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Week 1: Establishing Self-Care and Committing to Change

It is in changing that things find repose.
—Heraclitus

Practice Background and Rationale

Embarking on a journey toward lasting well-being and genuine contentment requires deepening our understanding of ourselves and others. This understanding is cultivated through three complementary methods of learning: through others' views and beliefs, through our own critical thinking, and through our direct experience. This week, we will explore the underlying factors contributing to unhappiness and examine how the mindfulness skills you'll develop can address them effectively.

Three Ways of Learning During the MiCBT Program

Others' Views, Opinions, and Beliefs

If we told you that it's possible to achieve genuine well-being—a lasting experience of joy, peace, and contentment—would you believe it? What would shape your belief or disbelief? As children, much of our understanding of life is shaped by observing and listening to others. Our need for knowledge, often expressed through ongoing curiosity, is satisfied by our parents' and teachers' explanations. Initially, our sense of reality is heavily influenced by others' knowledge, perspectives, and wisdom.

Mindfulness-integrated CBT for Well-Being and Personal Growth: A 10-Week Evidence-Based Program to Cultivate Inner Calm, Boost Self-Confidence and Improve Relationships,
Second Edition. Bruno A. Cayoun and Andrea D. Grabovac.

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Through repetition, the views of others become internalized, shaping our beliefs through a largely subconscious process. Ongoing identification with our acquired views progressively shapes certain neural pathways in our brain. However, as we later discover, some of the information we've absorbed isn't accurate. For example, cherished childhood beliefs in the tooth fairy or Santa Claus must, disappointingly, eventually be let go to accommodate a more mature understanding of reality.

Despite this, learning from others' perspectives remains essential throughout adulthood. For example, believing what is said by a nurse, electrician, lawyer, trainer, or scientist is part of adult life. Often, our beliefs and views are shaped far more by faith in others' views than we are aware.

While this approach to learning is useful when information is accurate and relevant, relying solely on others' views can be limiting. Without questioning our beliefs, we risk delaying or even preventing the development of rational, independent thinking. When we fail to logically question the views we've adopted, we can be left feeling vulnerable. To foster growth and self-reliance, it's vital to balance this mode of learning with critical thinking—the ability to question, investigate, and assess the information we encounter.

Critical Thinking

When we engage in critical thinking, we become more actively engaged in the learning experience. As we grow from children into young adolescents, our developing brains enable intellectual independence. While this newfound independence may sometimes manifest as rebelliousness, it also reflects our ability to question, disagree, and reshape our understanding of reality, as we see it. During our teenage years, our sense of identity also begins to change, leading us to reevaluate and often let go of many of our childhood beliefs we once held so dear.

As we mature, our expanding capacity for critical thinking gives us the opportunity to put our beliefs to the test, whether through logical reasoning, philosophical exploration, or scientific experimentation. This increased ability to examine and question information about ourselves and the world we live in is an important stepping stone toward self-knowledge. However, critical thinking alone does not necessarily bring us tranquility and joy. Even individuals with highly developed critical thinking skills, such as philosophers or scientists, are not inherently happier than others.

Direct Experience

First-hand experience brings information in a way that is undeniable, for better or worse. It fully engages us in the learning process and brings a sense of knowing that we can rely on and that no one can take away, even through philosophical argument. This marks the difference between intellectual reasoning and wisdom. However, while direct experience can be the most reliable way of learning, what we make of it depends heavily on the accuracy and depth of our understanding.

For example, experiencing fear during a car accident can lead to a phobia of driving. Similarly, being bitten by a snake can result in a phobia of snakes. In both cases, the direct experience of anxiety in a life-threatening situation can overwhelm even rational thinking about the actual likelihood of future harm, such as being killed in an accident or being bitten by a snake again, resulting in lifelong avoidance behaviors.

Although experiential learning is the most reliable means of acquiring accurate self-knowledge, it needs to be balanced with the other two ways of learning: gaining useful knowledge we have yet to learn (e.g., reading about what a phobia is) and utilizing our ability to make sense of experiences accurately (e.g., questioning whether we would really die by driving on this road).

Integrating the Three Ways of Learning

While these three ways of acquiring knowledge about yourself and the world are individually useful, they are even more so when integrated. This brings us to the surprising way in which one of us (Bruno) was introduced to mindfulness meditation, years before his formal psychology training. In his own words:

In February 1989, while living in Sydney, Australia, I got a phone call from Veronique, a friend whom I had met about 18 months earlier during my travels in northern Queensland. She had found out that I had done some training in rebirthing therapy combined with gestalt therapy and heard that it was beneficial, so she wanted to learn the method. Yes, this was the heyday of the New Age movement in the 1980s in Australia.

I suggested that she enquire about training in her local area, where it was available, but she insisted that she wanted to learn from me. I agreed, and she traveled 2,600 km by bus from Cairns, in the north of Australia, down to Sydney in the hope of finding the Holy Grail of alternative therapies.

Soon after her arrival, we discussed the principles of rebirthing techniques. As I explained that connecting the breath can bring up very deep, painful memories, she asked, “What do we do with the emotional aspect of the memories?” I was pleased with the specificity and technicality of her question; I replied that we just feel it and express whatever it is that we may have suppressed at the time in whichever way we can, provided it is not harmful. She continued, “But what do you think happens to this emotional energy, like fear and anger?” I replied, “I’m not sure, but as long as it’s out of our system, does it matter where it goes? We just feel calmer and sometimes insightful afterwards.” This didn’t go down well. She appeared surprised and somewhat disillusioned. As the conversation progressed, I started to feel a tension in my abdomen and a general discomfort. I felt some responsibility since she had traveled so far and had so much faith in my ability to contribute to her knowledge.

She then mentioned that S. N. Goenka, her teacher of mindfulness meditation in one of the Burmese Vipassana traditions, teaches that, “when we react

emotionally, it increases the mind's habit pattern of reacting in future similar situations; it conditions the mind." By then, I was speechless, trying to understand and let go of my increasing abdominal discomfort as I spontaneously recalled an embarrassing event that had taken place a few months previously.

I'd arrived in Australia more than a year and a half earlier, and changing my international driving permit for an Australian one was well overdue. As I arrived a few minutes late for my driving test appointment, the man behind the counter shouted, "Are you Mr. Cayoun? You're late, and you're making everyone wait!" And the unexpected happened. I began to cry, just like a little child whose parents scolded him for having done the wrong thing. I am still not sure who was more embarrassed: me, crying like a little child at 26 years of age, or the angry man, who was just as bewildered and ended up trying to comfort me.

In a few seconds, while Veronique expanded on what is well-known to psychologists as operant conditioning, it all made sense. I had attended a 7-day intensive rebirthing residential workshop as a participant and returned on the day prior to my driving test appointment. During the workshop, I had been indulging in daily catharsis over my painful childhood, hitting pillows and crying my eyes out over various memories. Basically, I had been training myself to react emotionally and cry like a child intermittently for seven whole days! I saw that my spontaneous reaction at the driving test office was a direct consequence of the way that I had trained myself to react emotionally. Veronique was right, and so was her teacher!

Accordingly, I asked, "What is this Vipassana (mindfulness) meditation and where can I try it out?" Veronique smiled and told me that there was a 10-day course nearby, starting in 2 weeks, and that I should enroll soon to secure a place. This I did. She had traveled 2,600 km to learn from me, and it was I who ended up learning from her. I felt a combination of mild embarrassment and excitement about the prospect of a new direction and learning. I remain so grateful to Veronique, as she was the catalyst for what was to be the biggest change in my life.

With hindsight, the main aspect of what allowed me to open my mind to the unknown and go beyond my original understanding was the unpleasant bodily experience in my stomach. Had I not openly and honestly experienced visceral anxiety and the co-emerging memory of the rebirthing workshop I attended, I would have continued to defend my views and I would have missed the point that Veronique was trying to make. I would have also missed what was for me the greatest opportunity for personal growth toward a more lasting joy and meaningful life.

Over the next several years, Bruno was to learn that direct experience has been the foundation and guiding principle for mindfulness training for the past 25 centuries. This is in accord with current empirical findings. Erika Carlson's review of the research literature bears out the idea that mindfulness practice serves as a path to self-knowledge [1]. However, as noted at the beginning of this section, while these three ways of acquiring knowledge are

individually useful, they work most powerfully when integrated. For instance, the insight that Bruno had during his conversation with Veronique would not have been possible without his prior knowledge that mind and body can interact to produce an experience that has meaning. Accordingly, to achieve the best possible outcomes, this book is structured in a way that will allow you to combine these three ways of learning in an integrated manner.

Since it is easier to address a problem once we understand it well, let's first explore the true nature of what creates human suffering, how suffering arises, and how it is maintained.

Inheritance and Maintenance of Unhappiness

Dissatisfaction is a fact of life. By “dissatisfaction,” we mean the unpleasant emotional experience that arises from any experience where expectations are unmet or desires go unfulfilled. From preconscious and very subtle experiences to the most devastating events, every human being, at all ages, experiences varying degrees of dissatisfaction and emotional pain. Since you're reading this book, you likely already recognize this.

One of the main causes of this kind of mental and emotional dissatisfaction, or suffering, is our unawareness that we are suffering! Providing a description of suffering, its causes, and the mechanisms that perpetuate it is essential to put your mindfulness training in context. However, this is certainly not meant to convey a pessimistic view of the human condition. Rather, it's based on the need to better understand the path we travel toward growth and well-being. This path starts with improving our ability to notice when we are suffering, to see more clearly what causes that suffering, and to recognize the fact that all human beings suffer.

To develop a sense of well-being, we need to clearly understand the mechanisms that lead to suffering, the factors that maintain it, and the means by which we can genuinely alleviate it [2]. As you embark on a journey to address these in your own life, let's examine them in some detail. While some of the mechanisms might seem counterintuitive, please bear with us, as we bring it all together in the end!

Impermanence: The Trigger for Suffering

This is the story of a river, starting its journey as a small stream, descending the mountain with increasing speed and strength. As it merges with other streams, it gradually becomes larger, and by the time it reaches the valley, it is a mighty river. Now, feeling important and confident, it follows its course toward the ocean, its ultimate destiny. But when traversing the desert, it begins to slow down and dry out under the desert sun, eventually stopping

its journey. The wind, seeing that the river has lost its confidence and is afraid to move on, comes to help. “Don’t worry,” it says to the river, “just rest and you will dry out under the sun. Then you will become clouds and I will carry you to the ocean. There, you will turn into rain, fall into the ocean, and thus reach your destination.” Very skeptical, the river replies, “This is all very well, but can you guarantee that I will become a river again?”

This short story is rich in symbolism and represents the flow of our own lives. From early life, we grow from childhood to adolescence, seeking who we are, seeking validation, and a sense that we matter, that we are somehow important. Initially, things change quickly, but our pace of change slows down as we reach maturity and strengthen our sense of who we are. Just as the stream widens to become a river in the valley, birthdays begin to reflect our mortality, and we start to worry about things like health, reduced performance and productivity, and sometimes question our purpose in life. We begin to stagnate and wonder what else there is.

Then comes the time when the survival of our body, and sometimes our mind, is jeopardized by the natural order. Human life is not forever. It arises, stays for some time, and ends. However good a person we may have been—however loving, obliging, and generous—life will end. No matter who we are, we will need to let go of this life. For most human beings, seeing the end of life approaching can be frightening. Just like the river, afraid of losing its sense of self and identity, we fear the separation from who we are, that sense of “I,” of “me.”

However, the nature of change is not limited to chronological age; it affects every moment of our lives, regardless of how old we are or the circumstances we find ourselves in. Life, by definition, is a bundle of change. Without change, life could not exist. Since change is not only unavoidable but also necessary, our fear of it can lead to great suffering, much like the river in the story. Our inability to find lasting enjoyment in life is due to three fundamental causes identified in Buddhist psychology: craving for pleasant experiences, resentment (“aversion”) toward unpleasant experiences, and the unawareness (“ignorance”) that *identifying* with these impermanent experiences, including our sense of self, creates a persistent attachment to them that jeopardizes our well-being [3]. Attachment leads to craving and resistance to the inevitable process of change.

More specifically, due to impermanence, we cannot enjoy things in a sustained manner. This alone is a source of suffering. At a physiological level, whether it’s a substance or any other sensory stimulus, pleasure occurs when it triggers the release of a neurotransmitter called dopamine. Alas, the dopamine response doesn’t last forever! Once it subsides, so does the pleasure. Even if we had the means to maintain the same level of dopamine stimulation over time, such as with drugs or pleasurable food, we would become habituated to the pleasurable experience. As the initial amount of stimulation eventually feels insufficient to fulfill our needs, we crave more of it. This pattern is often observed with addictions, where it is known as “diminishing

returns.” This applies whether the addiction involves socially acceptable stimuli, such as screens and social media, or overtly harmful ones, such as drugs, alcohol, or gambling.

This phenomenon is not limited to the mechanism of addiction. Conditional and momentary happiness is evident in just about every pleasant experience. For example, the job we initially found exciting may no longer stimulate us, or the entertaining jokes we used to tell no longer elicit laughter because people have heard them so many times. The new computer, the new car, the new house, and the new game lead us to feel initially elated, but soon we lose that feeling of excitement. To maintain the high, we need more stimulation. In psychological language, this is called “reinforcement.” Unless our pleasant experience is reinforced through the ongoing presentation of effective stimuli, the satisfaction response decreases and eventually ceases. This makes satisfaction highly dependent on conditions.

And money? There’s no guarantee that the money we have will be there forever, nor that the means by which we acquire it will remain reliably available. Even if this were possible, for how long would we be likely to remain ecstatic about it? Even sex can lose its initial appeal over time when it occurs in the same way and with the same person. Research on happiness shows that once our basic needs are met, suffering does not disappear with increased wealth, no matter how abundant it is [4].

What about our health and personal capabilities, are they permanent? If they were, we would never become ill and would always perform at our best level. As you know, this is not the case. Health fluctuates; it comes and goes. The same applies to our personal abilities. There is only one constant in life, and that is change. Why, then, do we believe that we should remain capable and competent at all times just because we have been so previously? Have you noticed how difficult it can be to accept that things have changed and to let go of past expectations of yourself, such as looking like you did when you were younger or having the same amount of energy you used to have?

Ironically, our unawareness, denial, or nonacceptance of impermanence has led to the emergence of multibillion-dollar industries around the world. These industries capitalize on suffering. No industry is more lucrative than one that capitalizes on giving you predictability or promising to fulfill your need to sustain what you desire—what makes you happy. Change is imminent, and they count on it. Cosmetics and clothing industries capitalize on our desire to change our physical appearance, while banks and other financial organizations capitalize on our fear of losing wealth, and so on.

Eventually, we come to realize that it’s impossible to maintain a reliable sense of happiness through worldly matters because such conditional happiness is contingent upon them not changing. In other words, we can only remain satisfied and happy as long as those worldly matters remain the same. But worldly phenomena, like our body, mental states, skills, relationships, and wealth, keep changing; they cannot be indefinitely sustained. Thus, happiness derived through conditional means is temporary and unreliable.

Even in the unlikely event that some of the things we want don't change, we do! We are also subject to the same law of impermanence. Yet, beneath our naïve search for worldly pleasures and satisfactions, we all seek a profound sense of happiness that is unchanging. The Buddha explained that our mistake is seeking permanent happiness through impermanent means. This inevitably leads to confusion, disappointment, and suffering. Identifying with phenomena that continuously arise and pass away is a central cause of suffering because it perpetuates the habits of craving and aversion.

The Three Unwholesome Cravings and How They Reinforce Suffering

There are two types of craving: wholesome and unwholesome. Wholesome craving motivates our desire for personal growth, well-being, and insight. It motivates and helps us sit down to meditate. It's important to deliberately cultivate this kind of desire; otherwise, it can be difficult to sustain interest in healthy change. Over time, wholesome craving reduces our attachment and aversion to impermanent experiences, thereby decreasing our suffering.

Unwholesome craving, on the other hand, strengthens our attachment or aversion to impermanent experiences and consequently leads to suffering. There are three types of unwholesome craving. These are “craving to obtain” (which we call “attachment”), including the stimulation of our senses, “craving to avoid” (which we call “aversion”), and “craving to become.” This last type relates to the craving to enhance our sense of self, often manifesting as a need to feel more important or valued than we currently believe ourselves to be. In traditional mindfulness teachings, these cravings are called greed, hatred, and delusion, respectively, and together, they fuel many of the behaviors and habits that perpetuate suffering [5].

It's important to clarify that wholesome doesn't simply mean “positive,” nor is unwholesome the same as “negative.” For example, a parent who tries to please their children by letting them have as much screen time as they want might be experienced as likable (“positive”) in those moments, but allowing these behaviors can be unwholesome in the long run and lead to suffering. Conversely, a parent who sets firm boundaries about screen time might be unpopular in the moment (“negative”), yet their actions stem from wholesome intentions and can lead to better outcomes. In essence, any thought, emotion, or behavior that increases the likelihood of suffering is unwholesome, and any thought, emotion, or behavior that reduces the probability of suffering is wholesome.

Over the next 10–12 weeks, one of the aspects of mindfulness that we'll be training is profound discernment (*sati sampajanna* in Pali, the language spoken in Northern India during the time of the Buddha), which will help us clearly distinguish between wholesome and unwholesome cravings. Rest assured, while we introduce large concepts related to craving here, we will

go into them in greater detail at a “how-to” level in Week 4, when we discuss working with body sensations. Let’s have a closer look at the three types of unwholesome craving and how they affect our lives so that we can better recognize them when they are present.

Craving to Obtain

Our attachment to pleasant experiences and the sensations they bring—and our *craving to obtain* them when they are absent—is driven by the underlying belief that possessing or prolonging these sensations will lead to lasting satisfaction or happiness. However, the need for constant stimulation often leads to physical and mental health challenges. For example, the mass production and aggressive marketing of highly addictive foods, especially those loaded with fat and sugar, have contributed to overeating in Western societies. This has led to a new societal norm of feeling “overfull,” not just physically but also mentally, as we constantly seek stimulation to satisfy cravings.

One of the most widely accepted and encouraged forms of craving is consumerism. Through it, we attempt to fulfill our craving for sensory stimulation. Our brains are wired to respond to pleasure, which creates an attachment to the sensations of stimulation and elation.

Bruno recalls a story shared by a colleague about his early experiences trading on the stock market. Initially, his craving for gains led him to cling to the hope that profits would last longer than they actually did. This led him to hold onto stocks far longer than his trading rules advised. Conversely, when he experienced losses, he was unable to let go and waited too long before selling, sometimes at a significant cost—a behavior similar to the “chasing” pattern seen in pathological gambling.

As he began his Mindfulness-integrated Cognitive Behavior Therapy (MiCBT) training, he started to notice how craving and aversion dictated his decisions. He realized that not adhering to his trading rules stemmed from reactions rooted in greed and fear, which in turn caused significant financial losses. Over time, mindfulness meditation helped him develop an increased awareness and acceptance of these emotions without the need to act on them. With relief, he shared how this new awareness enabled him to practice “mindful trading,” making it easier to stick to his trading rules and achieve financial gains.

Of course, this is not limited to stock trading. Clinging to anything that is impermanent, even if it is less volatile than the stock market, is bound to bring disappointment at some stage. More troubling, we can also become attached to the experience of craving itself! Sometimes, we even seek situations in which we are likely to experience the desire for something, knowing very well that we won’t obtain it. Why? Because we crave the body sensations associated with craving, to the extent that it can become a real addiction. People often indulge in this craving for certain types of body sensations, for example, through the stimulation provided by window-shopping, television, and social media.

Craving to Avoid (Aversion)

In addition to not having what we desire, we may also have things we *don't* want, which produces frustration and dissatisfaction that we then resent. We then crave to eliminate these unpleasant thoughts and bodily sensations associated with our dissatisfaction. This will be explored further in Week 3.

In everyday life, whenever we believe that something should be different from what it is—whether it's our own qualities, someone else's actions, or an undesirable situation—we experience the consequences of unrealistic expectations, regardless of how justified they may seem. We judge these situations as unacceptable and respond with aversive reactions such as avoidance, sadness, anger, fear, or other contextually unhelpful emotions. However, it's important to distinguish aversion arising in these everyday scenarios from aversion arising during severe traumatic events, such as sexual assault or other forms of violence or injustice, where strong emotional responses arise naturally and understandably.

Craving to Become

Attachment to a sense of self—who we feel we are or who we want to become—can be a significant obstacle to personal growth and well-being. As we will explore in much more detail in Week 3, at the core of the *craving to become* a particular kind of person lies a desire to experience certain sensations and avoid others.

It is important to remember that any thought, emotion, or behavior that increases the likelihood of future suffering is unwholesome, while those that reduce future suffering are wholesome. When we aspire to become a certain kind of person because of an unwholesome intention, such as seeking the pleasant sensations associated with positive external validation, we reinforce mental habits that lead to future suffering. In contrast, aspirations that arise from a wholesome intention focus on reducing future suffering by breaking those very same mental habits.

For example, reading this book with the intention of fostering personal growth and developing wisdom can stem from either wholesome or unwholesome motivations. The intention is wholesome if it is aimed at reducing your future suffering by cultivating insight and equanimity. However, the aspiration becomes unwholesome if it is driven by a craving to “become someone special” in the eyes of others, to experience the pleasant sensations associated with being admired, or those associated with a sense of superiority over others. These kinds of motivations reinforce craving and perpetuate future suffering.

The Three Conceits

The *craving to become* is closely related to what Buddhist psychology describes as three types of conceit—feeling superior, inferior, or falsely equal to others [6, 7]. The most common type, often referred to as the **conceit of**

superiority, involves the desire to feel important or special, either in a positive or negative way. This reflects a tendency to inflate our self-image, and when this urge goes unmet, it can lead to suffering. When our self-worth is tied to feeling superior, any perceived threat to that status can compel us to seek validation through achievements or approval from others, often resulting in competitive or judgmental attitudes. For example, in academic research, the saying “you are only as good as your last publication” drives many researchers to equate their worth as individuals with the number of publications they produce. This association can lead to intense pressure, stress, and burnout. Maya’s example below illustrates how the craving to become can lead to emotional suffering. It highlights how the conceit of superiority—such as when our self-worth becomes tied to external validation—can create a persistent sense of disconnection and resentment in our lives.

Maya was a former client who struggled with depression and anxiety she attributed to “low self-esteem.” She had been educated in an academically rigorous environment in Europe, where her self-worth became tied to her academic success. When her family relocated to Australia during her adolescence, she entered a school that prioritized sports and social engagement over academics, leaving her sense of self deeply challenged. While Maya adapted to her environment the best she could, the move separated her from her friends in Europe, labeled her as an outsider, and deprived her of the academic validation she once relied on to feel “special” and “superior,” leading to growing feelings of resentment toward her parents.

Despite completing a highly regarded university degree, Maya felt like a failure because she believed she wasn’t “important enough.” Over the next 3 decades, she blamed her parents for having moved to Australia, as she attributed her perceived lack of meaningful accomplishments to their decision. This craving to feel significant created a rift between Maya and her family, leaving her isolated and feeling misunderstood.

In therapy, Maya came to realize that her struggles were not due to “low self-esteem” but rather unrealistically high self-expectations rooted in a need to feel superior. Letting go of this need was key to enjoying a happier and more fulfilling life. By reframing her motivations and decisions, her anxiety and depression subsided. Maya also became increasingly able to notice others’ situations and needs, which fostered greater acceptance and forgiveness, both of others and herself.

Another facet of the conceit of superiority is false modesty. When we downplay our abilities or accomplishments in order to elicit reassurance, acceptance, or approval from others, we are still focusing excessively on our sense of self. We feel the need to hide aspects of ourselves, because we believe acknowledging our achievements might be criticized, and we may lose value in the eyes of others. False modesty prevents us from fully accepting who we are and can create unnecessary barriers to genuine connection.

A second type of conceit, the **conceit of inferiority**, involves the belief that we are especially unimportant or a “lesser” person. We compare ourselves to others and may judge ourselves as not being as intelligent, attractive, successful, or deserving as they are. This self-deflating view often serves as a justification for perceived personal shortcomings.

For example, thoughts such as “It’s all my fault,” “I’m not good enough, I’m useless,” “nobody is interested in me because I’m not attractive enough,” or “there’s something wrong with me” are all unhelpful beliefs rooted in an overemphasis on the sense of an “inferior” self. These beliefs foster an exaggerated sense of inferiority. *Mea culpa!* It goes without saying that having these thoughts frequently and for a long enough period feeds into a sense of low self-worth and increases the probability of clinical depression.

In Western contexts, the conceit of inferiority can be challenging to grasp because we typically associate “conceit” with feelings of superiority. However, in Buddhist psychology, conceit arises from any excessive focus on the self, regardless of whether that focus inflates or deflates our sense of worthiness.

Consider David, with whom we discussed this topic during a therapy session a few days ago. David is a kind, middle-aged father of three teenagers who sought therapy for depression and trauma symptoms. Although his depression had lifted and his trauma symptoms had subsided, his sense of self-worth remained low. He recently sold his house for an excellent price, unexpectedly finding himself left with extra funds, enough to purchase a small boat—a long-held dream. For over 20 years, David had wanted to buy a boat but repeatedly prioritized his family’s needs, never feeling comfortable putting his own desires first. Despite their excitement and encouragement, he hesitated, feeling undeserving of such a purchase.

While David’s hesitation might not immediately seem like conceit, it is a classic example of the conceit of inferiority. David was overly focused on himself, which in this case took the form of feeling undeserving. During therapy, we explored his motivations for buying the boat and the potential outcomes of doing so. He had previously talked about it with his family, and his partner and children were very excited about the idea. When asked how he envisioned using the boat, he described it as a way of spending more time with one of his sons, with whom he felt less connected. Through this process, David realized that focusing solely on himself triggered feelings of guilt and selfishness, but shifting his focus to the wholesome motivations and benefits for his family freed him from these unhelpful beliefs. He decided to buy the boat and enjoy it with his family!

The **conceit of equality** is the third and often the most subtle of the three types of conceit. It is the view that “I am the same as others,” leading to a distorted perception of equality. While this view might seem harmless or even virtuous, it can obscure the unique qualities, strengths, and challenges that make each person’s life experience different. For instance, it overlooks

the reality that some individuals will excel in areas where we do not, or face struggles we have never encountered. With this form of conceit, we lose our humility and remain preoccupied with comparisons, which, like the other forms of conceit, lead to craving, aversion, and ultimately, suffering.

This conceit can also perpetuate systemic issues, such as racism, sexism, and other types of discrimination, particularly when it takes the form of “We are all equal, so we should all be treated the same.” This perspective dismisses the distinct experiences of different groups, including the unique challenges and injustices they have historically faced or continue to face. By failing to acknowledge these realities, the conceit of equality can allow subtle or overt discrimination to persist, reinforcing a superficial notion of fairness that overlooks deeper inequities.

In summary, conceits of superiority, inferiority, and equality all involve an excessive preoccupation with the self, distorting perception and influencing decision-making in unhelpful ways. Recognizing these forms of conceit allows us to redirect our attention toward the consequences of our actions and choices, reducing feelings of unworthiness and fostering wiser decisions.

Unawareness: Maintaining Factor for Suffering

When we remain unaware that identifying with impermanent phenomena leads to craving and aversion and, in turn, dissatisfaction, it becomes very difficult to do something about it! Instead, we find ourselves caught in a cycle of reactivity, constantly chasing our own tail, so to speak. In this process, we develop unhelpful beliefs shaped by a narrow perspective of the world and of who we are. Since unawareness plays such a central role in maintaining unhappiness, it’s worth spending a little time discussing this topic.

Identifying with Experience and Creating a Sense of Self

When we *identify* with our internal experiences—body sensations and thoughts—these experiences become part of who we think we are, forming our sense of self. The process through which we come to feel this identification is fascinating to study. While we rarely identify with stimuli generated outside our body and mind, we tend to automatically identify with internally generated stimuli.

For example, if you open your window and smell a broken sewage pipe, do you pinch your nose and say, “I hate my smell”? Similarly, if you see an ugly brick wall outside your window, do you say, “I hate my sight”? Or, when eating a delicious dish, do you say, “I love my taste”? Surely, you would not. And yet, when your mind is occupied with sadness, anger, or fear,

you might say, “I hate my thoughts” or “I hate my feelings.” Likewise, when you feel intense sensations in your body, you may say, “I hate my pain.”

Rather than recognizing these as transient experiences—made up of ultimately impersonal and impermanent sensations and thoughts—we tend to identify with them. In Buddhist psychology, this automatic identification with ever-changing internal phenomena is what constructs and maintains our sense of self and perpetuates suffering.

Think back to when you were a teenager, perhaps 15 or 16. Did you feel like you knew yourself? Most teenagers do, unless they’ve experienced significant trauma or adversity. At that age, there’s often a strong sense of certainty about who we are, even amid the rapid changes in identity that occur during adolescence. Now, if you are older, think about your mid-20s. Did you still feel like the same person you thought you were at 16? And what about 20 or 30 years from now? Do you expect to feel like the same person you are today? Probably not. Yet, despite the fluidity of our sense of self over time, we often cling to the “I,” or ego, believing that we know exactly who we are.

From early childhood, our sense of self begins to take shape through social reinforcement. A common question we’re asked as children is, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” While seemingly harmless, this question subtly implies that our identity should be tied to our career. Phrases like “I’m a carpenter” or “I’m a banker” reflect how deeply we connect our sense of self to what we do. We identify with our profession to the extent that we can have difficulties adjusting when there is an unexpected career loss or retirement. It can feel like a part of us is gone.

Throughout our lives, those around us continually reinforce the idea that we are a distinct and stable person with a unique name, characteristics, and abilities. This feels intuitively right given the uniqueness of our thoughts, feelings, and the physical solidity of our bodies. Accordingly, there is no apparent reason to doubt that this thought, feeling, or sensation in my body *is* mine, is a part of *me*. Nor is there any apparent reason to doubt that this body *is* mine, a part of *me*.

Nonetheless, as we examine this with skill and sincerity through mindfulness practice, we begin to see through what we once thought was reality. This thing, which we call the self, is just as impermanent as all other phenomena. It relies on beliefs, feelings, physical body, sensory perception, and a sense of identity remaining the same. But do these elements truly stay the same?

We change our style and relationships, and even the way we think about the world. Over time, we learn to moderate our emotional reactions and revise long-held beliefs, and our bodies are definitely changing too. How can the self remain unchanging if everything that composes it is in a continual state of flux?

Effects of Context

You may find that your motivation, mental state, feelings, and behavior can vary dramatically from one context to another—so much so that you might feel like a different person in different situations. For example, you may be

very bubbly and social with friends and quiet and withdrawn at work. How can this be the case?

Both Buddhist and Western psychology describe how our current context, or “conditions,” and our past experiences, or “causes,” condition our responses in this moment. In Buddhist psychology, this is referred to as “causes and conditions,” emphasizing that all phenomena that arise are dependent on multiple factors and conditions—nothing arises in isolation.

Consider one of our clients, Sarah, who struggled with anxiety and feelings of inadequacy in certain contexts but was calm and confident in others. She became highly anxious in social situations, even at small gatherings with friends she was looking forward to seeing. However, she felt relatively calm and composed at work, where tasks and expectations were clear, and the environment was structured and predictable.

Using the framework of “causes and conditions,” the causes of Sarah’s social anxiety might include past experiences of social rejection and embarrassment during her teenage years. These experiences left a lasting impact, conditioning her to feel anxious in similar situations. The conditions, in this case, are the current social settings, which are sufficiently similar to previous experiences to trigger past anxieties.

This example demonstrates how Sarah’s current anxiety is not a fixed trait but instead is a conditioned response arising from the interplay of past causes and current conditions.

Identifying with Self-Image

Our appearance can significantly influence our sense of self, as we often identify with how we present ourselves in different contexts. For instance, how would you perceive yourself, feel, and behave if you wore flashy Mexican boots and a leather jacket while arriving at a party on a motorbike, compared to wearing professional attire and arriving in a taxi? Would you walk in the same way, or choose the same beverage to drink? Or would you adapt to “act the part”?

We also adapt our self-concept to justify our experiences and behaviors. If we become popular in various contexts, we start to identify with being a successful person. Similarly, if we steal on several occasions, we may begin to identify as a thief. If we are a student who consistently gets A grades, we identify with being an “A student.” But what happens to this sense of self if we change from a school that has relatively low standards and expectations to a school with higher standards? If our grades drop to Cs and Bs, we might feel like a failure or, at the very least, deeply disappointed. Unfortunately, even identifying with being an A student can create suffering, as we saw with the example of Maya, who had tied her identity to being academically superior.

In summary, whether the identification is with academic success, professional achievement, or any other belief about who we are, the resulting sense of self often becomes fragile and inflexible, creating vulnerability to disappointment

when circumstances inevitably change. The same applies to all other contexts where we rigidly identify with a fixed sense of self based on our beliefs.

Identifying with Views

Our accumulated beliefs shape how we view ourselves, others, and the world at large. Unless we actively test our views through unbiased self-observation and understand that they are *just* views, mere hypotheses, our subconscious tendency is to identify with them and use them to construct or strengthen our sense of self. Attachment to our views makes them rigid and leads to suffering because when they are challenged, refuted, or even dismissed, we tend to feel that a part of ourselves is being challenged or dismissed. We think, “I am being challenged,” or “I am being dismissed,” perceiving it as an attack on who we are. Even the most objective scientist is not immune to this fundamental process of identification and may find themselves defending a view without irrefutable evidence or rejecting another’s view without solid grounds.

As strange as it may seem, even if our view is correct and substantiated, our identification with it can still be a source of suffering. This is because our attachment to these views leads us to defend our self-image, from which we naïvely derive a sense of self-worth. Whether we are right or wrong, we become vulnerable by our attachment.

In many ways, we can become prisoners of who we *think* we are, making it difficult to change and grow. The Buddha referred to our belief in a fixed sense of self as a “delusion” [8]. While this may seem like a strong term for what we commonly accept as our natural sense of self, it reflects the irrational nature of this belief. The more aware of this we become, the more rational and flexible we can be about who we are—or perhaps who we are not.

By increasing our awareness that established views are merely the results of accumulated beliefs, we can learn to keep them at arm’s length, fostering a willingness to question them, recall their origins, and consider how they might be better verified. Our views often act as self-imposed limits; if we change our views, we can go beyond those limits! This also means we can allow our sense of self to change with more confidence, despite past beliefs.

Rationale for the Practice of Mindfulness

Great wisdom emerges from the simple yet profound realization that we all suffer. There is no exception. There is no escape. We all suffer—this is a universal condition that all of us experience. The Buddha called this the “First Noble Truth” [8]. Why “noble”? Because recognizing this universal reality, and perceiving it in a way that fosters understanding rather than despair, is the foundation of actions and insights that can alleviate suffering and promote personal and interpersonal well-being. For instance, understanding that our own or another person’s negativity and reactivity stem from

unawareness of underlying past causes and current conditions can help us develop patience, tolerance, and compassion. From this perspective, keeping in mind and genuinely acknowledging that all human beings suffer becomes an act of great dignity and kindness—a “noble” action.

Addressing the deeper mechanisms that maintain suffering makes more sense than trying to address the specific contexts in which it emerges [3]. In other words, addressing the root cause of our suffering is going to lead to longer-lasting relief than focusing on the symptoms.

The encouraging news is that if unhappiness and other types of suffering arise from conditioned patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior, they can also be “unconditioned.” Over the course of this program, we’ll explore how training mindfulness skills can transform the way our mind processes information and how we can use this in daily life to improve our well-being. The first step is to develop a clear plan and make a commitment to follow it!

Training Mindfulness Skills

Commitment to Self-Care Agreement

We begin by writing a “commitment to self-care agreement” that will serve as your guide throughout this program. Having a clear plan and committing to it will help keep you on track. In formal therapy, this is often referred to as a “therapy contract.” It has three main components: agreeing on the problems or situations to address, agreeing on the indicators of improvement, and agreeing on the means to achieve these goals.

It’s helpful to think of problems as tools—we’ll learn to use dissatisfaction productively, turning it into a source of growth. By making the most of our problems to develop new skills, we can transform suffering into contentment. This process will become a key part of your journey during this program.

The rationale for using problems as tools is that skills develop best in contexts where they are needed. When skills are lacking, problems arise, highlighting areas for growth. Adopting the attitude that problems are good opportunities for developing new skills helps reduce distress and builds confidence in our abilities! Let’s begin our training plan, step by step.

Areas for Improvement

First, think honestly about what you would like to change. Using the examples in Table 1.1, identify at least three areas in your life that you are not happy with, and list them in the “Areas for Improvement” section in Table 1.2. You can include more if you wish. Examples of targeted problems might include: worrying excessively, feeling unmotivated, not coping well with chronic pain, struggling to lose weight, losing your temper with your kids, feeling worthless or like a failure, not having a partner, or feeling lonely.

Table 1.1 Examples of targeted problems and corresponding success indicators.

<i>Areas for improvement</i>	<i>Evidence of improvement</i>
1. Feeling disconnected from what is important to me	A. Taking 10 minutes each day to do something enjoyable on my own, like playing my guitar or exercising
	B. Attending a workshop or class related to my interests once a month
	C. Having a meaningful conversation with a close friend at least once a week
2. I get anxious in social situations	A. Starting conversations with at least two new people at social events
	B. Attending social gatherings twice a month without leaving early due to anxiety
	C. Participating actively and sharing my ideas in conversations
3. Impulse buying when shopping and not being able to save money	A. Sticking to my grocery shopping list, without adding unplanned items
	B. Saving 5% of my income each month
	C. Only browsing online for items I truly need

Table 1.2 List of your targeted problems and corresponding success indicators.

<i>Areas for improvement</i>	<i>Evidence of improvement</i>
1.	A.
	B.
	C.
2.	A.
	B.
	C.
3.	A.
	B.
	C.

It's important to focus on problems that you have control over. For instance, instead of listing "My partner always seems angry and takes it out on me" or "People at work are unfair," which involves changing others, reframe these issues to reflect your own experience. By acknowledging your own suffering, behavior, or limitations, you identify ways in which you can change. You could write, "I'm scared of my partner," or "I'm unsure how to handle my partner's aggressiveness." Similarly, instead of "people at work are unfair," you might write, "I feel guilty and powerless at work," or "I feel too anxious to address being bullied at work." This way, you focus on aspects you can work on and change.

Once you've identified your targeted problems, take some time for self-reflection to envision the specific changes you expect to see after addressing each issue. Ask yourself: "What will improvement look like? How will I feel and act differently?"

Write these anticipated changes in the "Evidence of Improvement" section in Table 1.2. Be specific about what improvement looks like. For example, "lack of assertiveness" is too vague. Instead, describe specific situations: you may be assertive at home but struggle at work. Being clear about the context makes your goals more actionable and measurable.

So, for example, if the targeted problem is feeling guilty and powerless at work, a possible success indicator might be being able to say "no" to a colleague, or expressing your thoughts in an appropriate way to your employer. Success indicators are most effective when they are specific and measurable. Using a different example, if the targeted problem is a fear of heights, success indicators could include driving on a hill or walking across a bridge without experiencing distress. Now, take a moment to fill in the table below before we continue.

Readiness for Change

Now that you have identified clear goals and pragmatic ways to measure your progress, an important question emerges: Are you ready for change? Are you prepared to work toward a more peaceful, harmonious, and fulfilling life? If your answer is yes, then you will need to commit the necessary time and effort. Put plainly: Are you ready to invest in yourself? Achieving the goals you've outlined will require dedicating 30 minutes of your time in the morning and another 30 minutes in the evening. Is your well-being worth one twenty-fourth of your day?

In our modern society, time often seems scarce. Between earning a living, fulfilling family obligations, and meeting social expectations, it can seem like there's no time left for yourself. On top of this, many of our unproductive habits—habits that we may be deeply attached to—also consume valuable time. If you're like most people, much of your energy is likely directed outward, toward the needs of others. Although this can feel generous and

responsible, when out of balance, it can also lead to neglecting your own well-being.

Even if you feel like time is unavailable, it's worth considering that busyness doesn't always equate to productivity. Many of us fill our schedules with activities that create the *illusion* of being busy. Since you haven't yet personally experienced the rewards of mindfulness training, it may feel difficult to prioritize an hour a day to practice. To overcome this, you will need to *make* time for it, carefully considering your priorities.

Making time for yourself is essential for your self-care and well-being and will ultimately benefit those around you. Our emotional states inevitably affect others. Just as unhappiness and frustration can ripple out, so can joy and contentment. Many parents we see in therapy make a firm decision to commit to the program, saying things like "I don't want my children to learn to be depressed and anxious from me," or "I see my daughter starting to behave like me, and it's heartbreaking!"

No matter your profession or area of expertise, acquiring new skills requires three conditions: *frequency* of training, *duration* of training, and *accuracy* of training. This principle applies universally—whether in sports, arts, trades, or personal skills. The brain forms and strengthens neural connections as we repeatedly practice, memorize, and automate skills, just as when we learned to walk, ride a bike, or drive.

With a little bit of creativity and effort, you can prioritize time for self-care. Consider getting up 30 minutes earlier in the morning or freeing up 30 minutes in the evening. The returns on this small investment will be exponential. Based on extensive clinical experience with this integrated approach, we can confidently say that very few of your targeted problems will remain unresolved. Remember, "Indecision is the thief of opportunity" [9].

Developing the habit of daily practice requires strong organizational skills, which is an important achievement in itself. If you're ready to engage fully in this program, treat it as a formal agreement. Let's sign the Commitment to Self-Care Agreement in Table 1.3 to affirm your commitment—we commit to teaching you to the best of our ability, and you commit to practicing these skills daily to the best of yours.


Accessing the Tools

As you get started, you'll need to access the tools you'll be using during the program. There are several options available, so you can choose what suits you best.

MiCBT Smartphone Application

If you enjoy using smartphone apps, "The MiCBT Guide" app is the easiest way to access all program materials. These include audio instructions for

Table 1.3 Commitment to self-care agreement.

You	
SIGNATURE _____	DATE _____
Us	
SIGNATURE  _____	DATE <u>March 20, 2025</u>
SIGNATURE  _____	DATE <u>March 20, 2025</u>

your meditation practices, written and audio summaries of weekly practices, short videos to motivate and assist with your practice, questionnaires, a diary to record and graph your daily practice, practice reminders, timers, progress records for specific skills, and more.

Beginning in Week 4, electronic record-keeping for applied skills exercises may be especially practical. In the app, *Stage 1.1* refers to the first week of Stage 1, *Stage 1.2* refers to the second week of Stage 1. Similarly, *Stage 2.1* refers to the first week of Stage 2 and so on. The app is available for download from app stores on both iOS and Android devices.

Worksheets

If you prefer using pen and paper, all the worksheets you’ll need are available for download in full-page format. You can print them by visiting this link: <http://www.micbtforwellbeing.com/forms>.

MP3 Files

Similarly, if you prefer downloading MP3 files from the internet than using a phone application, all audio files you’ll need are available for download from this link: <http://www.micbtforwellbeing.com/audio>. Table 1.4 shows the audio tracks you will be using.

And one last step: before we begin, it can be very helpful to have a formal measure of your current ability to accept your inner experiences and manage emotional reactivity. This will allow you to track your progress midway through the MiCBT program and again at the end. Seeing your progress can be empowering and uplifting.

We invite you to take a moment to complete the Equanimity Scale-16 (Table 1.5), a brief, evidence-based questionnaire developed by our team to

Table 1.4 List of MP3 tracks for audio instructions.**List of MP3 audio files**

1. General Introduction (1:18)
2. Rationale for Training (10:56)
3. Introduction to Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR) (2:22)
4. Progressive Muscle Relaxation (14:00)
5. Introduction to Mindfulness of Breath (2:40)
6. Mindfulness of Breath (30:00)
7. Introduction to Body Scanning (1:41)
8. Unilateral Body Scanning (31:31)
9. Withdrawing Instructions (3:24)
10. Practicing in Silence (30:00)
11. Introduction to the Mindfulness-based Interoceptive Exposure Task (MIET) (2:54)
12. The Mindfulness-based Interoceptive Exposure Task (6:05)
13. Introduction to Advanced Scanning Practices (2:44)
14. Symmetrical Scanning (30:00)
15. Introduction to Bipolar Exposure (1:05)
16. Bipolar Exposure Task—Guided (11:00)
17. Bipolar Exposure Task in Silence—Timer only (11:00)
18. Introduction to Partial Sweeping (1:35)
19. Partial Sweeping (30:00)
20. Introduction to Sweeping en Masse (1:46)
21. Sweeping en Masse (30:00)
22. Introduction to Transversal Scanning (1:20)
23. Transversal Scanning (30:00)
24. Introduction to Sweeping in Depth (1:00)
25. Sweeping in Depth (30:00)
26. Introduction to Loving-Kindness (3:12)
27. Loving-Kindness (8:11)
28. Sweeping in Depth and Loving-Kindness Combined (40:00)
29. Maintenance Practice (44:56)

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Table 1.5 The Equanimity Scale-16.

Select the response that best describes how much you agree with each statement right at this moment, based on the scale below. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers. Strongly disagree = 1, Mildly disagree = 2, Agree and disagree equally = 3, Mildly agree = 4, Strongly agree = 5.

1.	When I have distressing thoughts or images, I am able just to notice them without reacting.	1 2 3 4 5
2.	I approach each experience by trying to accept it, no matter whether it is pleasant or unpleasant.	1 2 3 4 5
3.	When I experience distressing thoughts and images, I am able to accept the experience.	1 2 3 4 5
4.	I can pay attention to what is happening in my body without disliking or wanting more of the feeling or sensation.	1 2 3 4 5
5.	When I notice my feelings, I have to act on them immediately.	1 2 3 4 5
6.	If I notice an unpleasant body sensation, I tend to worry about it.	1 2 3 4 5
7.	When I feel physical discomfort, I can't relax because I am never sure it will pass.	1 2 3 4 5
8.	I perceive my feelings and emotions without having to react to them.	1 2 3 4 5
9.	I remain present with sensations and feelings even when they are unpleasant.	1 2 3 4 5
10.	I notice that I need to react to whatever pops into my head.	1 2 3 4 5
11.	When I have distressing thoughts or images, I "step back" and am aware of the thought or image without getting taken over by it.	1 2 3 4 5
12.	I can't keep my mind calm and clear, especially when I feel upset or physically uncomfortable.	1 2 3 4 5
13.	I endeavor to cultivate calm and peace within me, even when everything appears to be constantly changing.	1 2 3 4 5
14.	I am impatient and can't stop my reactivity when faced with other people's emotions and actions.	1 2 3 4 5
15.	I am not able to tolerate discomfort.	1 2 3 4 5
16.	I am not able to prevent my reaction when someone is unpleasant.	1 2 3 4 5

assess progress in mindfulness training. Specifically, it will measure your level of equanimity. If you are using the MiCBT Guide app, you can complete the questionnaire directly within the app, which can be found in the Assessment section. The app will calculate your results and generate graphs to display your progress over time.

Scoring

To calculate your total score manually:

Step 1

For items 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 11, and 13, your item score is simply your response. For items 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 14, 15, and 16, reverse the score of your response as follows.

<i>Your response</i>	<i>Reversed score</i>
1	5
2	4
3	3
4	2
5	1

Step 2

Add up all the scores and use the reversed scores for items 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 14, 15, and 16. This should give you a total score out of 80: ___/80. As a point of reference, the average score in the general population before equanimity training is 59/80.

Adapted with permission from Rogers, H. T., Shires, A. G., and Cayoun, B. A. 2021. "Development and Validation of the Equanimity Scale-16." *Mindfulness* 12: 107–120. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-020-01503-6>. You can find a downloadable version of the Equanimity Scale-16 at <https://mindfulness.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/EquanimityScale16-1.pdf>. A research summary of our studies in the Handbook of Assessment in Mindfulness Research can also be found here: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-77644-2_57-1.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Progressive muscle relaxation [10], also known as PMR, is not a mindfulness meditation practice itself, but we begin with it in the first week of MiCBT to help develop key foundational skills. These include teaching your nervous

system to relax before starting the meditation practices. During PMR, you will sequentially contract and relax each of the major muscle groups for a few seconds.

PMR has been extensively researched since the 1970s within the context of behavior therapy [11] and continues to have strong empirical evidence supporting its effectiveness as a short-term standalone technique for managing stress, muscle tension, headaches, and anxiety [12, 13]. One distinct advantage of PMR is that it grounds you in the present reality of your physical experience. Unlike relaxation techniques that use imagination to create a relaxing “peaceful place,” PMR keeps you connected to your body and reduces the risk of dissociation.

The Practice

When practicing PMR at home, choose a quiet space where you can be undisturbed. Plan for about 30 minutes on the first day, and 14 minutes per session starting on day 2. The PMR instructions on Track 4 last about 14 minutes, but for the first day, you’ll also listen to the first three tracks, which together take about 30 minutes.

Just to ensure there is no confusion, while the Commitment to Self-Care Agreement outlines a 30-minute meditation practice twice daily, this week you only need to practice PMR for 14 minutes twice daily. The 30-minute meditation practices will begin next week with mindfulness meditation.

Use Table 1.6 to record your daily practice. This table is designed to be used for the entire week as you practice PMR. If you prefer, you can download and print a full-page version here: <http://www.micbtforwellbeing.com/forms>. Alternatively, if you are using the MiCBT Guide app, you can record your practice by tapping the “Log my practice” button.

You may want to wear loose clothing and remove your shoes to feel more comfortable. Sit in a comfortable chair, close your eyes, and follow the audio instructions as you progressively relax your entire body. When prompted to “relax this part” or “let go of tension” in a particular area, do your best to relax that part fully and immediately by dropping the muscle contraction you’ve just created. For example, after lifting your shoulders up toward your ears and contracting these muscles, drop the shoulders completely and effortlessly when prompted, releasing all tension in one go. This approach helps prevent the retention of any residual tension.

When would you like to begin? Ideally, as soon as possible! However, you might need to organize your schedule first. As we discussed earlier, making time is not always easy, so a little preparation can go a long way. Perhaps you could inform your partner or household members about your planned practice times to minimize interruptions. It may also help to rearrange your day to prioritize these sessions. For instance, you could set your alarm clock 30 minutes earlier in the morning and choose a time in the afternoon or evening that fits your routine for your second practice.

Table 1.6 Daily record of progressive muscle relaxation.

Day	Date	Morning practice (circle)	Duration (minutes)	Awareness of muscle tension rate from 1 to 10 your ability to feel the difference between tension and relaxation in the body. 1 = almost never; 10 = almost all the time	Evening practice (circle)	Duration (minutes)	Awareness of muscle tension rate from 1 to 10 your ability to feel the difference between tension and relaxation in the body. 1 = almost never; 10 = almost all the time
Day 1		Yes/No			Yes/No		
Day 2		Yes/No			Yes/No		
Day 3		Yes/No			Yes/No		
Day 4		Yes/No			Yes/No		
Day 5		Yes/No			Yes/No		
Day 6		Yes/No			Yes/No		
Day 7		Yes/No			Yes/No		

Skills You Will Learn

You may ask, “What are some of the reasons for practicing 14 minutes of peaceful and efficient relaxation each morning and evening this week?” We’re glad you asked! Here are the four main reasons for using PMR in MiCBT:

- 1 **Learning to relax:** By training your mind to perceive the difference between tightness and looseness in the body, you can then apply this skill in daily life to release unnecessary physical tension as needed throughout the day. This practice can be especially helpful in releasing subtle, habitual tensions that usually go unnoticed.
- 2 **Maintaining alertness in the mind, while being relaxed in the body:** How often are we fully relaxed while also being mentally sharp and crisply awake? Most of the time, when we are deeply relaxed—for example, right before falling asleep, while watching one last episode of a show before bed, or when using alcohol—we are also a bit mentally fuzzy, certainly not fully alert! Learning how to be very relaxed in the body while keeping the mind alert and awake is a valuable skill for the meditation practice you’ll start next week. During PMR, releasing excess physical tension is often accompanied by releasing mental tension, which can enhance our concentration and focus.
- 3 **Grounding attention in the body:** Unless we’re exercising or experiencing physical discomfort, we tend to live in our heads, distracted or overthinking the past and future. We are rarely grounded in the sensory experience of the present moment, where reality actually takes place. This tendency is especially strong when we experience depression or anxiety. PMR helps you become more present by bringing your awareness to the body as you gently tense and relax muscles twice daily.
- 4 **Caring for yourself twice a day:** For many of us, prioritizing our long-term well-being can be a challenge. In fact, if you look back at the “Evidence of Improvement” column in 1.2, you’ll likely notice that many of the behavioral changes listed will require consistent prioritization of your long-term needs and well-being. By practicing twice daily, you’re forging new habits and learning to prioritize self-care. Be kind to yourself and realistic in your commitment by setting yourself up for success—see the suggestions in Table 1.1 for helpful ideas.

Integrating Skills in Daily Life

What is the most effective way to apply the skills you are training twice daily? As it turns out, the brain tends to retain and retrieve knowledge in the same environment where it was first learned—this is known as the transfer of learning problem. To ensure that mindfulness skills benefit you across all areas of life (a process known as skill transfer), it’s essential to practice

applying the skills you are developing during meditation sessions throughout your day.

This ongoing integration ensures that mindfulness skills become more accessible during difficult moments. Each week, you'll have specific exercises or practices designed to help you embed mindfulness skills into your daily life. This week, we start with mindfulness of the body.

Mindfulness of the Body

Your amazing journey begins with cultivating present-moment awareness of your body's posture and movements. Mindfulness of the body (*kayanupassana* in Pali) is one of four mindfulness training modalities and a foundational part of establishing mindfulness in daily life. It's the first step in this mindfulness training and is the first aspect of the four foundations of mindfulness, as taught for the past 2,500 years [8]—the others being mindfulness of body sensations, mindfulness of mental states, and mindfulness of thoughts, all of which will be covered throughout the program.

When working with mindfulness of the body, *we pay attention to the posture, movements, and activities of the body during daily life*, as much and as often as possible. If you're sitting, simply notice that you're sitting. If you're lying down, notice that you're lying. The same applies to standing, walking, or any other physical activity. This practice trains your mind to stay in the present moment and reduces the tendency to become distracted by unproductive or unhelpful thoughts. For example, while aware of sitting at the dinner table, your attention is anchored in the present—you're not ruminating about the past or worrying about the future. You are here and now, likely to the delight of family members or friends who may be eating with you!

There's another very important aspect to this practice, and that is the quality of attention we use—we approach the body very objectively. In other words, we observe it as “a body,” rather than “my body.” Seeing the body as a body, rather than as “me,” helps reduce identification with it, which in turn helps free us from judgments about it. Instead of labeling the body as attractive or unattractive, old or young, healthy or unhealthy, we view the body *just as a body*. Whether it is moving or still, standing, sitting, lying, or in any other position, it is always changing—and it is not who we are. Learning to be kind to the body while not overly identifying with it can be especially helpful if you have medical conditions, persistent pain, or other issues. We will build on this foundation when we practice self-compassion in Stage 4 of this program.

Research by Dr. Ellen Langer of Harvard University has shown that older adults in long-term care facilities who practiced mindfulness in daily action (not meditation) lived about two and a half years longer than those who didn't [14]. She attributed this increase in longevity to heightened health

awareness and a reduction in accidents. Similarly, our past research demonstrates that adults who were asked to practice present-moment awareness in daily activities reported marked reductions in stress, anxiety, and depression [15]. The participants were only asked to pay attention to their posture and physical actions, such as walking, toileting, eating, driving, sitting, lying down to sleep, etc., as often as possible for a period of 8 weeks. This highlights the potential benefits of simply being grounded in the present moment.

Getting Started

To begin, simply know that you are reading this book right now. Become aware of your posture and how it changes after a few minutes. Try to maintain the continuity of body awareness over time, whether walking, showering, or lying in bed. Combining this present-moment awareness of your physical actions with progressive muscle relaxation will likely bring about rapid changes in your perception of what is happening in the present moment and your sense of calmness. When using your body to anchor your attention in the present moment, you are less likely to ruminate over the past or worry about the future. In the present, you are more likely to feel calm.

There's also a lot of valuable information to learn about your habits and your body through this simple practice. For instance, if you notice that you frequently slouch while sitting, it's okay to adjust your posture—in fact, it can be beneficial! But there's a caveat—make adjustments to your posture if you *choose* to, but not because you feel you should, or because how you were sitting was somehow “bad.” Instead, do so because you've noticed an unhelpful habit and are curious about developing one that may benefit your body in the long term. However, remember that the essential purpose of practicing mindfulness of the body is to cultivate objective attention to the body in the present moment, rather than to perfect your posture!

This Week's Practice

Using Pen and Paper Forms and Downloadable Audio/MP3

Commitment to Self-Care

- Commitment to Self-Care Agreement (Table 1.3).
- Complete the table of targeted problems and success indicators (Table 1.2).
- Fill out the Equanimity Scale-16 questionnaire (Table 1.5).

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- Practice progressive muscle relaxation twice daily.
 - Track 4.
 - Remember to listen to audio tracks 1 to 3 on Day 1.

- Record your practice.
 - Complete the daily record of progressive muscle relaxation (Table 1.6) form each day.

Applying Your Skills

- Mindfulness of the body (posture and movements) throughout the day.

Using the MiCBT Guide App

Commitment to Self-Care

- Commitment to Self-Care Agreement, found in the “Set your goals” section at the top of Stage 1.1.
 - Complete the “What problem would you like to target?” question.
 - Tap the first circle in Stage 1.1 and press “Start” at the top to set your goals.
- Equanimity Scale-16.
 - Access the questionnaire in the Assessments section at the bottom of the Stage 1.1 screen.

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

- Go to Meditations in Stage 1.1 for audio guidance.
- Record your practice.
 - Use the app to log your PMR sessions by tapping the orange “Log my practice” button.

Applying Your Skills

- Mindfulness of the body (posture and movements) throughout the day.

Frequently Asked Questions

The following questions address common challenges shared by clients during sessions and via email. Some of them relate to anxiety and pain. Others address practical concerns, like time management. If you encounter similar situations, our answers might provide helpful guidance.

Question: I’m not able to relax despite really trying to. I can only get about 20% of my body to relax. It’s frustrating, and I’m starting to dislike this exercise. Am I doing it wrong?

Answer: It might seem counterintuitive, but the purpose of PMR isn’t to achieve 100% relaxation. The real goal is to carefully notice the contrast between tension (when you tighten the muscles) and relaxation (when you release that tension). This week, you’re training your mind to recognize these differences, which will help you notice and release tension more effectively in daily life.

Interestingly, the sessions where relaxation feels difficult are often the most valuable. So, when you notice that it's hard to relax muscles after tightening them, approach this as a learning experience! Being without aversion toward tension and without craving for relaxation will help you be more accepting of the unavoidable tensions that arise in daily life, even those that you cannot readily release.

Question: I have bulging discs in my back, and I feel scared of tensing my back in case I injure it further.

Answer: It's important to be gentle with any areas that require special care. When the instructions suggest arching your back, adapt the movement to suit your body's needs. For example, you can substitute a gentle stretch or, if necessary, simply bring your awareness to the area and notice whatever sensations are already present, without adding any small movements.

In general, even when the audio instructions are to tighten muscles even "tighter," avoid overly tensing muscles. The appropriate amount is one that doesn't hurt.

Question: I feel anxious when I do PMR. Am I doing something wrong, or is this just too difficult for me?

Answer: It's common to feel unsettled during the first few PMR sessions. However, the practice of PMR does not create anxiety in and of itself. This anxiety can stem from worries about not performing the exercise correctly, from taking time away from other activities or responsibilities, or from bringing physical sensations of anxiety that were already there into greater awareness. As PMR itself does not train skills to address anxious thoughts, relaxing during practice can allow existing concerns and anxieties to become more prominent.

During your practice, do your best to disengage from any anxious or distracting thoughts that may be pulling your attention away from the body. Then refocus attention on the physical sensations of tensing and relaxing each muscle group. If anxiety persists, try practicing with your eyes open for the first few sessions. Once you feel more comfortable, gradually shift to practicing with your eyes closed.

Question: I have some flashbacks during PMR. I can handle them, but I wonder if I would be better off skipping this practice.

Answer: Experiencing flashbacks during PMR can happen for those with a history of trauma. In your previous email, you mentioned past trauma. Relaxation can sometimes bring painful memories into awareness, which may explain why individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

often avoid relaxation by engaging in distracting activities like watching TV late into the night, using substances, or overworking.

If you experience flashbacks or an initial increase in anxiety during PMR, there are a few ways to approach the practice. You can keep your eyes half open for the first few sessions to help reduce feelings of vulnerability and provide a sense of control. Over time, as your confidence builds, you may feel more comfortable closing your eyes. If closing your eyes constantly triggers flashbacks, it's perfectly fine to keep them open and proceed with PMR at your own pace.

You can also focus your attention on the sensations of your feet on the floor or the sensations of sitting on the chair supporting you. This grounding practice can help anchor you in the present moment and reduce the intensity of flashbacks. If you are experiencing severe PTSD symptoms, work with your therapist to ease into relaxation training gradually.

Question: I've practiced other forms of relaxation before, and it was suggested that I lie down. Can I lie down with this one, too?

Answer: It's better to practice PMR while seated for two main reasons. First, lying down can lead to drowsiness, and one of the key goals of PMR is to learn how to remain fully awake while feeling deeply relaxed so you can apply this skill in daily life. All upcoming practices, such as mindfulness of breath and body scanning, will also be practiced while seated, as this helps maintain alertness. Training yourself to be alert and deeply relaxed while seated during PMR this week will set you up for more alert, effective meditation practices next week! Posture plays an important role in supporting this alert, wakeful mental state.

Question: I'm struggling to make time for practice. Can I just practice once instead of twice daily?

Answer: While practicing once daily is better than not practicing at all, research shows that more frequent practice leads to better results [16]. You'll likely experience greater benefits if you commit to practicing twice daily. If finding time feels challenging, consider reorganizing your activities so your self-care doesn't come last... again. We often prioritize others' needs out of duty or compassion, but neglect our own needs. This program is an opportunity to improve self-care, which will also support the development of self-compassion in Stage 4 of the program.

Our brains have evolved to prioritize tasks based on what we expect the rewards to be. If you currently find it more rewarding to focus on others' needs than your own, it's natural to prioritize their care over your own. Behavioral psychology explains this as a conditioned response, where perceived gains or losses shape our actions. These conditioned tendencies can make it hard to prioritize self-care, including practicing twice daily. Changing

this pattern involves recognizing that investing in your well-being benefits not only you but also those around you.

Instead of overthinking, try to approach twice-daily practice as a nonnegotiable part of your day. Developing the habit of consistent self-care is one of the most valuable outcomes—arguably even more important than learning to relax!

Question: I’ve tried PMR a couple of times, but I don’t like it because I dislike the feeling of tightening my muscles.

Answer: This happens occasionally. In MiCBT, the PMR technique we use emphasizes the contrast between tension and relaxation. Highlighting this difference makes it easier to detect tension and release it more effectively during daily life. If this contrast is not sufficiently clear during practice, PMR’s benefits may not carry over as strongly into the rest of your day.

Another reason tensing is helpful is that during periods of anxiety or high stress, we can feel a little disconnected from the body. At these times, tensing can help us feel grounded in the body.

That said, if deliberately tensing muscles feels uncomfortable or isn’t possible, there’s an alternative method of practicing PMR in MiCBT that is also very helpful. Instead of a strong contraction, bring your attention to each muscle group following the same sequence and gently contract the muscles—the contraction might be just at the threshold of awareness—and then allow relaxation, to whatever degree is possible. This approach can be very beneficial for managing subtle tension and stress throughout the day.

Proceeding with the Next Chapter

The most effective way to approach this book is to read one chapter each week. Begin reading Week 2 when you are ready to start the practice of mindfulness of breath. Aligning your reading with your practice prevents unnecessary confusion that might arise from reading too far ahead and allows for a natural balance between intellectual understanding and experiential learning. By pacing yourself, you’ll build a strong foundation for the skills and insights that follow. Happy practicing!

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