



Greetings to all the people in the Oakland University Mindfulness Community,

Spending a few moments to check in with you, and send a message of connection and encouragement for the difficult times we are now encountering. COVID-19 presents many challenges; fortunately, mindfulness practices have many evidence-based responses that can help with those challenges. It is with that spirit that I send this message.

I send three themes for your consideration: **Self-Compassion, Breathing, and Loving-Kindness Meditation.** Each of these areas may provide some peace and calm to feelings of being anxious, worried, or overwhelmed. We are dealing with a time of uncertainty and isolation, adding to the fear of COVID-19 itself. People feel triggered by thoughts and emotions of worry about illness, employment, and social isolation. Let's see how Mindfulness Practice can speak to these issues.

First is the reminder that Mindfulness Practice does not mean that we deny or resist our thoughts or feelings; instead, we enter them to know what is there. You may remember one practice from our workshops that includes phrasing something like this when it comes to watching our emotions or thoughts: *"May I see it, may I know it, may I feel it - it is here already."* The other phrasing is that we *"Name it to Tame it"* or we might notice our thoughts and say to ourselves, *"This is just a thought"* or *"Worrying, Worrying"* or *"Thinking, Thinking."* Again, the idea is to notice, be aware of the thoughts and emotions instead of trying to deny or resist them. Other well-known phrases in mindfulness that work: *"What you feel, you can heal. What you resist, persists."* In these ways we are taking our internal temperature, noticing where we are in the moment.

By doing this, we have some distance between the thoughts and our response. Because I am a former school practitioner, I see this as going to the top of the bleachers and watching all the activity on the playing field, not being engaged in the activity, but observing it. When we name or label emotions, we can get some distance from them and they may soften or relax.

The other thing to think about with regard to thoughts and emotions is that they are like clouds in Michigan; they may come and go quickly. One thought enters and it might be followed by another thought that is ready to take its place. If we stay with our thoughts, we

might notice if they lessen or worsen. For example, we might notice worry, and if we stay with the feeling, it might change to remorse, or guilt, or anger. We learn to watch and note, without judgment or criticism. That's where Self-Compassion enters...

Self-Compassion

You may remember that we most likely studied the works of Drs. Kristin Neff and Christopher Germer for their work with researching, writing, and training others about self-compassion. If, for example, you notice worry or anxiety, instead of talking to yourself with a harsh and critical voice such as, "*Why am I such a coward?*" or "*I should be able to control these feelings*" or "*Why can't I be like other people who live their lives without anxiety?*" Instead, talk to yourself as you would a good friend, offering affectionate understanding. Compassion recognizes the suffering in the world and wants to do something to lessen it; self-compassion helps in lessening that suffering. Just, offer yourself three responses of self-compassion:

- **Self-Kindness** - Being kind and caring, like you would talk to a friend. Something like, "*It's a tough time right now. I need to offer myself some kindness and compassion. I need to practice self-care.*"
- **Common Humanity** - Offering yourself something like, "*I hear on the news that people are worried right now. There is a lot of anxiety. I am not alone with these thoughts.*"
- **Mindfulness** - Being aware, in the moment, without over-exaggerating the worries, or denying them. It's like floating in the middle of a stream, without crashing into either shore: the "*My life is probably over*" shore, or the "*There's nothing to this*" shore.

Breathing

You will remember from the workshop you attended that when we are worried or nervous, our breath is often shallow, rapid, and in the upper part of the chest. When we slow our breathing, we can return to a place of calm. To get in touch with the parasympathetic nervous system, include one to two counts longer in your exhale. For example, breathing in for three counts, and out for four to five counts. Or, breathing in for four counts, and breathing out for five or six counts.

You might also try one of the breathing exercises we did in the workshops; it is the **Three Breaths** exercise.

- **Breathing in, I breathe in peace;
Breathing out, I breathe out worry.**
- **Breathing in, I breathe in peace;
Breathing out, I breathe out fear.**
- **Breathing in, I breathe in peace;
Breathing out, I breathe out anxiety.**

Change this to reflect what you want to exhale, and substitute your words. **Feel the peace as it enters your body; likewise, picture and feel the negative emotion as it leaves your body.**

Our breath is portable, always with us, like a good friend. We need to remember in a time of stress: **I can do something about this.** The 'do something' is a type of mindful breathing in this case.

Loving-Kindness Meditation (LKM)

You may remember that we usually close our workshops with the Loving-Kindness Meditation, an ancient practice that has many research articles written about its effectiveness. Here are a few examples:

- Reconditioning our habits of how we respond to others. Helping people to be more positive. Reducing racial bias. (Fredrickson, 2009; 2013: She has numerous articles)
- Gains in empathy. (Leppma and Young, 2016)
- Increases in positive affect; decreases in depressive symptoms. (Hoffman et al. 2015)
- Increase in well-being, positivity, and connection. (Hutcherson et al., 2008)
- Decentering negative reactions to thought rumination. (Feldman et al., 2010)

We followed the **Loving-Kindness Meditation** that is taught by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn:

- ***May I be safe and protected and free from inner and outer harm***
- ***May I be happy and contented***
- ***May I be healthy and whole to whatever degree possible***
- ***May I experience ease of well-being.***

You will recall that I guided a series of holding the image of someone, or some people, in our mind's eye and offering the same to them:

- ***May he/she/they be safe and protected and free from inner and outer harm***
- ***May he/she/they be happy and contented***
- ***May he/she/they be healthy and whole to whatever degree possible***
- ***May he/she/they experience ease of well-being.***

So here is a way for us to practice LKM during this pandemic. Think of the people we want to hold in our mind's eye and offering loving-kindness.

Some Loving-Kindness Meditation possibilities:

- *All the health care workers who are risking their own lives to save the lives of others*
- *The first responders and ambulance drivers who bring others to a place of safety*
- *The men and women serving this nation, the military, and police officers who keep us safe in times of worry*
- *The people working in grocery stores and pharmacies who also risk exposure while providing food and medicine for all of us*
- *The people who have lost their source of income and are looking for hopeful news*

- *The sick and hospitalized people throughout the world that they may be comforted with recovery*
- *The people who are grieving for lost loved ones*
- *People who are lonely, afraid, anxious, and isolated*
- *The teachers and school leaders who are working to provide learning and connection with students, staff, and faculty in their care*
- *The children who worry about food scarcity, illness of their grandparents or family members, and those who might be living in abusive home environments*
- *Truck drivers and delivery persons who are bringing essential materials and supplies*
- *(You will add to this list, all of the people in your list of care)*
- *And finally, as we did in the workshops: **For all beings, near and far...as we cast our loving-kindness to the people on this planet***

Final thoughts

Please know that no matter how you feel right now, mindfulness teaches us that it is important to know and label these thoughts and feelings. We are a community of people doing our best to adjust. Information about resilience includes how people have growth after adversity, and 'bounce back' from difficulties. At **Oakland University**, we are truly here with you. We are uploading our workshops for fall programs. Some of them include

Mindfulness Pt. I - How to Teach Mindfulness

Mindfulness Pt. II - Additional teaching methods, and Self-Compassion

Two-Day Institute on Mindfulness and Mental Health, Including Anxiety and Trauma

Two-Day Institute on Mindfulness and Restorative Practices, with Bill Boyle

Mindfulness Retreat

Mindfulness for School Teacher and School Leaders

And launching in the fall: Two-Day Institute: Mindfulness and Cultural Responsiveness, with Dr. Robert A. Martin

Just click on <http://oakland.edu> and enter **Mindfulness** in the Search Bar for program descriptions and registration information. **We hope to see you in the next academic year to deepen this practice.**

Please share our message with others who might find comfort in this communication, by clicking on the Mindfulness Message below.

**Warmest regards from your friends at Oakland University,
Caryn M. Wells, Professor, Department of Organizational Leadership**