**Five Essential Elements to Develop Your Mindfulness Practice (Edited Version)**

**ELISHA GOLDSTEIN, PhD**

Science continues to reveal that an active practice has *[important health benefits](https://blogs.psychcentral.com/mindfulness/2013/10/the-heart-and-science-of-how-to-make-mindfulness-work/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank),* (<https://blogs.psychcentral.com/mindfulness/2013/10/the-heart-and-science-of-how-to-make-mindfulness-work/>)

 But no matter how much we talk about it, read about it, or study it, putting a mindfulness practice into practice can be challenging.

Sometimes, all we need is a simple road map to get us started—or restarted, if it’s been some time since we practiced. Here are five essential elements to creating a [mindfulness](https://www.mindful.org/what-is-mindfulness/) meditation practice in daily life:

### 1. PREPARE YOURSELF

Before even attempting to do any practice, it’s important to understand that your practice is not a performance. Each practice doesn’t need to be evaluated about whether it was a “good” meditation or a “bad” meditation. This performance-based mindset misses the point entirely. If there is any goal at all to the practice, it’s simply to learn.

For example, if someone is using their breath as an object of attention, the goal is not to stay on the breath for a long period of time, it’s to learn about what it’s like to settle attention [on the breath](https://www.mindful.org/use-breath-strengthen-mind/). If the mind wanders a lot, then you learn how busy the mind is. If it wanders a lot on a particular topic, you learn to what degree that topic is on your mind. If it is on your mind a lot you learn that whatever it is, it needs attending to and you can later make the choice to focus on it.

Everyone’s [mind wanders](https://www.mindful.org/when-wandering-minds-are-just-fine/), even people who have been meditating for 50 years. It’s part of what the brain does. In fact, you could make the argument that the more it wanders the more you have an opportunity to train the mind to see “choice points” to gently bring it back. What you practice and repeat becomes a habit and so you’re strengthening the habit of choice.

### 2. BRING YOUR HEART INTO IT

There is sometimes confusion in how people teach mindfulness practice, but in the way that I’ve come to understand it is that it’s simply not as effective unless you’re bring your heart into it. The quality of attention has relaxed curiosity and tenderness to it. It’s as if we’re bowing with respect to the life being lived, whether the attention is on the breath, the body, or any sense perceptions.

***You’re doing this practice ultimately because you care about yourself, and possibly because you know that doing this practice will also be a gift to those around you.***

When there is pain involved, there is an awareness of the pain and the attention has this quality of wanting to be supportive in some way. It is a quality of care and self-compassion.

### 3. FORGIVE YOURSELF

You’re going to be [completely imperfect](https://www.mindful.org/overcome-these-five-obstacles-to-your-mindfulness-meditation-practice/) at this, like the rest of us. If time goes by and you forget to practice, forgive yourself for the time gone by, investigate what took you off course, and then in that space of awareness invite yourself to begin your practice again.

This is a very forgiving practice; you can always begin to be present to your life again. It only takes a moment.

### 4. THANK YOURSELF

Perhaps even the most important part of this practice is to thank yourself each time you do it. When the time is up, you acknowledge yourself for making the effort to take time out of daily busy-ness for your own learning, health and well-being.

This imprints in your memory that you care enough about yourself to pay attention to you! That self-compassionate type of energy is healing. What would the days, weeks, and months ahead be like if you had more of that energy circulating through your mind and body?

### 5. FIND A BUDDY

You could do the previous four elements of practice on it’s own, but it sure helps when we have people to do it with. Maybe you know someone who has had the interest to start a practice or you go on meetup.com and check to see if there are any groups in your area. Or maybe you look at an app like[Insight Timer](https://itunes.apple.com/app/zen-timer-meditation-timer/id337472899?mt=8" \t "_blank)that has worldwide online and in-person groups to check in with.

Again, a buddy is not essential to start, but it can help you feel more connected to others who are aligned with this interest of yours. Ultimately that really helps motivation.