

## Taming the Brain - Exercise 1: Week One

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For this course, we have four weeks of suggested mindfulness exercises tailored to work in tandem with the reading material and the Participant Guide reflective exercises for this course.

When we say “Mindfulness Exercises” we are talking about meditative and contemplative exercises that are designed to impact your heart (emotional) intelligence center and body (instinctual) intelligence center.

**While working on the cognitive (rational thought) elements of your brain are also critical, in our culture, we tend to focus on our cognitive side almost exclusively. Applied neuroscience indicates that this is an incomplete focus, in that it engages only one third of the key elements from which we derive intelligence in our life.**

*The two elements that are most often neglected are our present emotional state and our embodied experience.*

**If you desire to build disciplines and practices into your life that enable you to live transformation as a lifestyle, then mindfulness practices are absolutely essential. You will not effectively build the new neuron pathways that enable you to change the areas of your life that you desire to change unless you build the new neuron pathways that will support that. And mindfulness practices are an essential part of that process.**

You will not effectively build those pathways unless you couple the cognitive learning and self observation/self reflective disciplines represented by your Participant Guide exercises with this third element of mindfulness.

**Here is our foremost priority in supporting you in doing these new habits: We are going to take it slowly and do everything we can to set you up to win, in developing mindfulness habits.**

**The name of the game here is CONSISTENCY. It is better to do mindfulness practices for a few minutes EVERY DAY than it is to do them for a couple hours ONCE PER WEEK.**

We will be intentionally brief in what we send to you. This is because most people simply have too much on their plate to read a lot of info. And, this is about DOING IT, PRACTICING IT, not reading about it.

That having been said, if you want a more extensive grounding in this, then we recommend you read Jon Kabat-Zinn's book, *Mindfulness For Beginners*. It is an excellent grounding in mindfulness practices.

*We rarely take time to stop the endless chatter of our minds, clear our minds as best as possible, attend to deep breathing and simply BE PRESENT, without any felt need to do anything else. That is the foundation of meditative mindfulness and it is what you get to practice this week.*

We are going to take our time slowly working into these disciplines. **Think long-term patience and progress, rather than quick, dramatic results.** These disciplines are not about quick results. They are about transforming the way we relate to life to a richer, more textured and nuanced way of being and engaging.

While mindfulness and mindfulness practices are becoming more and more popular, most people are challenged to establish these as a regular practice in today's hyperactive, hurried, distracting world. I ask you to interrupt the normal mindset of achieving "getting it done" that dominates our culture, as you engage this. These disciplines are successfully built upon the attitudes of patience, and non-judgment.

**So, be patient with yourself. Practice this non-judgmentally.**

Meditation is, in many ways, practicing stillness, both internally and externally. It is best practiced in silence and solitude. You may not always have that option, but whenever possible, seek it.

## Silence and Solitude

**To be silent is to be in a place of quiet—with no extraneous noise.** Silence includes only natural sounds (the wind in trees, birds, nature, your heart beating, the sound of your breathing). Just quietness. —You and your thoughts, feelings, physical sensations—what you are experiencing.

Silence is best accomplished in solitude. **Solitude means being by yourself, —doing nothing and not trying to make anything happen.** Its focus is on receptivity, not assertive activity.

It is fascinating and transformative to introduce the disciplines of silence and solitude into your life on a daily basis. **Self-observation and self-reflection—two key disciplines in this work and in life, are powerfully supported through embracing silence and solitude.**

When I talk about practicing stillness, I am talking about *consciously relaxing*. *Ceasing efforting and striving*.

## Keys to Practicing Silence, Solitude and Stillness

This week we are going to meditate/practice stillness within the environment of silence and solitude.

**All I am asking you to do this week is to practice this for a few minutes a day. Two minutes is a win. Twelve minutes is a home run.** Some experts say twenty to sixty minutes per day is ideal. But, I have found that this is an unrealistic goal when starting for around 95% of the people who try.

So, for now, go for at least two minutes, but shoot for twelve minutes per day this week. If you can do more, then please do. But, remember, be patient with yourself and non-judgmental. If you forget, don't worry about it. Just pick it up again when you remember. If you find it difficult, simply relax into that reality and practice it anyway. **This is one practice that generates tremendous value whether you think you are doing it easily or not.**

Here are some tips:

1. Get in a place where there are **no distractions, no extraneous noise, and where you can be in solitude.** Do your best to do this daily.
2. How much time you dedicate to this is up to you. The main thing to remember is that **consistent practice is the key.** It is better to do this for five minutes per day than two hours once per week. When you are doing this, **you are literally forming new neuron pathways, new ways of relating.** You are rewiring your brain. This takes consistency.
3. Just to give you a sense of optimal time frames, if you can do this for at least **twelve minutes per day, research shows that that time frame is a favorable tipping point in terms of building new neuron pathways.** I have heard many neuroscientists say 45 to 60 minutes per day is ideal. **BUT TWO MINUTES PER DAY IS FINE IF THAT IS WHAT YOU CAN MANAGE. SIMPLY DO SOMETHING.**

4. There is a lot of evidence that **first thing in the morning is an ideal time to practice this. BUT DO IT ANY TIME IN THE DAY THAT YOU CAN MANAGE.** If mornings are tough, then do it another time.

5. If you cannot swing one single session of stillness per day, then do a few minutes here and there when you can carve time out for it. **Doing a few minutes at a time a few times per day has an accumulative effect.**

6. **Be patient with yourself.** If you forget, don't worry about it. Practice consistently relating to this non-judgmentally. When you remember, just pick it up again. This is not something you **HAVE** to do. It is something you **GET** to do, and you get to decide when you do it. Remember this is about **CEASING EFFORTS.** It is not something else you need to strive at.

7. There is no “right” way to do this. There are basic elements of the practice and then endless creativity on your part as to how you engage it. **Be creative and flexible as you engage it.**

## **The Basic Elements of Meditating/Practicing Stillness**

This is a meditative practice. It is an emptying process. **I think of it as preparing the room of my mind to recognize and experience what is there when my thoughts are not constantly filling the void.** In order to maximize that possibility, I first need to clear the clutter from my mind. You do this by:

- **Get into a comfortable posture.** It can be lying down, sitting upright, walking—whatever helps you focus and clear your mind.
- **Focus attention on your breathing.** Follow your breath into your nose, own through your lungs deep into your “belly.” Practice deep breathing, while always “attending” to your breath. This mechanism of placing your attention on your breath enables you to clear your mind of extraneous thought.
- **Consistently clear your mind of thought.** Think of it as clearing the clutter out of the room of your mind. When your mind wanders, simply bring your attention back to your breath and bodily sensations. Simply be present in that moment, moment by moment.
- **Be mindful of your bodily sensations—**where you feel pain, tension, etc.

- **Consciously relax.** Practice peace. If you still feel anxiety, simply be with that. Don't resist it.
- Release the urge or felt need to "do something." You don't need to do anything except for what I just iterated. **There is no end point you are supposed to arrive at.** Just practice this moment by moment. Some days your mind will seem like it won't slow down, and you will feel endlessly distracted. That is okay. Just be with it and patiently continue to bring your attention and awareness back to your breathing and bodily sensations.
- **Notice your feelings, bodily sensations and notice when your thoughts intervene.** When you notice thoughts, simply notice it and release them and bring your attention back to your breathing and being present in your body.

We will build on these beginning steps in in future weeks. Enjoy your week as you engage the disciplines of silence, solitude and internal stillness.