

From Broken to Whole:
Mindfulness for Survivors

by

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Curtis Brown

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Introduction

If you are reading this, it means you've endured something no one should ever have to face—sexual abuse or assault. You've carried pain that was never yours to bear. You've survived moments that could have broken you, yet here you are, still searching for light. That speaks volumes about your strength.

I wrote this book for you—for every woman and man who has felt violated, silenced, or stripped of their sense of safety. For every survivor who has struggled to trust again, to feel whole again, to believe in life beyond the trauma.

Let me say this clearly: **What happened to you was not your fault.** You did not deserve the humiliation, the fear, the coercion, or the cruelty. The pain inflicted upon you does not define who you are. You are more than what was done to you—you are resilient, you are worthy, and you are capable of creating a life that feels safe, joyful, and meaningful.

This book is not a quick fix. Healing is not linear, and it's not about forgetting the past. It's about reclaiming your power in the present. The practices you'll find here—especially mindfulness—have the potential to transform the way you relate to your thoughts, emotions, and body. They've helped me rebuild my own life after trauma, and I believe they can help you, too.

Mindfulness is not just a buzzword. It's a tool for survival, for grounding, and ultimately for thriving. It helps you:

- **Calm your nervous system** when anxiety or flashbacks take over.
- **Create emotional safety** by reconnecting with the present moment.
- **Release shame and self-blame** and replace them with compassion and acceptance.

- **Build trust in yourself again**—one breath, one choice at a time.
- **Find joy in small moments**, even when the big picture still feels hard.

This book offers gentle, practical steps to help you feel more centered, more in control, and more hopeful. It won't erase what happened, but it will give you tools to navigate the pain, soften its grip, and create space for healing and growth.

You deserve that. You deserve peace, love, and safety. You deserve to live, not just survive.

My prayer is that these pages give you more than strategies—they give you a sense of possibility. That you can heal. That you can thrive. That the best parts of your story are still unwritten.

With compassion and hope,

Mandie Brown

Chapter 1:

What Mindfulness Really Is (and Isn't)

When you've lived through abuse, whether physical, emotional, sexual, or psychological, the very idea of *being present* can feel complicated—even terrifying. For many survivors, the present has often been painful, unpredictable, and unsafe. So when someone says, "Just be in the moment," it can feel dismissive or even triggering.

That's why we need to start here—with the truth about mindfulness. What it really is, what it isn't, and why it can become a powerful tool for your healing.

The Misconceptions About Mindfulness

Before we explore what mindfulness *is*, let's clear up what it's *not*. So many people misunderstand mindfulness, and when you're healing from trauma, the last thing you need is another unrealistic expectation placed on your shoulders.

Myth 1: Mindfulness means emptying your mind.

People often imagine mindfulness as sitting cross-legged on a cushion, trying to think of nothing. If that's what you've been told, no wonder it feels overwhelming! Mindfulness isn't about shutting off your thoughts; it's about noticing them without judgment. Thoughts will come—that's normal. You simply learn not to be dragged away by them.

Myth 2: Mindfulness means feeling calm all the time.

If you're practicing mindfulness and you still feel anxious, that doesn't mean you're failing. The goal isn't to feel peaceful every second—it's to build awareness of what's happening inside and around you so you can respond instead of react.

Myth 3: Mindfulness erases pain.

It doesn't. Mindfulness doesn't make the past disappear or magically heal wounds overnight. But it does give you a way to relate to your pain differently—without being consumed by it.

Myth 4: Mindfulness is religious or only for monks.

Mindfulness has roots in spiritual traditions like Buddhism, but today it's widely practiced in secular ways and supported by modern psychology and neuroscience. You don't have to believe in anything specific to practice mindfulness. It's about awareness, not worship.

Myth 5: Mindfulness means sitting still for an hour every day.

No. You can practice mindfulness for 30 seconds standing at your kitchen sink. You can bring mindfulness into brushing your teeth, drinking tea, or walking your dog. It's about intention, not perfection.

So What *Is* Mindfulness?

The simplest definition comes from Jon Kabat-Zinn, who introduced mindfulness into modern medicine:

"Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, and without judgment."

Let's break that down:

- **Awareness:** Simply noticing what's happening inside you (thoughts, emotions, sensations) and around you (sounds, sights, textures).
- **On purpose:** You're not drifting or running on autopilot. You choose to pay attention.
- **In the present moment:** Instead of replaying the past or worrying about the future, you land in *now*.
- **Without judgment:** You don't label your thoughts or feelings as "good" or "bad." You just notice.

When you've experienced abuse, this kind of gentle awareness can be life-changing because trauma often pulls you into two painful places:

- **The past** — replaying what happened, feeling stuck in old patterns.
- **The future** — fearing what might happen, scanning for danger.

Mindfulness offers an alternative: a return to the present, one breath at a time, in a way that feels safe and manageable.

Why Mindfulness Matters for Survivors

Abuse often leaves behind deep emotional imprints—hypervigilance, anxiety, flashbacks, self-doubt. The body and mind learn to live in survival mode, always scanning for threat. Mindfulness interrupts that cycle. Here's how:

- **Grounding:** It helps you anchor in the here and now, so you don't get swept away by memories or "what ifs."
- **Self-regulation:** It teaches your nervous system how to come out of fight-or-flight mode.
- **Empowerment:** It gives you choice. Instead of reacting automatically, you can respond intentionally.
- **Reconnection:** It helps you feel safe in your body again—a place that may not have felt like home for a long time.

Mindfulness doesn't erase trauma, but it creates space between *you* and your experiences. You learn: *"I have thoughts, but I am not my thoughts. I have feelings, but I am not my feelings. I can observe without being overwhelmed."*

Starting Small: The Survivor-Friendly Way

If you're thinking, "*This sounds good, but I don't know if I can do it,*" you're not alone. Many survivors feel nervous about mindfulness because slowing down can make them feel vulnerable. That's why we start small. Just seconds at a time. No pressure. No "perfect practice."

The truth is: **Mindfulness is not about doing more. It's about being with what already is, in a way that feels safe.**

Practical Ways to Begin

Here are some trauma-sensitive mindfulness exercises to try. Remember: if any practice feels too intense or triggering, stop. Honor your pace.

Exercise 1: One-Minute Awareness

- Sit or stand in a comfortable position.
 - Take one slow, deep breath in and out.
 - Notice 3 things you can see around you.
 - Notice 2 things you can hear.
 - Notice 1 thing you can feel (your feet on the floor, your hands resting).
 - That's it. You just practiced mindfulness.
-

Exercise 2: Safe Breathing Space

- Place one hand on your chest and one on your belly.
- Inhale gently, feeling your belly rise.
- Exhale slowly, whispering to yourself: "*I am safe right now.*"

- Repeat for 3 breaths.
-

Exercise 3: Anchor with an Object

- Find a small object—a stone, a keychain, a bracelet.
 - Hold it and feel its texture, temperature, weight.
 - Let it remind you: *"I am here. I am present."*
-

When Mindfulness Feels Hard

Sometimes sitting quietly can feel uncomfortable. You may notice tension or emotions you've been avoiding. That's okay. Mindfulness doesn't mean you force yourself to stay in discomfort. It means you notice what's happening and choose what feels safest.

For example:

- If focusing on your breath feels overwhelming, focus on your feet touching the floor.
 - If silence feels too much, use music or nature sounds as an anchor.
 - If stillness feels triggering, try mindful movement—walking slowly and noticing each step.
-

What to Remember as You Begin

- There's no right or wrong way to practice.
- If your mind wanders 100 times and you bring it back 101 times, that's mindfulness.
- Every attempt counts. Every pause matters.

- Mindfulness is not about achieving a certain state; it's about noticing what is already true without judgment.
-

Reflection Questions

- What misconceptions about mindfulness have I believed?
 - What part of mindfulness feels most inviting to me?
 - When in my day could I take 30 seconds to pause and notice?
-

Closing Thought:

Mindfulness is not about perfection. It's about presence. It's not about fixing the past or predicting the future. It's about giving yourself the gift of *now*—a moment where healing can begin.

Mindfulness for Healing After

Abuse – Workbook Section

Chapter 1:

What Mindfulness Really Is (and Isn't)

This workbook section is designed to help you integrate the concepts from Chapter 1 into your daily life. Take your time with each exercise and reflection prompt. There are no wrong answers—only opportunities for awareness and growth.

Practical Exercises

1. ****One-Minute Awareness****

- Sit or stand comfortably.
- Take one slow, deep breath in and out.
- Notice 3 things you can see around you.
- Notice 2 things you can hear.
- Notice 1 thing you can feel (your feet on the floor, your hands resting).
- Write down how this experience felt in the space below:

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection:

2. ****Safe Breathing Space****

- Place one hand on your chest and one on your belly.
- Inhale gently, feeling your belly rise.
- Exhale slowly, whispering to yourself: "I am safe right now."
- Repeat for 3 breaths.
- After practicing, jot down any sensations or emotions you noticed:

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection:

3. ****Anchor with an Object****

- Find a small object—a stone, a keychain, a bracelet.
- Hold it and feel its texture, temperature, and weight.
- Let it remind you: "I am here. I am present."
- How did this exercise make you feel?

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection Questions

- What misconceptions about mindfulness have I believed?

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- What part of mindfulness feels most inviting to me?

- What part of mindfulness feels most inviting to me?

- When in my day could I take 30 seconds to pause and notice?

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- What resistance do I feel when I think about practicing mindfulness?
Why?

- What resistance do I feel when I think about practicing mindfulness?
Why?

- What does 'being present' mean to me personally?

- What does 'being present' mean to me personally?

**Remember: There is no perfect way to practice mindfulness.
Every small step counts toward healing.**

Chapter 2:

Trauma and the Nervous System – Why Your Body Reacts the Way It Does

If you've ever wondered why you can't "just get over it," why you freeze during conflict, or why your heart races at the smallest reminder of the past, the answer is simple yet profound: your body remembers.

When you've lived through abuse, your nervous system becomes wired for survival. It's not a sign of weakness; it's evidence of how powerful and protective your body truly is. Understanding this truth is essential because you can't heal what you don't understand. You are not broken—you are adaptive. And now, mindfulness can help you gently rewire those patterns so you can live fully again.

Why the Nervous System Matters in Healing

Trauma is not just a memory in your mind. It's a pattern imprinted in your body. When abuse happens—whether physical, emotional, sexual, or psychological—your nervous system goes on high alert to keep you safe. This is the fight-flight-freeze response, and it works like a smoke alarm: it sounds loudly when there's danger.

The problem is, once the danger is gone, the alarm often doesn't switch off. It keeps scanning, keeps ringing at the slightest spark. That's why survivors may experience anxiety, hypervigilance, flashbacks, or panic—even years later. Your body is doing what it was trained to do: protect you. The trouble is, it hasn't learned that the threat is over.

This isn't about willpower. It's about biology. And once you understand the biology, you can work with it instead of against it.

The Three Main States of the Nervous System

Your nervous system isn't static. It moves between states depending on what it perceives. Dr. Stephen Porges' *Polyvagal Theory* explains these states:

1. Safe and Social (Ventral Vagal State)

When you feel calm, connected, and present, your nervous system is in its optimal state. You can think clearly, engage with others, and feel grounded.

2. Mobilized for Danger (Fight or Flight)

When your brain senses threat, your sympathetic nervous system kicks in. Your heart races, your muscles tense, and adrenaline surges. You feel anxious or angry because your body is preparing to fight or run.

3. Shut Down (Freeze or Collapse)

If the danger feels overwhelming, your system may hit the "freeze" button. You might feel numb, detached, or disconnected from reality. This isn't weakness—it's a survival response designed to protect you from unbearable pain.

As a trauma survivor, you may move between these states more often than someone who hasn't experienced abuse. You might feel safe one moment, then triggered the next. That's not because you're broken. It's because your nervous system is still on guard.

Why Triggers Happen

A trigger is anything that reminds your brain of past danger—even unconsciously. It could be a smell, a tone of voice, a certain look, or even silence. When you're triggered, your nervous system reacts as if

the past danger is happening now. That's why your heart races or your body freezes even when you logically know you're safe.

This is why mindfulness is so powerful. It helps you notice when you're being pulled into a survival state, and it gives you tools to ground yourself in the present. But first, we need to accept this truth: **your body isn't betraying you—it's protecting you.**

The Cost of Living in Survival Mode

If you've been living in fight, flight, or freeze for years, it takes a toll. Chronic stress can lead to:

- Anxiety or depression
- Digestive issues
- Headaches or body pain
- Insomnia
- Difficulty concentrating
- Emotional numbing

These are not character flaws. They are the result of an overworked nervous system. Healing means teaching your body that the war is over—that safety exists now.

The Good News: Neuroplasticity

Here's the hope: your brain and nervous system can change. This ability is called **neuroplasticity**, and it means new pathways can form through repeated experiences of safety and calm. Mindfulness is one of the most powerful ways to create these new patterns because it gently retrains your nervous system to settle, little by little.

Every time you pause, breathe, and anchor in the present, you're sending a new message: "*It's safe now.*" Over time, those messages become stronger than the old alarm bells.

Why Mindfulness Works for Trauma

Mindfulness doesn't ask you to erase the past. It gives you tools to handle the present differently. When you practice mindfulness:

- You notice triggers before they take over.
- You create a gap between reaction and response.
- You teach your body that it can calm down without danger returning.

Think of mindfulness as exercise for your nervous system. At first, the "muscle" feels weak. But with practice, it grows stronger, and calm becomes your new default state.

Gentle Mindfulness for Survivors

Because trauma can make stillness feel unsafe, start small. Here are three trauma-sensitive practices:

Exercise 1: Notice and Name

- When you feel your heart race or your stomach tighten, pause.
- Silently name what's happening: "*I'm noticing anxiety.*"
- Then remind yourself: "*This is a body response, not an emergency.*"

This naming creates distance and helps shift you from panic to presence.

Exercise 2: Grounding Through Senses

- Look around and name:
 - 5 things you can see
 - 4 things you can touch
 - 3 things you can hear
 - 2 things you can smell
 - 1 thing you can taste
 - This anchors you in now instead of the memory.
-

Exercise 3: The Safe Touch

- Place one hand over your heart and the other on your belly.
- Take a slow breath in, then out.
- Whisper: *"I'm safe in this moment."*
- Repeat for 3 breaths.

These small steps signal safety to your nervous system. Over time, they become automatic pathways to calm.

What to Avoid at First

- **Long silent meditations:** They can feel overwhelming and trigger flashbacks.
 - **Forcing stillness:** If sitting still feels unsafe, practice mindfulness while walking or doing gentle movement.
 - **Judging yourself:** There is no "wrong" way. If your mind wanders 50 times, that's okay. The magic is in bringing it back, gently.
-

Reflection Questions

- When do I notice my body feels most on edge?
 - What are my common triggers? How does my body respond?
 - Which grounding technique felt most helpful to me?
 - How do I currently talk to myself during anxious moments? How could I respond with more compassion?
-

Key Takeaway:

Your nervous system is not your enemy. It's your protector—and it can learn new patterns of safety. Mindfulness is the bridge from survival to thriving.

Mindfulness for Healing After Abuse – Workbook Section

Chapter 2:

Trauma and the Nervous System – Why Your Body Reacts the Way It Does

This workbook is designed to help you understand your nervous system, recognize triggers, and apply gentle mindfulness techniques to create a sense of safety. Use these exercises and prompts at your own pace. There is no rush—healing is a journey.

Practical Grounding Exercises

1. ****Notice and Name****

- When you feel anxious or tense, pause.
- Silently name what you feel: “I’m noticing anxiety” or “I feel tightness in my chest.”
- Then remind yourself: “This is a body response, not an emergency.”
- Write about how this helped you separate the feeling from your identity:

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection:

2. **Grounding Through Senses (5-4-3-2-1)**

- Look around and name:
 - 5 things you can see
 - 4 things you can touch
 - 3 things you can hear
 - 2 things you can smell
 - 1 thing you can taste
- Describe what this exercise did for your sense of calm:

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection:

3. **Safe Touch**

- Place one hand on your heart and one on your belly.
- Take a slow breath in, then out.
- Whisper: "I'm safe in this moment."
- Repeat for 3 breaths.
- How did your body respond? Write your observations here:

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection:

Bonus: Try combining any two exercises and note if it deepens the sense of safety.

Reflection:

Reflection:

Reflection Questions

- When does my body feel most on edge?

- When does my body feel most on edge?

- What are my common triggers and how do I usually react?

- What are my common triggers and how do I usually react?

- Which grounding technique felt easiest to use? Why?

- Which grounding technique felt easiest to use? Why?

- Which grounding technique felt most effective for me?

- Which grounding technique felt most effective for me?

- How can I remind myself that my body is trying to protect me, not harm me?

- How can I remind myself that my body is trying to protect me, not harm me?

Remember: Every time you practice grounding, you are teaching your nervous system that safety is possible.