

MINDFULNESS INSTRUCTION

Mindfulness is a practice that directs your attention to only one thing.

These are guidelines for leading mindfulness practice in a group setting. Leadership of the mindfulness exercise should rotate from member to member. These instructions reflect that; everyone gets a chance to lead the practice. The leader should receive nonjudgmental feedback and coaching about the exercise.

BEGINNING

The team leader asks a designated person, "Are you prepared to lead us in a mindfulness practice?" If the person answers, "yes", the team proceeds. If not, the leader moves to the next person, continuing until someone answers "yes". The person leading the exercise is the bell keeper as well, so the bell is passed to them at this moment. The team practices a nonjudgmental attitude toward anyone who is unprepared to lead. Why ask if the person is prepared? His or her preparation enhances the quality of the practice of every person.

TELL A PERSONAL STORY

Telling a personal story anchors the exercise in the listener's mind. Place the mindfulness exercise you're leading in the context of your daily life. Telling a personal story evokes emotion, making it easier for the group to recall the specific practice.

Example: The leader used a recent trip to an aquarium as the backdrop to the mindfulness exercise. The leader told the group, "The fish are like my thoughts, coming and going, some more preferable to me than others. I hold on to certain thoughts and push others away. Observing my thoughts would be like stepping back from the aquarium glass, and allowing me to simply notice each thought as it arises and disappears, without judgment, without attachment." She then led a five minute practice on observing thoughts, using the aquarium as the metaphor.

MAKE THE EXERCISE SIMPLE (NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH EASY)

In other words, pick ONE thing as the focus of your mindful attention. For instance, if you lead mindful breathing, you might suggest focusing on the rise and fall of the belly OR the sensation at the tip of the nose where the breath comes in OR the point in the back of the throat where the air is exhaled OR counting each breath. But ask, that each person pick ONE thing as his or her focus; this seems especially salient for beginners.

ANTICIPATE AND GIVE INSTRUCTIONS ON "WANDERING" ATTENTION

We like to refer to this as "what to do when you lose your mind". It's perfectly normal and expectable that the mind will wander off to something other than the focal point. For example, the mind may start craving that pastry on the table in front of you, or worry about paying that unexpectedly large credit card bill or detect the unbelievably intense urge to scratch an itch you've just noticed on the tip of your left nostril. Of course your mind does this and its fine. Really fine.

The practice is to catch your mind wandering and gently, gently, gently bring it back to the exercise. THAT is the practice. THAT is mindfulness! If you start judging yourself because your mind is wandering, notice you're judging (without judging it) and bring your attention back. Likewise, if you're thinking what a wonderful person you are because you can really concentrate, notice your judgments (without judging) and bring your attention back to the practice.

ASK FOR FEEDBACK

After you have led the practice, you may find it helpful to hear nonjudgmental feedback, coaching and reflection on your story, your bell-keeping, your instructions, etc. Remind the group to give you very specific behavioral feedback of something they might change. Our rule is to start with brief and genuine appreciative or complimentary feedback. Remember that one of the most effective ways to strengthen your skills is to strengthen your awareness of what you do well.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR USING A MINDFULNESS BELL

The mindfulness bell serves as a cue for the practice. We advise you to use the bell for mindfulness only, avoiding using it for bringing your team back to order. At retreat centers, the bell is invited to sound, not rung. Inviting the bell to sound, mindfully, marks the beginning and end of the formal exercise. These guidelines are an example of ones used at mindfulness retreats; Invite the bell to sound three times to start the practice, and three times to end it. As the bell sounds three times, slowly, mindfully, it gives your mind a few moments to settle down and ready itself for the practice. Likewise, inviting the bell at the end of the practice reminds you to bring yourself back to the present moment, as you move from mindfulness practice to team discussion. Note: remember to orient new team members to the bell and its purpose.