we connect with this, it helps us not to feel so alone.

The Raisin Exercise

I first experienced this exercise with 100s of others, in a huge hall in central London. It seemed like a strange thing to do, especially with so many people. I was in the middle of chemotherapy and felt self-conscious with my head scarf. Yet it was interesting to reflect on afterwards.

My voice will guide you from the website recording. I will be following the practice myself as I lead it for you. This is your first taste of mindfulness. You are joining many thousands of others who have been introduced to mindfulness in just the same way. You may have experienced this exercise before. Even if you have, it is helpful to do it again. See if you can come fresh to the raisin, as if you have no idea what it is, and no expectations of what we will be doing ...

Have a raisin ready when you follow this practice.



The Raisin Exercise

Your first taste of mindfulness! – Imagine that you have dropped in from Mars and have no idea what this little object is in the hand! Feel it in the palm ... have a good look at it (taking your time and focusing in on all the detail that you can see); ... bring it up to the nose and smell it slowly; ... feel the touch of it in your fingers (maybe closing your eyes to focus in on the texture); ... and finally and very slowly, place it in the mouth. Chewing deliberately and slowly one chew at a time, ... noticing the taste, the texture, the experience of swallowing, ...

We approach things ‘as if for the first time’ by bringing a fresh awake curiosity to the experience of the little raisin. Some of you may enjoy the strange oddness of it. Others of you may be bored and become restless with the slowness of it. Whatever you feel, see if you can simply explore your experience of the raisin, and this exercise, using the following questions – almost as if to gently get some juice out of the little thing.



Reflective inquiry

- What was happening for you as you went through the different parts of the raisin exercise?
- What did you notice – in detail – about the raisin?
- How was it to experience a raisin in this way?

Try the raisin exercise with younger family members, you may learn from their ‘beginners mind’. I did this with my 7-year-old granddaughter. She noticed the shapes on the surface of the raisin and liked the way they reflected light – and she laughed, delighted at the tiny sound the raisin made when she squished it near her ear. She later announced in a family meal that she would like to listen to her vegetables rather than eat them!

A definition of mindfulness

Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as ‘the awareness that emerges when we:

pay attention

on purpose

in the present moment

without judgment

in the service of greater self-understanding, wisdom and well-being.’⁸

Spending a little time now reflecting on the raisin exercise in the context of this definition.

- What was the particular way that you paid attention?
- What do the other aspects of the definition mean to you – on purpose; in the present moment and without judgement?

When I lead this with a group of people with cancer, participants often comment on the way we slowed down. They describe what they noticed with each sense, one at a time. Some people associate the smell of the raisin with Christmas, or the kitchen they remember as children. Others realize how often they taste things without really tasting them at all. Some of them describe how much they did NOT want to taste the raisin. We learn that taking time to be present to the taste, and smell, and look of something changes the experience. We notice more. It is so different to chucking a handful of raisins in the mouth and swallowing them after a very few chews. Wanting a ‘hit’ of sweetness, the mouthful passes almost unnoticed in a second.

Stephen was unsure about the whole mindfulness enterprise, but his wife had persuaded him to give it a go and join a course. ‘It came as a bit of a shock on that first day when we were given that raisin. I was sceptical – but then I was intrigued. It seemed such a trivial thing to do, but it obviously had quite enormous resonance, once you grasped the fact that eating the raisin is a metaphor for all sorts of things. After that, I began to look at it all with more interest.

Eating mindfully at home

In the weeks to come, see if you can bring the same curious fresh attention to the taste of your food from time to time. Pausing at some point to look at, smell, and taste one mouthful. What do you notice? There is no right way to do this, nor do you need to be enjoying the food – you are simply aware of tasting in that very moment. You are waking up to the process of eating, instead of automatically chewing and swallowing, without tasting much at all.

Margret attended a mindfulness course in a nearby community hall. She was known in the neighbourhood to love her cups of tea. She might have twenty or more a day and had done for years. After tasting the raisin in the first class, she returned the next week in some consternation. She had mindfully drunk a cup of tea – and discovered that she did not like the taste!



Short Practices

The Pause

This is a key practice that helps us to reconnect with our present moment experience. It is simplicity itself, yet it holds an important key – for the more we practice the Pause, the more we build the ‘muscle’ that enables us to remember to interrupt the automatic and come back to what is happening *here and now*.



The Pause

Begin by stopping what you are doing – and asking yourself one of the following questions:

- *What is going on for me right now?*
or
- *How am I feeling right now?*

Keep this very simple. You might want to adapt the question to make it your own. You are feeling into a sense of what is happening in this moment – not so much thinking about it.

Practicing the Pause

Practicing this several times a day over the next two or more weeks helps you to develop the habit of interrupting the automatic way we live so much of our lives – pausing and coming back.

- You might choose to practice the Pause every time you do a specific task such as: at the start of meals; when you open email; in the middle of washing up; as you go outside.
or
- You might choose to practice a Pause whenever you notice you are feeling: speedy; anxious; stressed; irritable; or upset.



Feet on the Floor

This is your second key short practice in this chapter. Like the Pause it is straightforward – deceptively so. It appears to be something of nothing – yet many people find that bringing attention to the sensations of feet on the floor, whether sitting or standing, offers them a reliable anchor to come back to, over and over. It forms the basis of the beginning of many subsequent short practices.



Feet on the Floor

Feeling the contact of your feet on the ground just placing your attention down onto the soles of your feet and noticing whatever is there. Exploring the detailed sensations in your toes, (are they all in contact with your shoes or the floor or do some have more contact than others?) the balls of the feet (what is the shape of that contact?), and the heels (what is the quality of the contact? – how does it feel?). Perhaps feeling the texture of the shoes surrounding the feet perhaps moving to the feel of the solid of the floor beneath you. Noticing the weight of you going down, through your legs onto your feet, on the floor. Just being curious about all of this – and keep bringing the mind back to the sensations of contact with the floor.

Practice this for a few moments – regularly several times a day – maybe linking it to a daily activity (such as getting out of bed, or boiling the kettle, or waiting in a queue, or finishing a meal).

You can do this at any time, wherever you are; sitting, standing, walking, and lying down. If you are walking – you simply notice the moment the foot comes down onto the ground. If you wake in the night, or have trouble getting to sleep, you can practice this by bringing attention to the contact of your body with the mattress or the bedding; noticing all the different sensations of contact between your body and the bed.

The key is to remember to do it. There is no need to do it for long periods – a few seconds at a time is fine. This is one of the building blocks that form your ‘cancer’ practices later on – so cultivating your intention to practice is important to ensure it becomes an established part of your mindfulness repertoire, whenever you need it. Following this several times a day for at least two weeks will help you integrate it into your life. Bringing specific intention to do this at the start is very helpful and then being curious about the experience of doing it.

- When do you plan to practice Feet on the Floor?
- What activity will you attach it to?
- How will you remember?



Core Practice

The Body Scan

This is your first core practice. It lasts for about 30 minutes. You can use the script below to guide you – but it is better to download the guided Body Scan from the website and follow it. It has been recorded specifically for you to use with this book. Find a way of doing it regularly in a place that is comfortable for you.

Posture

You can follow this practice lying down, on the floor, on a bed, or on a couch. Alternatively, it may prefer to sit in a comfortable chair, with your head and legs supported. You may want a rug or blanket over you, and pillows to support your head, and under your knees. The idea is for you to be comfortable, warm and well supported, and also awake and alert.



Body Scan Practice

‘Settling into the sensations of contact of your body with the floor, or bed, or chair as you briefly scan through the body from the feet up to the head adjusting any part of you that wants to move to a more comfortable position maybe your head and neck – or your back checking to see what might be needed..... and then becoming aware of the detailed qualities of contact between your body and what you are lying on

When you are ready, moving attention deliberately to the breath breathing deep in the body, perhaps placing your hands on the belly to guide you ... and simply resting awareness on the movement of the belly under the hands, as the breath comes in and goes out ... not changing it in any way, letting it breathe exactly as it does, without trying to control it in any way

We are now going to practice The Body Scan.

As we begin, connect with your intention for this practice. Feel this within you, letting your intention guide you throughout the practice. Remembering there is no specific goal to attain. The invitation is simply to follow as best you can, bringing your attention to the sensations in the different parts of your body and exploring them as I guide you through the practice. Remembering that it is fine if you find that you do not want to do something that I invite you to do, but always choosing and doing what is best for you. At any time, you may choose to ignore my practice and come back to the breath, breathing deep in the belly, as you are aware of it now

Now, when you are ready, moving your attention from the belly all the way down to the left foot and then out to the toes of the left foot noticing any sensations in the big toe – perhaps contact with the sock or stocking, maybe warmth or coolness, throbbing or tickling, a sense of the shape of the toe, maybe teasing out sensations of toe nail or pad of the toe (then moving through the different toes, and parts of toes and foot – inviting noticing of sensations, and texture, heat, hardness and softness, contact, inside and outside, and so on ...) ...

If you find as we do this, that you notice that some areas don't have much sensation, then see if you can explore what 'not much sensation' feels like remembering we are just practicing being aware and whatever you notice is fine we are not trying to change any part of your experience, just practicing being aware of how it is.

When you are ready, turning to the breath again, and imagine that you can breathe in a different way – bringing the breath all the way down the left side of the body, through the left leg, into the left foot and the left toes, as you are if breathing into the foot and then breathing out from the foot, up through the body and out through the nose. It is as if we are using the breath as a vehicle for our awareness On the next out breath, letting go of this focus on the breath and the left foot, and moving up through the ankle to the left lower leg (repeating this process through all the different sections of the body – sometimes widening the beam of attention to take in the whole of a limb or the whole of the trunk of the body ...) ...

If at any point you notice that your mind has wandered off into thinking, or you have been distracted by something such as a sound, or drawn to some other part of the body, simply noticing where the mind has got to, and gently and kindly bringing your focus back to wherever we have got to in the body If at any point, we come to an area that holds pain, or discomfort or difficult feelings for you, seeing if it is possible to pause perhaps bringing the breath gently down into and

around the area, and breathing into it and breathing out from it with kindness and sensitivity not trying to change it, but simply to offer this area some kindly attention noticing if the mind moves into thoughts about it, and if it does, seeing if you can simply come back to the sensations in the body, wherever you are choosing to focus

As we come to the end of this practice, expanding the attention into a sense of the body as a whole lying here and coming to the breath, breathing into and out from the whole of the body Now, if you would like to, gently turning towards any part of your body that has experienced treatment or injury – or feels tender or painful at the moment. Inviting you to bring gentleness and kindness to this part – breathing into it gently, if this feels ok, and opening to any sensations that are present there, and holding them gently in awareness now, when you are ready, coming back to a sense of the whole of the body again, bringing any awareness of tenderness into a sense of the whole body. And when you are ready, taking your time to open your eyes and perhaps moving any parts of the body that would like to move. Getting up (if you choose) and deciding what you will do next.



Reflective inquiry

- What was happening for you as you went through the different parts of the Body Scan?
- What did you notice, in general and more specifically?
- How was it to experience your body in this way?

You are invited to reflect like this on all the practices that you follow, especially the guided core practices. You can develop and adapt your own questions. It helps to spend a few moments at the end of each practice, pausing and noticing what you experienced. You can use your notebook or reflect internally. There is often a temptation to get to the end and move straight back into activity and busyness. See if you can take your time, bringing mindful awareness back with you into whatever comes next.

Practicing the Body Scan

You are encouraged to practice the Body Scan at least ten times before you move on to the next chapter. Ideally, you might practice it every day – but some days will be easier than others, so we are aiming for ten times over a fortnight – or twenty Body Scans over a month.

Decide when might be the best time to suit your day and choose a place where you are unlikely to be disturbed. Let your family know that you will be doing this most days – and ask for their support in not interrupting you. Make a choice not to take your phone with you – and then you can dedicate this time to you and your well-being. Morning may be a better time than evening as this offers a better chance of staying awake – but explore what works best for you. In the next chapter, we will learn more about the Body Scan. For now, it is best to experience it in your own way.

Intention

See if you can bring your intention into your plans to practice the Body Scan, the Pause and Feet on the Floor. By translating your overarching intention (what really matters to me?) into everyday commitments, little by little, and day by day, you are supporting the way you want to live. You are aligning your choices to supporting the life you want. Each recorded practice starts with intention. You might even start each day by connecting with your practice intention for that day.



The Experience of Cancer

In the final section of each chapter, we focus on different aspects in the experience of cancer. These follow a chronological order, although this will not necessarily align with your experience. In this section, we touch on the impact of diagnosis and learn a ‘first aid’ mindfulness practice. There are also descriptions of approaches and activities that others have found helpful.

Diagnosis

Getting a diagnosis of cancer is deeply shocking. Medicine and science have made great advances in the research and treatment of cancer – yet when one of us, or someone we care about, is given a cancer diagnosis, we feel shocked and distressed. We immediately fear the worst.

Sandra (50) was living on her own and just back from working overseas as a teacher. She attended the clinic after finding a small lump in her left breast. She remembers feeling incredibly thirsty straight after being told it was cancer. The nurse went to get her some water, but came back with the tiniest of cups and had to go back again and again to get more. ‘I felt very upset and shaky. I remember the doctor giving me endless information and thinking to myself, “How can he possibly imagine I can take all of this in?” Yet somewhere inside, I had noticed that he had mentioned four possible treatments, and I vowed there and then that I wouldn’t agree to having them all – and I didn’t.’

Why me? Why now?

Getting a cancer diagnosis challenges the assumption that we have control over our lives. When tragedy strikes, we invariably hunt for a cause, desperately trying to wrestle back some sense of certainty. We look at who or what is at fault. We blame ourselves. ‘If I had gone to the doctor earlier, this might not have happened.’ ‘I must have done something to deserve this.’

Rationally, it is important to acknowledge that cancer describes a wide range of illnesses with multiple causes, some of which are not yet well understood. Even if we made unwise choices in the past, most of the causes and conditions for getting cancer are beyond our control. Reflecting on this, can you untangle yourself from the additional suffering of self-blame?

The psychological impact

The discovery of life threatening illness and the need for arduous treatments has a strong physical and emotional impact. If at the same time, you are told that your illness is incurable, many people feel they are left without hope. For a time, they may feel quite unable to carry on. It is not surprising that anxiety or depression is significant in people recently diagnosed with cancer,⁹ whatever their prognosis. Overall, it is considered that at least 25–30% of people with cancer suffer from cancer-related psychological disorders.⁹

A cancer diagnosis often comes at the end of a period of waiting and worrying. I know someone who put an oncology appointment letter right at the back of a cupboard, and told no-one about it until a few days before she was due at the hospital. The worst possible outcome may have been imagined many times – and yet it is still a considerable shock when it comes.

Mary (65) was soon to be a grandmother when she was diagnosed with ovarian cancer. She remembers sitting in a large hospital clinic with her partner, waiting to see the doctor to get her test results. She realized that some people, sitting alongside her, would be told they had cancer that day. ‘Everyone looked so pale and scared. I remember wishing the best for all those who were going to be diagnosed that day – never thinking I would be one. I really thought I was ok – and that we were just being careful and getting things checked out. I was later told that there were eight of us that afternoon.’

Waiting

More waiting follows the actual diagnosis – waiting for test results; waiting to see what treatments are recommended; waiting to be referred to another specialty; waiting to hear about a research trial; waiting, waiting. These periods are hard – involving feelings of helplessness and intense anxiety. We tend to move from one extreme to another – from optimism to despair – from feeling it is manageable, to feeling it is impossible to endure.

Until relatively recently, patients were shielded from their diagnosis, and not even told they had cancer. Overprotective attitudes in medical practice are relatively rare now in most societies. We are usually told about the implications of the diagnosis and what treatment is likely to be needed. Whilst this is a great improvement on what used to happen, the traumatic impact of being given a diagnosis is often not fully recognized by medical practitioners.

It is quite normal to react initially to diagnosis with shock and disbelief. Many people describe feelings of numbness and unreality, often accompanied by racing thoughts and a sense of disconnection from the people and events around them. There are however a wide range of reactions to diagnosis. Some people appear not to react much at all.

Patrik (44), originally from Norway had moved to the UK 10 years before, to work in the health service. He had a young family. He cannot remember much about his diagnosis of bladder cancer. 'I was on my own for the appointment, I remember that. I had not told Elizabeth anything about it. It was certainly a surprise, but I am a pretty optimistic person and felt quite confident about my prognosis. I just wanted to hear about the treatment options, and get on with it as soon as possible.'

After some of the shock has worn off, anger, anxiety and depression may follow. Slowly most people adjust in time to the implications of a cancer diagnosis, although longer-term psychological difficulties can persist even after treatment has finished.

Some likely reactions

Not surprisingly, many people experience feelings of numbness and shock.

John could hardly hear what the doctor was saying. It was as if he was being talked to from a long, long distance away.

Others may feel quite overwhelmed and have catastrophic thoughts.

Debbie spent hours and hours on the Internet, reading about her type of cancer. She was convinced that she would die and became increasingly distressed.

Others appear to take the news in their stride.

Rebecca went straight back to work and carried on as if nothing had happened. But she woke up several nights in a row sobbing in her sleep. 'I was so surprised when I got up the following morning. I thought I had been coping so well', she told me.

Sometimes intrusive memories of the diagnosis break through at odd times of the day and night.

Ellen hated going back to the clinic where she had received news of her diagnosis. She had vivid memories of the room, the nurse, the doctor and a particular notice on the wall about fire drill. She would find herself reliving it, remembering it in detail, especially at night.

We are all different. Each of us reacts in our own way. There is no better or worse way to react than any other, although it may not always feel like that. We tend to assume that people who are stoical and do not obviously get upset may be managing 'the best', but that is not necessarily borne out. Our reactions depend very much on our own style of coping, and a multitude of different circumstances, present and past. It is all too easy to judge ourselves for the way we feel.

Reflecting on your own diagnosis

Maybe some of these stories resonate with how it was for you – maybe not. If you feel it might be helpful to reflect a bit on your own diagnosis and how you felt at the time, you might want to do this internally or perhaps in your notebook.

On the other hand, if it all seems too close and too difficult, there is no need to push yourself into this. Instead, you can go to the short practice at the end of this section and see what it offers you.

The following questions might be a starting point for your reflection, if you choose to do it:

- What or who was helpful for you at the diagnosis?
- Do you remember your first reactions? Were you mostly aware of your feelings and emotions, or your thoughts, or the sensations in your body? Or was your attention focused outward on what was going around you?
- Looking back on that time, how do you feel towards yourself now?
- If you were talking to someone who had just been told they had cancer – what might you say to them?

The period between diagnosis and the start of treatment can be tough. It always involves periods of waiting – for results, for news, for appointments, for tests. There is so much uncertainty. It is new territory for most of us and we have so much to learn about how the system works and what to expect.

- What could you suggest to others going through a similar time that you found helpful?

Here are a few ideas from various people I have asked.

Eating in the early days after diagnosis

Jerry: ‘I found it very hard to face food. My appetite vanished. It was as if my system had shut down – but I could manage soup. It had to be quite bland, especially to begin with – and warm and smooth. But it felt comforting and easy to digest.’¹⁰

Walking

Matt: ‘When I did the mindfulness course the year before, I really liked the mindful walking. So when I got diagnosed, I decided to walk a bit every day. My mind was endlessly slipping into “*what if?*” or “*what have I done to deserve this?*” Walking was the only way I could get any peace. It didn’t always work – but if I concentrated on the air on my face, or my feet touching the ground – I felt more calm somehow, sometimes anyway.’

Writing

Jenny poured her experience into her journal. She wrote down all her feelings about what had happened. As the weeks passed, she started collecting things to put in the pages. Some leaves from a walk – a sketch of the café table where she met a friend – a newspaper cutting – a message from her daughter. She used a big rubber band to hold it together.

Music

Mary was a member of the local choir and loved music. After she was diagnosed, she would find a quiet space in the day and choose some music that spoke of how she was feeling or what she felt she needed. Sometimes, it would be a sad piece – sometimes something that was slow and soothing. She let the sounds flow into her, as if comforting her sad, frightened heart.

Gardening

David spent many hours in the garden after he got his news. He could lose himself tending the plants and trees – and forget things for a moment or two. It helped him to stay active. He often wondered how he would cope without the garden to work in.

A 'First Aid' Practice



The time following diagnosis is often marked by intense anxiety and uncertainty. Things change very quickly from how life had been before the diagnosis. There may also be a sense of dislocation at home, with heightened feelings – and the phone constantly ringing and people visiting. Or maybe it is the opposite – with silence from the very people you imagined would be there for you.

This next practice is the same as one you have already been introduced to. Do not be deceived by its simplicity. It is ideal for turbulent times. This is a practice I often use myself. It is what I teach people who are feeling shaky and anxious – after diagnosis; before treatment; or when managing intensity or after difficult news. By doing this practice several times a day, and whenever you need it, you are investing in being more 'grounded'. Experimenting with this for yourself regularly over the next few weeks. This is the only way to discover what it has to offer you.

Your first aid practice is Feet on the Floor, which was introduced to you earlier in this chapter.



Feet on the Floor – with the thread

Feeling the contact of your feet on the ground just placing your attention down onto the soles of your feet and noticing whatever is there. Exploring the detailed sensations in your toes ... (are they all in contact with your shoes or the floor or do some have more contact than others?) the balls of the feet (what is the shape of that contact?), and the heels (what is the quality of the contact? how does it feel?). Perhaps feeling the texture of the shoes surrounding the feet perhaps moving to feel the solid floor beneath you. Noticing the weight of you going down, through your legs onto your feet, onto the floor. Just being curious about all of this – and keep bringing the mind back to the sensations of contact with the floor.

Your thread (see page 16 in Starting Out), and the feel of the bead against your wrist will remind you to come back to your feet on the floor. You can use this practice at any time, whether recently diagnosed or not. It is the basis of much that follows in later ‘cancer’ practices.

Intention for the ‘Month’

We have been exploring the place of intention in the practice of mindfulness. You began by mindfully tasting a raisin – then you were introduced to the Body Scan, the Pause and Feet on the Floor – and you have been taught the First Aid Practice to use with your thread for times of intensity.

Spend some time connecting with your intention this next month – or however long you choose to stay with the practices in this chapter. How might you do this? If you are wearing a thread, you can use it as a reminder. There may be other ways that you can set up to help you remember. Most important of all is to connect with what matters to you – remember your intentions letter – and be ready to begin again and again with your practice.

Practices – *for each 2 week period*

- Core Practice** – Body Scan [10+ times]
- Short Practices** – The Pause [a few times every day]
– Feet on the Floor [a few times daily]
- Cancer Practice** – wearing the thread
– First aid practice of Feet on the Floor

Notes

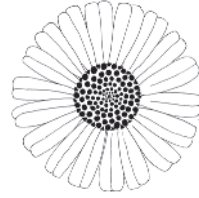
- 1 Rilke, R.M. (1996)
- 2 Kabat-Zinn, M., & Kabat-Zinn, J. (2014)
- 3 With particular appreciation to Christina Feldman.
- 4 See Appendix 1, also Carlson, et al. (2009)
- 5 Kornfield, J. (1993)
- 6 Gawande, A. (2014)
- 7 Tarrant, J. (1998)
- 8 Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990, 2013)
- 9 Moorey, S., & Greer, S. (2012)
- 10 See soup recipes created by Lee Watson in Appendix 4.

Sometimes

*Sometimes things don't go, after all
from bad to worse. Some years, muscadell
faces down frost; green thrives; the crops don't fail,
sometimes a man aims high, and all goes well.*

*A people sometimes will step back from war;
elect an honest man; decide they care
enough, that they can't leave some stranger poor.
Some men become what they were born for.*

*Sometimes our best efforts do not go
amiss; sometimes we do as we meant to.
The sun will sometimes melt a field of sorrow
That seemed hard frozen: may it happen for you.*



Personal Story

Sarah



Sarah was 39 when diagnosed with breast cancer. She describes herself as a local North Wales girl, through and through. When her grandfather died, her mother took on the family farm and Sarah bought the little house that her grandfather had lived in. She is carefully doing it up with all its original features, using natural materials. 'This is where my home is and it means the world to me', she told me.

Diagnosis

I always remember when it happened. I'd been away and on the way back, I found a message from the hospital, telling me to come in the next day. In the event, I was late for the appointment – would you believe it! I wasn't even sure I was going to make it. There was snow everywhere.

I had been having odd tests with my GP, for the last six months or so. I'd had a biopsy very recently. It was in the back of my mind that something heavy was probably coming. I remember sitting in the waiting room. People started to say, 'She's arrived' and I just thought, 'oh my goodness, tell me now – don't put it off.' They took me into a little room. I don't even remember the name of the consultant, but E, the breast care nurse was there and I could tell she was nervous. They said, 'You've got cancer. It is early and small – but the cells have started replicating.'

I stayed very much in business mode, gathering the facts and dealing with it as if it was a work meeting. I don't think I felt much at all, not even shock. That hit me much, much later – after surgery. When I got back to my house, I rang my boss and texted one of my closest friends. I wasn't ready to deal with much of it yet. I wanted to understand the facts and then I could face it.

I went into work for two days. I remember being in a meeting with people who were having a fit about having to move their desks. I felt like saying to them, 'Do you know I could come to an end?' Their concerns were of a totally different order of things. It was crazy stuff.

After two days, I went home for the weekend. I was dreading telling Mum and Dad. We were sitting round the kitchen table and I don't know if she sensed something because Mum was talking about everything under the sun. Finally, I said, 'Mum, I've got to stop you – I've got cancer.' I can't remember their reaction. I probably didn't tell them very well. I just had to blurt it out. How on earth do you say something like that?

In those early days, I very much equated cancer with death. I told my boyfriend, but I didn't want others to know. I wanted to get through the operation before people started probing. I needed my space. It was a surreal time.

Surgery

Even on the morning of the operation, I came up here to my house. I lit a fire, which is always a very symbolic thing for me to do. It is all connected with this being my home and wanting to take care of it – but it meant I smelt of smoke going into hospital! We had to go in quite early. I have never had to share accommodation – so it felt very strange. Would I be in a huge ward? Would

there be talking all the time? In the end, there was only one other lady in the little corner ward with me. It was pleasant enough, but I felt quite trapped.

After surgery and during treatment

I had chemotherapy, then radiotherapy and then Herceptin treatment. During treatment, I freaked out about having to spend time in hospital. I hated the thought of being closed in. So I was keen not to get any colds or bugs. I told my friends that I didn't want visits, but would love them to send me postcards with their news of ordinary life and a favourite picture of themselves. I bought this big notice board and put it by my bed. I spent ages pinning everyone's pictures on it. Nearly every day there would be something in the post. It was lovely.

I was pretty ill with chemo and spent a lot of time in bed feeling rubbish. Mum was brilliant, feeding me tasty things. I remember watching these chicks that I'd bought for her birthday. I would sit in the kitchen looking out of the window, watching them.

My other important occupation was growing trees from seed. I spent a lot of time with plant books, looking at seeds for sale on the Internet, reading up about them, and whether they would they survive the climate here. I learnt how to germinate the seeds with all the temperatures involved. There was a whole industry going on!

It was amazing how quickly I let go of work. All the deadlines and hoo-hah were left behind – something I hadn't done for years. I was back with my parents and they dealt with everything. I was letting myself be looked after. It is interesting. I would lie in bed often feeling quite anxious about being ill, but I remember much more, all the happiness of that time. Isn't it fantastic the way the mind works?

I was conscious of the possibility of cancer coming back and was checking and looking. But what eased my sense of dread was hearing from other people who had come through. Mum had a friend who had treatment a few months before me. She was still there. Other people would tell me about such and such, who had treatment and was fine now. It almost became a body of evidence. This was important, as I like to be rational and logical.

Mindfulness

I got to mindfulness through R, whom I'd had treatment with. We went together on the same course. I was pretty open to it. I found it helpful to approach things in this different way. The way the course was organized suited me quite well, as I like to take time observing things. I enjoyed the practices that were set us – doing things that started off as systematic tasks, but then along the line,

realizing that I could change them and do them in my own way. Even now, I do the stretches, reaching for imaginary ‘grapes’ just above my head. I lie in bed and come to the breath. I loved the movement exercises – and still do. At the time, it was a new activity to learn and maybe a bit of a distraction. Initially the practices and exercises would be isolated events – but as time moved on, I really revelled in them and got a lot from them.

I love seeing the beauty of nature. I appreciated all this before mindfulness, but without realizing how important it was to me. Appreciating the beauty of nature through being mindful is like an affirmation for me of how to approach the world.

Wherever I am, I look carefully at natural things. These are what I see first. This morning, the moon was out and it was bright in the sky – and I felt so lucky to be seeing that. And then whenever I am here, I can always hear the stream. It is always bubbling. It is a perpetual thing – different but always there. I am always walking around the trees and seeing how they are evolving and growing. I buried my dog under one and I talk to her there and feel she is making a beautiful tree.

Post treatment

Chemotherapy finished at the end of July. I used to know all the dates, but now I have to think to remember them. You let it go gently, don’t you? I had radiotherapy for three weeks and then Herceptin treatment. One of things that used to worry me was how quickly I would run out of energy.

The house had been broken into during treatment so I was a bit apprehensive about staying here. Dad’s dog came back here with me, to protect me. I had heard on the radio about a woman who was bravely fighting for women’s rights. I thought to myself – ‘well if she could do that, then I’m going to do this’ (return to my house). I remember sitting up in bed and writing in my diary about it. This is my home. I was determined to be here for census night. ‘I’m back now,’ I felt. This place is so important to me.

What matters to me?

Mindfulness is important to me – I do a lot of mindful breathing before I get up in the morning. Time is precious and I don’t want to be losing it doing things that are less than precious. I do what I need to do, but I often feel that I want to get on with what is more important.

I am 3+ years post treatment now and I have a much clearer perspective of what matters to me. Illness and treatment has taught me the value of life. I’ve

rediscovered some aunts and uncles and we've become close. I'm glad we've managed this before it is too late. Family networks here in Wales are strong. I think it is to do with the permanence of the land and the softness of the culture.

A message to someone like me

A nurse on the morning of surgery said, 'Keep going at it.' Whenever I got slightly freaked – that little phrase, which sounded quite harsh at the beginning – would really help me. I would think 'Just keep going at it.' You see there was a really laid-back, soft side of me that was just wanting to let go of all responsibility – yet there was another side there as well, that was saying to myself, 'you will go at it, if it should come back.'

I think I gave in to the softer side. I can't ever remember thinking, 'I'm going to fight this. I'm not going to let it get to me.' It was about dealing with it my way. I still check my body and still get scared occasionally, but I could have died in a moment in a car accident and I would never have had the opportunity to do all these things. I've had nearly four really good years now.

I want to enjoy more of this place, and this space. I absolutely love it. I want to learn important skills so I can take care of everything here. It feels good to acknowledge how lucky I am. It hasn't always felt like that. At one point, everyone else seemed to be going off on maternity leave to have babies, whilst I was going off to have cancer. But I feel so fortunate that I have been able to do what I want with my life. I'm so lucky – How many other people have got their granddad's house?!

[translation from Welsh]

Dychwel at Graidd y Graig

*Aros
am anadl,
Atal adwaith.
A dewis.*

*Clywed y sêr
A gweld curiad y galon,
Nofio gwynt y storm
A dychwel at graidd y graig.*

Returning to the Root of the Rock

*Pause
a breath,
Refrain reaction.
Make a choice.*

*Hear the stars
And see the beat of the heart,
Swim the storm-wind
And return to the root of the rock.*

Sarah