Mindfulness Practices

You would like to collaborate with the client on using mindfulness practices as a Stress Buster! Before getting started, ask yourself:

- Has the client been connected to services and programs to address immediate needs or stressors?
- Has the client been presented with a brief overview of all seven Stress Busters?
- Did the client express interest in learning more about mindfulness practices?

Use the information and trauma-informed steps presented here to **listen** for what clients want to prioritize, **partner** with clients to find things they can do every day to help calm the stress response for long-term healing, and **connect** clients to programs and services if they want more support. **For more, see this chapter's *What you can do: Listen, Partner, Connect* and *A trauma-informed approach for mindfulness practices* sections.**

We can have a million thoughts running through our minds, distracting us from what we are doing, where we are, or who we are with. When we pause and pay attention to the present moment with a kind, non-judgmental attitude, it frees us from dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. This pausing and paying attention to how our mind, heart, and body feel in the moment is mindfulness.[1–4] Mindfulness is an approach to everyday life and a way of engaging in the world and does not necessarily refer to a strict regular practice such as meditation. However, having a regular practice such as mindfulness meditation can train the brain to more readily integrate mindfulness into our daily lives.

Trauma-sensitive mindfulness, which is what this chapter covers, emphasizes listening to our bodies, but also taking it slow and acknowledging our individual experiences so we do not retraumatize ourselves. Presented here are tools and strategies to support clients in practicing mindfulness in ways that are accessible and comfortable.[1,2,5]

How does mindfulness affect our health and well-being? Mindfulness is a concrete, evidence-based strategy we can use to help protect our brains and bodies from toxic stress. Research shows that mindfulness can be used to support healing from a variety of health conditions that are associated with Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), including:

- post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)[6,7]
- anxiety and depression[8–12]
- executive functioning disorders[7,13,14]
- pain management[8,15]
- attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)[16]
- sleep problems[17,18]
- parental/caregiver stress[7]

Mindfulness can be practiced by adults, youth, and children and can be incorporated into a daily routine. Many of us have heard of meditation, which is a practice of focusing our attention inward to our breath, bodies, and emotions. This is just one way to practice mindfulness. Other ideas for mindfulness practices and activities from community partners and clinical experience include:

- increasing awareness of internal thoughts, the breath, and movement of the body.
- gratitude journaling.
- doodling.
- praying or chanting.
- focusing on a candlelight flicker or imagining a candlelight flicker while eyes are closed.
- participating in group and individual mindful movement or dancing to music.
- being fully present with friends and family members.
- listening to meditation music or experiencing a sound bath.
- mindful arts, crafts, and play.

Mindfulness practices can be offered in a variety of settings, including at workplaces and schools. Instruction and resources can be provided in a formal in-person class, in a less formal way, online, and can be offered in a group or individual practice.

The science: How mindfulness practices are a Stress Buster

Stress response	- Mindfulness can reduce feelings of stress and improve our response to stressful life experiences.[7,19–21] - Breathing exercises have been shown to reduce levels of stress hormones and blood pressure, as well as make people feel less stressed.[8,20,21]
Brain health	- Studies suggest that mindfulness improves the brain pathways involved in attention, emotion regulation, and thinking patterns.[8] - Mindfulness can help us focus and pay attention, regulate our emotions, and make better decisions.[20,22–24]
Heart health	- Mindfulness has been shown to lower blood pressure.[8,25] - In one study, a type of meditation was associated with decreased build-up of plaque in the arteries of Black Americans with hypertension (compared to those who received only health education).[26] - The American Heart Association reports that, given the low costs, low risks, and potential benefits, meditation could be considered an adjunct to routine treatments for cardiovascular disease.[27]
Immune health	- Mindfulness has been associated with a healthier immune system.[7,13,19,28]

Challenges

Many different factors – including those beyond our individual control – can affect how and if we practice mindfulness. Recognizing that there are structural/systems-level factors that can cause challenges to practicing mindfulness can reduce feelings of blame and shame. And, asking about these challenges can allow for more targeted individual-level solutions for clients.

Following are some examples of challenges;[5,29,30] this is not an exhaustive list. In addition, racism, discrimination, and inequities at all levels can contribute to and exacerbate any of these challenges.

Structural/systems-level challenges

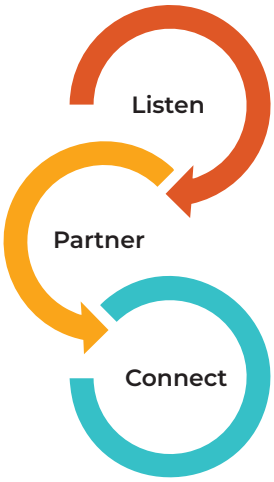
Environmental factors	Noise, unsafe communities
Societal or cultural factors	Some mindfulness practices may be socially and culturally acceptable, or there may be bias against them (e.g., due to misconceptions that mindfulness or meditation are religious practices due to their history or origins in religion; or misconceptions that mindfulness or meditation are practiced only by individuals of a certain culture or who appear a certain way or are viewed as living a certain type of unconventional lifestyle).

Interpersonal/individual-level challenges

Physical health factors	Some physical health limitations (e.g., musculoskeletal issues) may mean individuals need extra support, modifications, and encouragement to engage in mindfulness practices.
Psychological cognitive, and relational factors	For people who have experienced ACEs or other forms of trauma, mindfulness practices may be difficult and may actually activate the stress response system. They may experience: › difficulty sitting still and bringing attention to breathing and internal feelings and sensations. › lack of safety when doing an activity with eyes closed, such as meditation; particularly in a group if participants have not had time to get to know each other first. › difficulty trusting the person leading the meditation if a relationship based on trust and safety has not yet been established – especially if there are power and privilege differentials.

It is important to always take a trauma-informed approach to mindfulness with clients by acknowledging that practicing mindfulness can be challenging, honoring individual experiences, and preventing re-traumatization. This toolkit provides individual and organizational-level approaches to mitigate challenges (for organizational-level ideas, **see the chapter, *Promoting Stress Busters at the organizational level)***.

What you can do: Listen, Partner, Connect



The way you talk about Stress Busters with clients matters. ACEs Aware community and clinical partners shared that in their experience, it is more effective to engage clients with Stress Busters through conversation and partnership versus telling a client how to "fix it."

Using the **Listen, Partner, Connect Framework** is a way to remember how to structure a client conversation about Stress Busters and how to interact with clients using trauma-informed and strength-based approaches.

Listen

Ask open-ended questions and use compassionate active listening to understand clients' needs and desires around the mindfulness practices Stress Buster from their perspective.

Example questions:[31,32]

- Think of a time when you were really upset. How did that feel in your body? Did your heart rate increase, or did you feel anything else? How did you calm down?
- Tell me how you practice self-compassion and self-criticism.
- Can you share with me how worried you generally feel? Tell me more. What helps you manage these feelings?
- When you feel an emotion, like if you're angry or upset, how do you react? How do you manage these emotions?
- Do you use art, like writing or painting, to feel calm?
- [After explaining what mindfulness practices are and giving examples] Have you tried any of these? What did you like or dislike about doing them?
- How can I support you in practicing mindfulness?
- What do you see as your next steps?

For more information about how to do active listening, see the toolkit chapter *Listen, Partner, Connect: Framework and skills for a trauma-informed approach with clients.*

Reminder: Create safety and trust

- Be the calm that you are trying to inspire. Use a soothing, comforting tone of voice when leading a mindfulness exercise.
- When doing an activity with eyes closed, such as meditation, acknowledge that you are looking over the space until they are ready to come back. Give the option to keep eyes open with a soft, lowered gaze instead of closing them.

For more examples of how to apply SAMHSA's six key principles, see *A trauma-informed approach for mindfulness practices* section of this chapter.

Partner

Base the conversation and next steps on what a client needs or wants. There is no need to lecture or tell someone what to do. This is a partnership and a collaboration. If a client gets stuck or is not sure what to do, check in with them by asking, "How do you see me being able to help?"

- **Use the ACEs Aware handout as a guide in the conversation if helpful:**
  - "Did You Know? Being Mindful Can Prevent and Manage Stress" (from www.ACEsAware.org/managestress).
- **Explain the concept of "flipping our lid"** using the visual model to describe how stress can shut off our thinking brain and turn on our emotional, impulsive, instinctual brain – but mindfulness helps us stay in our thinking brains (for more information on the visual model, see the *Listen, Partner, Connect: Framework and skills for a trauma-informed approach with clients* chapter of the toolkit).
- **Use strengths-based and collaborative approaches with the client,** such as motivational interviewing, to discuss strategies for practicing mindfulness and for them to choose what works best for them, such as the following ideas from community partners and clinicians:
  - Be mindful with loved ones for 10-15 minutes every day; give them your complete attention by putting down the phone, turning off the TV, etc.
  - Use a daily mantra or affirmation, such as repeating "I am strong," "I am enough," "I am grateful," or another phrase that speaks to them.
  - Notice a stress response "in the moment" and use techniques to calm it, such as breathing exercises, grounding techniques, a body scan, or progressive muscle relaxation (for information on these techniques, see the *Listen, Partner, Connect: Framework and skills for a trauma-informed approach with clients* chapter of the toolkit)
  - Take a mindful walk, using all of your senses to notice what you see, hear, feel, and smell.
  - Eat mindfully by starting with feeling a small piece of food in your hands or fingers, focusing on how it smells, then putting it in your mouth. Focus on how it feels in your mouth and how it tastes. When you swallow, focus on how it feels going down your throat.
  - Try physical activity that integrates mindfulness, such as yoga, Tai Chi, and Qigong.
  - Try a soothing meditation app (see Share online resources, below).

For more information about how to use motivational interviewing techniques, see the toolkit chapter *Listen, Partner, Connect: Framework and skills for a trauma-informed approach with clients*.

Reminder: Focus on strengths and collaboration

- Let people know they can move and respond to their own internal cues. Over time, mindfulness can help them practice noticing their internal cues and being curious about how best to respond to them.
- If clients find that they feel anxiety, stress, or PTSD symptoms when they practice mindfulness, encourage them to start with only a few minutes and work their way up to more, if possible..

For more examples of how to apply SAMHSA's six key principles, see *A trauma-informed approach for mindfulness practices* section of this chapter.

Connect

If clients are experiencing toxic stress and have stress-related mental or physical health issues (see a list of ACE-Associated Health Conditions), they may be interested in connecting to resources, programs, and services that can support them in using mindfulness practices as a Stress Buster to reduce stress, heal, and thrive.

Share online resources	› Help clients find mindfulness and meditation apps, online videos, and free resources through clients' health insurance. › See a list of resources at www.acesaware.org/managestress/cbotoolkit.
Find Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs	› Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs can be offered in a variety of settings and are taught by certified teachers. The program is typically delivered in an eight-week format and includes an examination of the mind-body connection, and techniques aimed at sitting meditation, yoga, and body awareness.[33,34] › Many workplaces, universities, schools, hospitals and clinics offer free or reduced-cost MBSR programs.

Refer to primary care doctor	❯ If the client is interested, connect them with an ACEs Aware-trained clinician to help them get needed interventions and referrals. ❯ Ask the client if they would like to ask their doctor about different types of therapy. Some examples of therapies include: • Biofeedback:[35,36] Biofeedback involves practicing breathing techniques, mindfulness, or other calming strategies while being monitored by a device that visually shows your heart rate, breathing rate, blood pressure, or other physiologic measures in real time. This can be a very powerful tool in helping people connect with their body and see healing in action. • Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT):[37–39] A tailored approach to cognitive therapy that incorporates mindfulness practices. Therapy is offered by a mental health professional who has specific training in mindfulness-based techniques. ❯ For clients without health insurance, you can find help with Medi-Cal, health coverage, and other benefits on the California Department of Health Care Services (DHCS) website and find free primary care services at the California Association of Free and Charitable Clinics. ❯ For resources, visit www.acesaware.org/managestress/cbotoolkit.

A trauma-informed approach for mindfulness practices

When we say "take a trauma-informed approach," what does that mean? There are six key principles of SAMHSA's trauma-informed approach.[40] The following table provides examples from lived experience from community partners, clinical expertise, and the literature showing how to apply this Stress Buster across the six key principles. You can follow these practices with clients who are participating in group classes or programs, or when working one-on-one with a client using Listen, Partner, Connect.

SAMHSA's principles of a trauma-informed approach	**Ways to put the principles into action** Examples from community partners, clinicians, and the literature
Safety	› Be the calm that you are trying to inspire. Use a soothing, comforting tone of voice when leading a mindfulness exercise. › Consider helping clients identify cues for safety to remind them they are in a safe space – such as non-triggering imagery like a plant or how the sunlight hits the floor – rather than sounds or cues that may be more triggering such as sirens, machinery, etc. › Where possible, situate clients so that other people, doors and windows are in front of them rather than behind them. In groups, everyone can sit in a circle so they can all see each other. › When practicing mindful movement, avoid poses that are vulnerable, such as opening up the chest, neck or groin areas, or give options to do other poses.
Trustworthiness and transparency	› Acknowledge to clients that practicing mindfulness can be challenging. › When doing an activity with eyes closed, such as meditation, acknowledge that you are looking over the space until they are ready to come back. Give the option to keep eyes open with a soft, lowered gaze instead of closing them.

Collaboration and mutuality	› Clients who may be in an affiliate, fight, flight, or freeze state (see *The science of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and toxic stress* chapter of the toolkit) may need to start with a more active mindfulness practice such as taking a mindful walk, playing a sport mindfully, or doing a mindful body shake (for links to resources, see www.acesaware.org/managestress/cbotoolkit). › If clients find that they feel anxiety, stress, or PTSD symptoms when they practice mindfulness, encourage them to start with only a few minutes and work their way up to more, if possible. › If clients are experiencing difficult emotions or symptoms during a mindfulness practice, gently guide them to non-judgmentally notice and be present with their symptoms, be compassionate with themselves, and listen to what their body needs. If they need to stop, it is fine to pick it up again another day.
Peer support	› Help clients practice self-compassion by reminding them to be kind to themselves. › Explain it is normal to have thoughts come into our minds as we practice mindfulness. Many people give up and think that they are not good at it because they can't stop the thoughts from coming in. The goal is not about getting to a place where no thoughts come in. Rather, when the thoughts come in, we notice them as just that: thoughts. Rather than engage with the thoughts, we can gently return our focus back to our breath or the mantra or the body scan, etc. The process of noticing the thoughts and shifting our focus back to mindfulness is what is associated with the brain benefits.

Empowerment, voice and choice	› Give clients agency and choice, such as: • Options of three different areas to focus on – the breath, sensations, or sounds. • Different ways to practice mindfulness, from meditation to mindful movement (focusing on the movement of the body such as when walking). • Where to sit, such as with their back against a wall instead of in a circle. • Eye contact: don't insist on it; invite clients to look at the ground, have a soft unfocused gaze, or close their eyes if they are comfortable. • Length of practice: Let clients know that some people, especially those with a history of trauma, may experience distress or discomfort with some mindfulness practices. In that case, the client may be more comfortable starting with short 1-2-minute mindfulness sessions and working towards longer periods. • Ways to opt out: offer clients alternatives for any instruction that they aren't comfortable with. › Let people know they can move and respond to their own internal cues. Over time, mindfulness can help them practice noticing their internal cues and being curious about how best to respond to them. › Practicing mindfulness techniques every day helps build our "mindfulness muscle." When stressful events happen, mindfulness can be a core strategy in calming stress hormones, staying present, and thinking clearly. › To help clients feel comfortable speaking up about what they want, work to level power differentials in your interactions with clients (for more information, see the *Listen, Partner, Connect: Framework and skills for a trauma-informed approach with clients* chapter of the toolkit).

Cultural, historical, and gender issues	› Recognize and honor the different cultural, historical, religious, and other customs that can influence how we can or want to engage with mindfulness. › Honor that cultures throughout the world have their own mindfulness practices and traditions. › Acknowledge the historical origins of mindfulness, still present in many cultures, that are grounded in religion. Though mindfulness is currently independent of religious identity or practice, this context may influence a client's understanding of the practice and should be considered in one's approach to education and activity planning related to mindfulness. › In individual sessions, find out more about the client's spiritual or faith-based mindfulness practices, like prayer, chanting, attending services. Some assessment tools ask about spirituality or faith – this can start the conversation. › Studies show that women are more likely to practice mindfulness than men, and men are more likely to report that mindfulness helped them "a little or not at all." Gender differences may influence how different mindfulness practices are received by clients, as well as help organizations develop strategies to encourage more equitable gender engagement in mindfulness.[41] › Ask clients about mindfulness practices they know of in their own cultures and consider incorporating these practices in your programs or work with clients.

With these tools and strategies, you can use the mindfulness practices Stress Buster to support individuals, families, and staff in preventing and treating toxic stress.

> **Take Stress Busters to the next level:**
>
> For ideas for integrating Stress Busters into your organization's operations, services, and physical environment, **see the chapter, *Promoting Stress Busters at the organizational level.***

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