

Mindfulness and Grief



“May I accept my sadness knowing that I am not my sadness.”

What is mindfulness?

It is sometimes easier to define mindfulness by starting with some common examples of mindlessness, such as heading to a new destination but finding yourself on your usual route to work or school, or eating the entire piece of cake when you intended to have just a few bites. A common explanation for these experiences is that you are “on auto-pilot.” Being mindful is the opposite. For example, as you read this page, be aware of the movement of your eyes, the position of your body, and your breath as it moves in and out.

The human brain is a natural time traveler. In a typical day, we can move through the past, present, and future hundreds of times. Additionally, we also tend to judge our thoughts, feelings, and experiences based on how we think life should be, which frequently causes us pain when reality doesn't meet our expectations. All of this activity usually goes undetected, and thus we may find ourselves feeling or behaving differently than we would like, without any clear explanation. This is when mindfulness can be helpful.

In short, mindfulness is *nonjudgmentally paying attention to what is going on right now*. By paying attention, we can create the mental space we need to be able to notice the thoughts and judgments that are always running through our minds. This space allows us to be observers of our thoughts and gives us the power to choose to let them pass rather than being swept away by them.

Meditation, yoga, and other mindfulness practices can help us pay attention to our thoughts and let go of judgments. Just like going to the gym can strengthen our body's muscles, meditation can help us to strengthen our mind's “attention muscle.” Through regular practice we can strengthen our ability to remain in the present moment, be aware of our thoughts, and let go of judgments when necessary.

So, what does mindfulness have to do with grief?

While mindfulness practices can be helpful throughout our lives, they can be particularly helpful when we're grieving because they can allow us to “ride the waves of grief” rather than being swept away by them.

If mindfulness is nonjudgmentally paying attention to what is going on right now, then grieving mindfully can be understood as nonjudgmentally paying attention to the intense pain of loss and all the other feelings that come with grief. This may seem like the last thing you want to do or may be something you do all the time, but it is important to note that “paying attention” is different from “wallowing” or “indulging” or being “in your feelings.” Grieving mindfully can be seen as the decision to allow yourself to mourn and to fully experience the lessons of grief with the goal of living life better, rather than escaping or numbing yourself from the pain. It is a decision that you continue to make each moment.

So, instead of feeling pain and allowing yourself to escape it by keeping busy, turning on the television, or eating a pint of ice cream, which may be appropriate actions at times, you can choose to allow yourself to “sit with your feelings,” to notice what they are, and to be curious about them as if this is the first time you've felt them. To help in this process, some find it useful to imagine being asked, “What does sadness feel like?”, and you try to describe what it feels like physically, mentally, and emotionally.





There are many great resources available in our Lending Library and online to help you grieve mindfully, but a helpful place to start might include repeating the words of spiritual teacher Joan Halifax:

May I be open to the pain of grief.

May I find the inner resources to really be present for my sorrow.

May I accept my sadness knowing that I am not my sadness.

Further Reading:

- *Yoga for Grief Relief* by Antonio Sausys
- *Mindfulness for Prolonged Grief* by Sameet M. Kumar
- *Grieving Mindfully* by Sameet M. Kumar

References:

- Kumar, S. (2005). *Grieving mindfully: A compassionate and spiritual guide to coping with loss*. Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications.
- Leem, S. (2012). Encountering Grief: A 10-Minute Guided Meditation with Joan Halifax [Audio]. Retrieved from <http://www.onbeing.org/blog/encountering-grief-guided-meditation/4983>
- Salzberg, S. (2011). *Real happiness: The power of meditation*. New York, NY: Workman Publishing Company.

