

## Strategies for Coping Through Emotionally Challenging Times

*Summarized by Thomas T. Thomas*

We are all looking for ways of building resilience and maintaining our wellness, especially during these stressful times. **Sarah Carr, LMFT**, is the Founder and Clinical Director of mindfulSF, a Bay Area-based company that offers science-driven mental health services and wellness workshops. Carr is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and a Certified Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Teacher. She is trained in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Mindfulness, and Self-Compassion.

In her clinical work, Sarah Carr specializes in the treatment of obsessive-compulsive disorder and anxiety. She facilitates workshops focused on mindfulness-based strategies for building resilience, supporting well-being, and effectively managing stress and anxiety. More information about Carr and her organization can be found at [www.mindfulSF.com](http://www.mindfulSF.com).

“I’m interested in making these strategies accessible in everyday life,” Carr said at our March meeting on Zoom. She urged participants to “take whatever is useful in this workshop.”

Our society has a “culture of stress,” she said. In a recent survey, 67% of respondents said they had emotional stress in their lives, 72% showed physical symptoms of stress, and 18% reported clinical levels of anxiety. Meanwhile, 60% to 80% of primary care visits these days involve stress-related conditions.

This situation has only gotten worse during the pandemic. In 2020-21, four in ten people reported anxiety and depression, where in 2019 the rate was just one in ten. And 53% of respondents identified joblessness or financial problems as stressors. This level of anxiety and depression, along with the COVID-19 epidemic itself, is unequally distributed among ethnic minorities and people of color.

And 40% to 70% of caregivers show some symptoms of depression. “Caregiving can be both physically and emotionally stressful,” Carr said.

The strategies being offered at our Zoom meeting might not be sufficient for all issues, she warned, but they will help build a person’s resilience.

Mindfulness may be defined as “the ability to know what’s happening in your head without getting carried away with it.” It is also “paying attention to the moment without judgment.” It involves being awake and aware, and allowing yourself to explore your own thoughts.

The practice began with Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979. He is a neuroscientist and Zen Buddhist practitioner who wanted to bring elements of eastern meditation to western medicine. He started with an eight-week program in Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), without the framework of Buddhist beliefs, for people in chronic pain. There he

discovered that most of the participants could reduce their use of painkillers. He later founded the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the Medical Center, and authored [\*Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness\*](#) (1991).

Mindfulness has since grown as a practice and can be used for all sorts of populations, including people with depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and physical symptoms. It supports physical and psychological well-being, focuses concentration, improves motivation, productivity, and task-related satisfaction, and produces changes in the brain.

A person's mind wanders during the day. Carr asked the Zoom participants how much they think their minds wander, and responses were between 15% and 85%. In a Harvard study in 2010 among 2,200 volunteers, the average was 47% of the time. And this is likely to increase with stressors, which heighten distractions and distressing thoughts about the person's past or future.

Carr then offered two practices that attendees could follow.

The first was a **small movement practice**: the person stands up, closes their eyes or remains half-lidded, and becomes aware of their body, feels their feet on the floor, allows the shoulders to drop, and lowers the chin. Then the person moves their body gently in a circular motion, allowing the mind to wander. They bring their arms over their heads, consciously inhaling and exhaling, then bring their arms down, noticing the sense of motion. They raise their arms again, link their thumbs, and move their body to the right and left. Then they bring their arms down, letting the body make any other movements.

The second practice was a **seated exercise**. The person finds a posture while seated that is both alert and relaxed. Again the eyes are closed or half-lidded. The person brings awareness to the body, noticing how it contacts the chair or other surface, dropping the shoulders and allowing the arms to feel heavy. They give themselves "permission for a moment or two of space" and acknowledge "anything that's bothering them, but it doesn't need to go away." Again, the person breathes in and out slowly, which helps to slow the mind. As the mind wanders, the person becomes aware of sounds and acknowledges them. The person notices breathing again and slowly opens their eyes.

These practices are similar to the more formal practice of meditation, Carr said.

Being mindful in everyday life can come through the senses: seeing and observing, hearing and listening, smelling and tasting. A person can become mindful of the sensations associated with routine tasks like brushing teeth, taking a shower, or going for a walk.

It's also useful to find ways to *unplug*—literally separating ourselves from electronic devices and sources of distressing news and outside distractions. "You want to set boundaries around technology," Carr said. And it's important to also *fill up*—doing things that are relaxing and satisfying, like gardening, cooking, or taking a walk among the trees. "We are biologically wired to be in nature," Carr said.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> See also the Japanese practice of [\*Shinrin-yoku\*](#), "forest bathing" or taking in the forest atmosphere.

She recommended taking “micro-mindful moments” during the day: just pause, check in, and find out what’s happening with you. Other mindful techniques include:

- Taking a timeout when you feel yourself getting fed up, chest tightening, tensing up. Step away, go into another room, find “alone space.”
- Scheduling refuel and buffer time. Decide what fills you up and put it on your calendar like a doctor’s appointment.
- Putting a refuel or buffer step between tasks at work. And leave work items in a separate area.
- Consider factors in and out of your control. Find where you *do* have control and access that space.

Carr also described a 30-second practice called STOP, which stands for:

- **Stop** for a pause.
- **Take** a breath.
- **Observe** what you are doing, with curiosity, and being open to the experience.
- **Proceed** with what you need in the moment, such as deep breathing or positioning yourself.

Various apps will help with mindfulness, such as [Headspace](#), [Calm](#), and [Insight Timer](#). Books in addition to Kabat-Zinn’s include Dan Harris *et al.*’s [Meditation for Fidgety Skeptics](#). And many websites are available, such as the [Center for Mindful Self-Compassion](#), the [Brown Center for Mindfulness](#), and the [Insight Center](#) in Los Angeles.

The [MindfulSF](#) site also offers eight-week classes that include techniques like the small movement and sitting exercise described here, with an opportunity to discuss their effects with a group of practitioners.

**Q. What about those times you take a break, breathe, and encounter painful feelings and grief?**

A. You need to hold on to what’s supportive for you and take care of yourself. It is not always good to go inside your head, and it’s sometimes uncomfortable when different feelings come in.

**Q. What about our society’s current practice of multi-tasking?**

A. That is the total opposite of mindfulness.

**Q. A recent article in *Harper’s Magazine* suggested that meditation can have a downside for some of our medically challenged loved ones. For instance, people with PTSD can have flashbacks when they close their eyes.**

A. Yes, and focused breath control can be destabilizing for some people. [Willoughby Britton, PhD](#), at Brown University has examined some of these indications in relation to mindfulness and other therapies.

**Q. Can we assume that these mindfulness techniques don’t work so well after a couple of glasses of wine or taking other recreational drugs?**

A. That’s right. They can cloud the mind, and you want your mind to be clear.