



# The Five-Step Model of Mindfulness

Excerpted from [Living Well With Pain and Illness](#) by [Vidyamala Burch](#)

*Inside this new love...  
Become the sky ...  
Escape .....  
Walk out like someone suddenly born into color.  
Do it now.  
You're covered with thick cloud.  
Slide out the side ...  
Your old life was a frantic running  
from silence  
The speechless full moon  
comes out now.  
RUMI*

Now that you have a sense of the dimensions of mindfulness, it's time to explore how to develop it, as mindfulness is a way of living that's cultivated by practice. Few people live with continual awareness, so for most of us mindfulness training means becoming aware once you're already distracted. You'll probably find yourself caught up in distractions hundreds of times a day, but choosing awareness even once is a victory, no matter how fleeting that moment may be. It's a step in retraining yourself after years of unhelpful habitual behavior. In time, awareness itself becomes a habit.

Mindfulness practice is like any other training. If you want to become an athlete, you need to develop certain muscles so you can run with ease; to cultivate mindfulness you must train your awareness so that it becomes an increasingly reliable source of strength and stability. This chapter describes five steps or progressive stages in developing mindfulness that offer a realistic and sustainable approach to practice for those of us living with pain and illness. I have included a short mindfulness exercise with the first four steps. (There's an audio version of the exercises at [soundstrue.com/burch](http://soundstrue.com/burch).)

## STEP ONE

### THE STARTING POINT: AWARENESS

The first step in developing mindfulness is simply to become more familiar with what's actually

happening in each moment. For example, you can become aware of your breath; of your body as you sit, walk, stand, or lie down; and of your sensations - pleasant or painful. You can notice your thoughts and emotions as discrete aspects of your experience instead of overidentifying with them. You can become more aware of other people and the world around you. You might suddenly notice little things such as the sensation of the sun on your skin, the taste of an orange, or the greenness of the grass on a summer's day. Becoming more aware can be like moving from a two-dimensional, black-and-white world to one that has three dimensions and is saturated with color.

### EXERCISE: PRESENT-MOMENT AWARENESS

Notice what you're experiencing right now. Can you feel the book in your hands as you hold it? Is it warm or cold. rough or soft, heavy or light? Does holding it feel comfortable? Are your shoulders relaxed or hunched? What about your belly: is it tight or soft? What happens when you bring your attention to these areas? Do they relax a little? Feel free to shift your posture in any way you want as you become more aware.

Now notice the sensations of contact between your body and your support. Does your body feel heavy or light, relaxed or tense? Just notice how your body feels without judging your experience.

How does the breath in your body feel in this moment? What parts of your body move with the breath?

What sounds and smells are you aware of?

How many colors can you see? Can you simply enjoy them, noticing all the different shades and textures?

As you draw this exercise to a close, see if you can carry this quality of awareness into the rest of

your day, being alert, engaged, and curious about your experience.

## **STEP TWO**

### **MOVE TOWARD THE UNPLEASANT**

The second step - moving toward unpleasant aspects of experience - is deeply counterintuitive and probably comes as a surprise. It may even sound masochistic. In fact, facing pain is essential because those of us with chronic pain usually resist it through trying to block the pain out or else drowning in it. In neither case do we really see the pain for what it is.

When you first turn your attention to painful sensations, you may be more aware of your resistance than of the pain itself, but you can work with this by gently "leaning into" the resistance with your awareness and using your breath to drop your awareness more deeply into your body. You can breathe in with a sense of awareness and breathe out with a sense of letting go.

Over time you can learn to adopt a kindly, nonjudgmental attitude to the whole of your experience and allow painful sensations simply to be present. You can develop a caring attitude toward your pain - like that of the natural impulse of a mother to gather a child who is hurt into her arms and hold him or her tenderly. Even though she can't remove the child's pain, her loving response will ease his or her distress.

### **REBECCA**

Rebecca has been disabled since birth and has been, through more than forty operations. She has meditated for many years and recently told me how turning toward the pain has helped her:

Turning toward the pain meant facing the fear that it would get out of control and I'd be overwhelmed. I'd never really looked into the pain, and that 'meant I'd turned it into a monster. So I tried to look at the monster. What shape was it? Where exactly was it located? Did it have a color? I became interested in the pain's real nature. I found that however bad it was, it didn't kill me! I discovered that some kinds of pain are more bearable than others; for instance, I can bear more of a fresh pain than old, nagging pain. I also saw how I solidify the idea of pain, as if it were a hot and jagged mountain. But when I turn toward it I see that it changes from moment to moment, and noticing those differences helped me to experience the pain instead of being caught in reactions.

### ***Taking Things One Moment at a Time***

It's easy to think that moving toward the pain will add to the sense of drowning, as Rebecca feared. But feeling overwhelmed usually comes from being overidentified with ideas about experience. You think, Oh my God, this is awful. I can't bear it. I hate my life. I've had this pain for ten years and it will never go away. It's getting worse; I feel so tired. I won't be able to go out with my friends and they'll reject me. No wonder I have no friends left. Before you know it, you're caught up in thoughts about how your pain stretches interminably into the past and will continue indefinitely into the future.

When you bring awareness and curiosity to the actual experience of pain, often you find that it's not as bad as you feared. Focusing on direct perception of the sensations rather than ideas about them brings you into the present moment in which experience is always fluid and changing. You see that you only ever experience your pain one moment at a time - as I understood in the hospital experience I described in chapter I (see page 5). The fear that I couldn't get through until morning dissolved when I realized that I simply had to live each moment, that the present moment is always bearable, and that the only authentic and sustainable way to be fully alive is to be open to all life's moments, not just the ones I prefer.

### **EXERCISE: MOVING TOWARD THE UNPLEASANT**

As you sit or lie down, gently open your awareness to include any unpleasant or painful sensations. Let them enter your field of awareness with an attitude of tenderness and kindly curiosity. Remember to keep breathing! We commonly tense against pain and hold the breath, but see if you can soften toward the pain with gentle breaths.

Maybe you are more aware of a sense of resistance and tension than of the pain itself. If so, see if you can investigate this resistance a little more directly-turning your attention toward it, like shining a soft light onto something that's hidden in shadow. Maybe you can "lean into" it with your awareness, as if you were gently leaning against a dense, yet, pliant, object. Allow it to soften a little with each in- and out-breath. Maybe you can feel the resistance softening as you let the body settle onto the earth with each out-breath.

As you open to the pain itself, notice what the actual sensations are like and sense how they are always changing. Maybe they feel hard and tight one moment, a little softer the next? Or are they sharp one moment and then tingly?

Can you tell exactly where the pain is located in your body? Be precise about this. You may notice that the pain is more localized than you thought. This may be the first time you've investigated your pain directly, so be patient with any disturbed thoughts or feelings of fear and anxiety that may arise. Notice how these are also constantly changing. See if you can relax a little around whatever unpleasant experiences you notice, and remember to let the weight of your body settle down onto the earth beneath you and soften your breath each time you notice you're tensing.

### **STEP THREE SEEKING THE PLEASANT**

This third step in developing mindfulness in fact grows naturally out of the second, but it may seem even more surprising: it involves becoming sensitive to the pleasant elements of your experience.

Hardening against pain also shuts out the pleasurable side of life, and we lose the sensitivity that allows us to feel vibrantly alive and experience pleasure and love. You might not feel the pain so much, but you'll numb yourself to other people, the beauty of nature, or the simple pleasure of the body's warmth while sitting in the sun. When I've been most able to be with my pain as a changing, dynamic experience, I've also been most in touch with the poignancy and subtlety of the human condition and most able to appreciate the world around me:

As you develop a more straightforward relationship with pain, you make the surprising discovery that there's always something pleasant, even beautiful, in your experience when you look for it. Everyone I've worked with, even those suffering severe pain, has found something pleasant to focus on, and for those of us living with chronic pain or illness this can be a revelation.

Seeking the pleasant is like being an explorer searching for hidden treasure. It might be as simple as noting the warmth of your hands or a pleasant feeling in the belly, or seeing a shaft of sunlight streaming through the window. If you're in the hospital it could be the smell of flowers by your bed or the pleasure of being with someone you love: maybe you notice the way their eyes crinkle when

they smile or the quality of their touch as they hold your hand.

As I've become more mindful, I'm much more attuned to the subtleties of my sensations. I notice how my hair feels against my forehead; when I meditate with my eyes closed, I notice the contact between my eyes and eyelids. Through such sensitivity the present moment becomes richer, more multifaceted, and more alive.

### **GERALDINE**

A severe neck problem gave me such bad vertigo that every day I would admit defeat and go to bed. I'd given up my career and seemed to be spending half my life in bed. I felt furious and depressed; I felt that the condition was ruling me and dictating my life and the lives of my husband and my two young children.

My attitude gradually changed as I developed mindfulness. One day I was lying in bed feeling dreadful, but instead of the usual negative thoughts about how terrible it was, I noticed how comfortable the pillow felt under my head, the feeling of being warm, how soft the light was in the bedroom, and I reflected on how lucky I was to have such a supportive family.

### ***What to Do If You Can't Find Anything Pleasant***

If you have a lot of pain the suggestion that there is something pleasurable in your experience may seem laughable. You'll need to explore this area with an open mind and a willingness to experience new things, letting go of any fixed ideas about your experience. You may be surprised.

A few years ago I was in the hospital following surgery, having developed an infection that caused tremendous pain. As I searched for pleasant sensations, I noticed I was enjoying the contact between my body and the crisp, clean bedsheets. That moment was particularly beautiful because the contrast with the pain made the feeling more pleasurable than usual.

### ***Seeking the Pleasant Isn't Simply Distraction***

Well-meaning friends and professionals may have encouraged you to "think positively" when you're in pain. That can be good advice, but you may simply be painting a veneer of false positivity over your suffering, which is just another form of avoidance. Seeking out pleasant aspects of experience as the third step of mindfulness is different. In the second step you have acknowledged

your pain with kindness, rather than trying to distract yourself from it or blocking it out. This attitude of sensitivity, openness, and honesty to the whole of your experience, including your pain, now allows you to gently turn to the pleasant aspects of the moment that have been there all along, just outside your field of awareness. You can feel stable and whole, rather than grasping for pleasure to avoid your pain. Amazing as it can seem, pleasure is always present, but you close yourself to it when dominated by your pain. As you let in pleasurable sensations, you may feel relief that you're at last giving them attention.

#### **EXERCISE: SEEKING THE. PLEASANT**

Start off by being aware of your whole body as you sit or lie down. Notice the breath rising and falling, and allow your body to rest down toward the earth, particularly on each out-breath.

If pain is present, let go of any tendency to tense up, and gently shift your focus to notice anything that's pleasant in this moment-like focusing the close-up lens of a camera on a beautiful object.

Notice pleasant physical sensations first of all, no matter how subtle they may be. It might be a sense of warmth in your hands, a pleasant tingling somewhere in your body, or perhaps a sense of relief around the heart area now that you're allowing yourself to come to rest with your experience in its wholeness: Maybe there's a curious sensation in your left earlobe that you realize is pleasant! Spend some time moving through your body with your awareness and pause when you find something pleasurable.

Now expand your awareness and notice any pleasant sounds. Spend a few moments simply appreciating them as sounds. Notice any tendency to get caught up in wondering about 'their source or wanting them to last. Just let them rise and fall.

Look around you and notice anything that's beautiful or pleasant in your immediate environment. It might be the light in the room or a picture on the wall. Just appreciate it as if you're seeing it for the first time.

#### **DEBBIE**

Debbie lives with severe musculoskeletal pain and fatigue, and she came to the Breathworks course when she was down and exhausted. She laughed out loud when she heard about looking for pleasant aspects of her experience. It seemed ludicrous that she might feel anything but unremitting pain and

despair. But as she sat preparing to meditate, she noticed the wall in front of her and realized she was appreciating the care that had gone into the brickwork. It was a revelation to find that often there were pleasant things in her experience that she usually didn't notice because she was so identified with her pain.

#### **STEP FOUR BROADENING AWARENESS TO BECOME A BIGGER CONTAINER AND CULTIVATING EQUANIMITY**

In the fourth step you broaden your awareness to include both the unpleasant and pleasant aspects of your experience, like switching from a focused to a wide-angle lens. In this stage, rather than focusing closely on sensations of pain or pleasure, you become aware of the diverse aspects of each moment as they come into being and pass away without automatically pushing away the unpleasant or clinging to the pleasant. Practicing mindfulness isn't about escaping difficulty; it's about holding the whole of experience in a wider perspective with equanimity and depth.

The Zen teacher Charlotte Joko Beck calls this state "becoming a bigger container."<sup>2</sup> Often you feel too small to accommodate what happens, as if you are a restrictive and narrow container. That causes stress. But if you feel yourself to be a bigger container, you can manage whatever happens and maintain perspective with a deep sense of inner spaciousness. Ultimately, the container may be limitless and allow a sense of space, freedom, and stability.

If you put a teaspoon of salt in a small glass of water it will have a strong taste, but if you add the same amount of salt to a lake, the water will be largely unaffected. With mindfulness you can become like a deep and clear lake: individual experiences don't overwhelm you, and you can remain steady through life's ups and downs while being honest about what's happening.

It can be a huge relief to accept the whole of your experience. It allows you to relax much more deeply. When you experience the sensations of your body right here, right now, whatever they may be, you can rest within it, settling your awareness in the stability of the belly rather than identifying with anxious thoughts in your head about your pain or illness. Truly settling in the body feels like coming home.



### *A Sense of Connectedness with Others*

Another aspect of this fourth step is to become sensitive to and aware of other people. You may notice how you communicate with your friends and family and how they communicate with you. As you feel greater emotional robustness and become more able to take things in, you may become less touchy and shrug off difficulties rather than being dragged down by them. You can relax and enjoy other people's company much more.

#### **EXERCISE: OPENING TO THE WHOLE OF EXPERIENCE**

Bring your awareness to your whole experience as you sit or lie down reading this book. Notice the contact between your hands and the book and the broader sense of your body on the chair or the bed. Gather your awareness around the breath for a few moments. See if you can feel from the inside how the breath gently rocks the body, and settle down onto the earth with each breath. You might imagine you're floating on a gentle ocean swell being rocked by the constant, rhythmic movement.

Imagine all the different aspects of your experience in this moment are taking place within a broad and open field of awareness. Let everything rise and fall with a fluid sense of change and flow, neither pushing away painful experience nor clinging to things you find pleasant. You'll probably find you relax for a moment and then get caught up in particular experiences. Never mind. Every time you notice a moment of resistance or clinging you can relax back down again into a sense of breadth and openness. Allow your awareness to be centered down in your belly.

Let your awareness be open and inclusive, including everything, whether it's an internal experience or something you perceive through your senses, such as a sound.

### *Awareness of the World*

A final dimension of the bigger container is becoming aware of the world around you. I had a strong experience of this in my late twenties when I spent eighteen months making a film based on images from nature. Meditation was teaching me to "be," and that enabled me to become aware of the world around me instead of running away from my pain. I could no longer climb and hike, but photography allowed me to combine my love of nature with my pleasure in making things. The film was stimulated by my hospital experience and my

curiosity about time and space and the mystery of the timeless present moment.

As I traveled through some of the most beautiful places in New Zealand, I was trying to see more deeply into the world. I would lie on my back looking up at the sky-blue as only New Zealand skies can be - and photograph the endlessly changing clouds and colors. I photographed black iron sand on a volcanic beach so close up that it could have been an image of a galaxy: flames leaping and dancing, shattering the illusion that a frozen image might halt the fire's relentless movement; smooth water fracturing into the hectic cascades of a rapid. I learned to see the incredible beauty in the depths of things and the constantly changing nature of matter and how it's impossible to hang on to anything because the nature of everything is change. How can you grasp a handful of clouds? As soon as I captured an image of a wave, it was gone.

My quest was to appreciate life's exquisite beauty without clinging to it with a grasping fist, to be open to the textures of the world around me while allowing experience to slip through open fingers. These fascinations have stayed with me ever since, and they hold important lessons for my own life.

#### **STEP FIVE CHOICE: LEARNING TO RESPOND, RATHER THAN REACT**

With this wider perspective you can move on to the fifth step: choosing to respond rather than react to your experiences, especially when they include difficulties. The sense that you have the freedom to choose how you respond is the heart of mindfulness practice.

In a sense, each of the five steps involves choice: you choose to start noticing your experience rather than avoiding it, to move toward the painful and seek out the pleasant aspects, and to broaden out your awareness. These stages tease apart the different aspects of experience, helping you distinguish between primary suffering - the actual painful or unpleasant sensations - and secondary suffering, which springs from your resistance to them. This creates a sense of spaciousness, as if you're a bigger container. Rather than feeling your pain is right on top of you and you're trapped in a battle that leaves no space to choose your response, you can find ways to respond creatively to any circumstances with a soft and pliant heart. The

previous steps of mindfulness prepare the way for you to act with initiative and confidence.

When life is approached in this way, with mindfulness, it can be a stream of choices and creative possibilities instead of continuous distraction and resistance.

Here's an example from my diary of how I work with this myself:

*Today I woke up feeling tired and nauseous but also willing myself to do my writing as I'd planned. I wanted to override the back pain, fatigue, and nausea. I felt myself hardening against my pain, and the tension grew in my body. Then I caught myself and decided I would stop, lie down, and listen to a meditation CD. By the end I felt that I'd broken out of an old groove of behavior and I had more perspective. I realized it didn't really matter whether I got my writing finished today. Now it's 5:30 and the writing is flowing. I'm using my timer to remind me to take a break after twenty minutes at my desk, and when I hear it beeping I again face the choice: do I react by ignoring it, or do I respond by lying down?*

### ***Mindfulness Is Not Suppression***

It's easy to hear about the value of responding, not reacting, and to think that you shouldn't react. You, might judge difficult emotions and think that you've failed in mindfulness practice if you feel moody or irritable. But mindfulness is being honestly aware of what's happening, not pasting on a layer of false equanimity. If you feel grumpy, the practice is to be aware of that without judging, and then you can find the best way to respond.

Living with pain is hard, so it's understandable if you feel emotions such as grumpiness or anger, but if you can acknowledge those feelings when they arise, then you will find space around them. Such emotions often feed on themselves in an escalating spiral of blame, self-pity, and rage, but it's always possible to find moments in which you can choose to encourage more helpful states of mind. It isn't easy, and it may be humiliating to face your negativity, but each time you manage this, it's a little taste of freedom.

One of the main emotional effects of my pain is that I can get impatient and grumpy, especially in lengthy discussions or group situations that require patience. If there's a decision to be made, I just want to make it quickly, and behind this is the thought that the sooner I finish, the sooner I'll be able to lie

down. But this attitude is hard for others, and it has affected my relationships and friendships. I wish it wasn't like this, but I'm finding that the best thing is just to own up to feeling irritable when it happens instead of thinking I can prevent it ever arising. My mindfulness practice helps me to notice what's happening without being too defensive and to take steps to behave differently.

Recently I was on a training retreat, and my colleague Ratnaguna demonstrated this honest and authentic aspect of mindfulness very well. When we had a meeting to discuss the retreat program he seemed withdrawn, and before long he told me that he felt irritable. But he communicated this without blaming anyone. His meditation experience meant he could be precise and uncomplicated in evaluating what he was feeling, so it was easy to empathize with him. He also knew from past experience that this kind of irritability grows out of sadness; he simply needed time alone to be with his experience, and he knew that it would then settle and pass. I found it inspiring that Ratnaguna could be honest about his difficult emotions without suppressing them or overidentifying with them and that he had the courage to move toward the sadness underlying them, giving it the space to subside naturally.

## **SPECIAL ISSUES FOR PRACTICING MINDFULNESS WITH PAIN AND ILLNESS**

Mindfulness can sound deceptively simple, so I want to go into a few more areas that are particularly relevant to those of us living with pain or illness.

### ***Working with Intense Pain***

Sometimes the experience of physical pain is so intense that you just can't work with it using awareness, no matter how much meditation, relaxation, or other techniques you've practiced. It's important not to feel you've failed if you're overwhelmed by your physical experience; it's still possible to get back on track.

After my last surgery I was in the hospital for six weeks. Until the last few days I felt emotionally positive and managed to maintain equanimity and patience, but then the pain grew very intense, and I fell into fear, despondency, and self-pity. A friend visited and I moaned about another friend by whom I felt let down. When she left I felt even worse: not only did I have to cope with my pain, I also felt guilty about my reaction and its effect on my friend. The next morning I phoned her and apologized; I immediately felt better. I began the slow climb out

of the pit and learned an important lesson: even when I was in the most hellish state and couldn't stop my reactions, I could still rectify the situation later by finding a moment of choice.

### ***Prescription Medication and Mindfulness***

People sometimes think they can't practice mindfulness and take painkillers, tranquilizers, antidepressants, and so on, as they affect the mind. In my view there's no inherent conflict. Some drugs do cloud the mind, but severe pain clouds it as well. If I reduce my medication too far, I end up tense and exhausted, which doesn't help me develop awareness, so I take several pain medications at a dose worked out with my pain-management consultant. The key is to find an optimum dose that leaves the mind as clear as possible without becoming overwhelmed by the pain.

Practicing mindfulness does help many people to feel more relaxed and happy - and also to sleep better, allowing them to reduce medication such as tranquilizers or sleeping pills. Keep in mind that you should always make adjustments to your medication in consultation with a health professional.

### ***Distraction and Mindfulness***

Does developing mindfulness of experience, including pain, mean there's no place for distraction? I think it has a place if you take into

account your motivation and whether your condition is acute or chronic. With acute pain that you know will pass, it can help to take your mind off it to do something more enjoyable than simply watching the pain. But with a chronic condition, continually distracting yourself may create a habit of avoidance that, in fact, brings greater suffering. If a mother ignores a crying child because she's busy, the child will just cry louder, and the mother's activity becomes more stressful because of the background screaming. But if the child is given some attention he or she may calm down, and then the mother can relax as well. A painful body is similar. If you include the pain in your awareness, you can accommodate it within a broad perspective while getting on with other things and pursuing your interests. This approach makes for a more fulfilling and successful life in the long run.

I call the attempt to escape and deny painful experience "compulsive distraction," but an alternative is "aware diversion," when you consciously choose to take your mind off the pain by engaging with something else. There's definitely a place for this within mindfulness-based pain management. Often I decide to read a novel or watch a movie as a stimulating and enjoyable way to relax and have downtime. Choosing consciously to do so feels very different from just rushing from one distraction to another.