



Unified Protocol for Transdiagnostic Treatment of Emotional Disorders: Workbook (2 edn)

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Mindful Emotion Awareness

Chapter: (p. 61) Mindful Emotion Awareness

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Goals



- To understand the benefits of applying nonjudgmental present-focused awareness to emotional experiences
- To encourage the practice of nonjudgmental present-focused awareness through the use of two formal meditation exercises
- To apply the concept of mindful emotion awareness to daily emotional experiences

Homework Review



Did you complete your **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (and your **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotion Scales** if you've chosen to complete them) for last week? Have you plotted your scores on your **Progress Record**? In the previous chapter, you were also

introduced to the **Following Your ARC Form**. Did you track your experiences over the past week? If so, did you notice any patterns that have emerged? What events seem to be typical triggers for you? Did you notice any common thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors that seem to crop up whenever you feel an intense emotion? Have you noticed any long-term consequences to responding to emotions in ways that provide immediate relief? Continuing to ask yourself these types of questions will help you gain a full understanding of how your emotions become overwhelming and will give you a better idea of where to make changes. If you did not track your ARCs, we recommend (p. 62) that you spend at least a couple of days completing them and rereading the previous chapter before continuing on. Please remember that completing the exercises laid out in this program is vital to your success.

Key Concepts



In the previous two chapters, we discussed how our emotions are, at their core, necessary and helpful. We also began tracking how emotional experiences unfold over time. In particular, we described how avoiding emotions in the short term can backfire, making it more likely that you will continue to experience overwhelming emotions in the future. You may have even seen this cycle occurring as you completed the **Following Your ARC Form**. We hope that you are starting to see that avoiding emotions doesn't work and that you are ready to begin approaching them in a more accepting manner. The skill presented in this chapter, *Mindful Emotion Awareness*, builds upon the tracking you've been doing in the previous two chapters. You have already been paying close attention to your emotional responses—now we will teach you to pay attention in a particular way. This is like going up to the second floor of the house you're building to gain a different perspective on your emotional experiences (see Figure 7.1). Specifically, we will teach you how to approach your emotions in a nonjudgmental and present-focused manner.



Figure 7.1

What Do We Mean by Mindful Emotion Awareness?



Mindful Emotion Awareness is a specific way of looking in on your emotional responses. You may be thinking: "I've already been paying very close attention to my emotions." You're right; the past two chapters have encouraged you track your emotional experiences as

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they unfold over time. It is not enough, however, to simply be aware of your emotions. The next step is to observe your emotions *mindfully*. Being mindful means paying attention to the present moment (what's happening *right now*) in a nonjudgmental way. In Chapter 1, we discussed how negative reactions to emotions may be driving your efforts to avoid them. *Mindful Emotion Awareness* is a skill that directly addresses these negative reactions to emotions. Let's break *Mindful Emotion Awareness* down into its two parts (nonjudgment and present-focus) and take a closer look at how this type of attention can be helpful. (p. 63)

Nonjudgmental Emotion Awareness

Being judgmental of our emotions can take several forms. First, we can judge *ourselves* for having certain emotions in the first place. This might look like telling yourself "I shouldn't be feeling this way" or "no one else is reacting like this." We can also judge ourselves for not feeling our emotions as strongly as we'd like ("why am I not happier about this—I must be broken," "I should be angrier about this problem—I'm so weak"). We mistakenly believe that beating ourselves up for having a particular emotional response (or lack thereof) will prompt us to feel the way we think we "should." This doesn't work because, as you'll recall, emotions are normal, natural, and hard-wired into us. It is actually impossible to change our emotions completely when the situation calls for them. For example, imagine you're about to give a speech in front of a large audience. Most people in this situation would feel at least a little bit nervous. What might happen to that initial emotional reaction if you were to tell yourself that being nervous before a speech makes you weak? In general, being hard on yourself for feeling nervous in this situation will probably make you feel even more anxious as you struggle with the impossible task (p. 64) of pushing this emotion away. This judgmental response may also bring up additional emotions, like shame or frustration over the fact that you can't prevent yourself from feeling nervous.

Another way that we can be judgmental is to have a negative reaction to specific parts of the emotional experience itself. For example, you might believe that the thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors you're experiencing are bad in some way. This might look like telling yourself that your racing heart and flushing face are too uncomfortable to cope with. Or that thoughts about something bad happening (e.g., getting into a car accident) mean this event is more likely to occur. Or even that you might do something out of control, if you're feeling a particular emotion (like anger). What might happen if you tell yourself that the emotions you're experiencing are bad or definitely going to lead to problems for you? This negative reaction to emotions is likely to increase their intensity, as well as escalate the urgency to escape them.

Nonjudgmental awareness means accepting emotional experiences as they are, instead of labeling them as problematic and immediately trying to push them away. It is important to understand that accepting emotions does not mean resigning yourself to feel uncomfortable. Instead, we will encourage you to recognize that your emotions, even the difficult ones, are trying to tell you something. This will allow you to move past your knee-jerk reaction to change how you're feeling and to respond to your emotions in a more thoughtful way. With practice, you will begin to tell the difference between when your emotion is an accurate reflection of the current situation and when it is a "false alarm." For example, a nonjudgmental response to anxiety before a first date might look like: "It makes sense I would be anxious because making a good first impression is important to me. I should probably prepare by taking a shower and putting on a clean shirt, but I don't need to give in to the urge to cancel the date because the situation is not actually dangerous." Additionally, the more you refrain from engaging in the immediate attempts to push away emotions, the more you will be able to see that their intensity

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ebbs and flows naturally. As you gain more experience with your emotions, it will be easier to approach them in a nonjudgmental manner.

Present-Focused Emotion Awareness

The second goal of being mindful is to keep our emotional responses rooted in the present moment—what is happening right now. Very often, (p. 65) our emotions in any given situation are being influenced by our past experiences or our predictions about what might happen in the future. Let's return to the example of giving a speech in front of a large group of people. Imagine you're feeling a little bit anxious, as most people would in this situation. What might happen to that anxiety if you start thinking about how you completely froze up and lost your train of thought the last time you spoke for an audience? Similarly, what might happen to your anxiety if you think about all the ways you might screw things up this time ("I'll be boring," "I won't be able to answer questions"). In general, connecting the current situation to what went wrong in the past or what could go wrong in the future will escalate the emotion you're experiencing—this practice will make the current situation seem even more overwhelming. So it can feel more manageable to focus on the situation right in front of you—the present moment—instead of connecting it to past events and possible future outcomes.

Present-focused awareness is also a useful way to connect with positive emotions. Imagine that you're spending time with friends but you're caught up in thinking about how you're going to feel lonely when you return home (future). By keeping your attention on the present moment, in this case engaging with your friends, you will allow yourself to experience pleasant emotions more fully. Similarly, predicting that you will not enjoy an upcoming event or activity (future) may prevent you from going, causing you to miss out on the positive emotions you might have experienced.

Of course, we learn important information from our past experiences. Focusing on the present does not mean discounting what has happened before. Similarly, preparing for challenges that may come up in the future can also be quite useful. Unfortunately, in emotional situations, we sometimes focus on the past or the future *at the expense of* what's right in front of us. The current situation will never be exactly identical to what has happened before. Similarly, we may have ideas about what might happen in the future, but we can never be 100% certain. For example, imagine your previous partner broke up with you out of the blue and now, years later, your current partner just snapped at you for forgetting to empty the dishwasher. You might immediately begin thinking about your previous failed relationship (past) and start to worry that the same thing will happen this time (future). This reaction will likely bring up strong anxiety about your current relationship and prompt you to apologize or seek reassurance. While you were being carried away by past events or possible future (p. 66) outcomes, you may have failed to notice that your partner has begun to talk about taking a vacation with you in a few months. A present-focused (and nonjudgmental) response in this situation might look like: "Given my past experience, it makes sense that any sign of conflict with my partner would immediately bring up fears that the relationship is over. That said, there is no indication that we are breaking up right now, so I need to refocus on what we're currently doing (planning the vacation)."

Practicing Present-Focused, Nonjudgmental Awareness



Being mindful (nonjudgmental and present-focused) does not come naturally to most of us. In fact, we are designed to evaluate many aspects of our lives, and, in most cases, these judgments are helpful. Additionally, learning from the past and planning for the future are useful most of the time (e.g., remembering to let your spouse know you're running late because he has

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gotten worried in the past). However, as discussed earlier, when these tendencies are applied to *emotions*, they don't work as well. Since we have so much experience making judgments and thinking about the past/future in our daily lives, it will take practice to apply mindful awareness to our emotional responses.

You can think of this skill as developing a new muscle. The rest of this chapter will be focused on two exercises to build your *Mindful Emotion Awareness* muscle before putting it to work in your daily life. Practicing these exercises is essential for developing this skill.

Mindful Emotion Awareness Meditation



The purpose of the first exercise (adapted from Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002) is to allow you to begin to get a sense of what mindful attention feels like. Guided meditation is a great place to start when building mindful awareness because it gives you a clear, concrete place to direct your attention, in contrast to the many demands on your attention you experience when going about your daily life. It is best to try this exercise out when you are in a neutral mood (or close to it) because it is much harder to be nonjudgmental and present-focused when feeling a strong emotion. In fact, it is much more difficult to learn any new skill (riding a bike, knitting) when you are very emotional. Again, the purpose of this (p. 67) exercise is to get some experience with a mindful quality of awareness so that you can apply it later when you're experiencing an intense emotion.

Instructions for Learning Mindful Emotion Awareness Meditation

- Read through the entire meditation script, as well as the tips in break-out boxes, before you do the meditation for the first time.
- Many people prefer to listen to an audio recording of this practice so they can focus their attention more fully on meditating. An audio version of this meditation is available on Appendix: Forms and Worksheets. Alternatively, you might consider using an application on your phone (e.g., voice memos app on iOS) to record yourself reading the meditation so that you can always have it handy.
- Practice this five-minute meditation at least once a day for a week using the **Mindful Emotion Awareness Form**, located at the end of this chapter, to record your experience.

Goal

To set the present-focused tone for the practice by grounding yourself in the here and now (the room).

Close your eyes and get settled in your chair. Begin by turning your attention to yourself in the room. Picture yourself in this space and start to take note of the places where you are coming into contact with it. Perhaps notice how it feels to be sitting in the chair, the sensations of the floor meeting your feet, or the pressure of your hands on your lap. Take a moment to ground yourself in the here and now by connecting to the room.

Goal

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To see that focusing on the breath (because it is always with you) can quickly bring your attention to the present moment.

Now bring your focus to the experience of your own breathing. Notice what your breathing feels like in your chest or diaphragm, in your mouth and nose. Focus on your breathing as it is happening right now, using your breath to help anchor you to the present moment. Your breath is always with you, so you can use it as a reminder to pay attention to what (p. 68) is happening right now. Pause for a moment, and just allow yourself to notice your breath.

Goal

To describe sensations matter-of-factly without judgment (“I feel heaviness in my limbs” instead of “I feel so depressed”). To focus on what you’re feeling now (tired) instead of what you might be feeling in the future (“this is going to last forever”).

Now expand your attention to notice any physical sensations you are experiencing. Pause for a moment, and just allow yourself to observe any sensations present in your body without judging them as good or bad or trying to change them in any way. Simply notice what is there with openness and curiosity.

Goal

To understand that thoughts are not facts—just because you think something does not make it true. To practice observing your thoughts without reacting to them as if they are true.

Next bring your attention to your own thoughts. Notice how your thoughts may shift from one topic to the next. Some thoughts may pass by quickly, others may distract you, and some of them may be very hard to let go of. Simply notice what you’re thinking without trying to force a particular topic into awareness or push away another. Try not to judge your experience as bad or good. If you notice yourself getting caught up in or carried away by a thought, just acknowledge it, and gently bring your attention back to observing your thoughts as they occur. Allow yourself to watch your thoughts for a few moments.

Goal

To notice how the intensity of emotions ebbs and flows naturally. You may notice that you feel sad when thinking about an old friend but that this feeling goes down when you become distracted by what you might make for dinner tonight.

Now start to shift your focus to explore how you’re feeling. Emotions, just like thoughts, can fluctuate. In the course of a short period you might (p. 69) feel anxious and then calm, angry and then loving, or sad and then joyful. Emotions come in waves, rising in intensity only to come

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back down. Simply acknowledge how you're feeling in this very moment without trying to change your experience in any way. Allow yourself to observe your emotions, without judgment. Notice how they ebb and flow.

Now continue to take note of your entire experience— how your body feels, what you are thinking, any emotions that are coming up. If you notice that you are trying to change your experience in some way, take note of that, and gently guide yourself back to simply observing. If you get caught up in a particular sensation, thought, or emotion, use your breath to anchor you back to the present moment, then return to the process of noticing your experience.

When you are ready, start to bring yourself back into the room. Picture yourself sitting in this room and become aware of the places you're coming in contact with. Begin to wiggle your fingers and toes and, when you are ready, open your eyes.

There are several common reactions to completing this exercise for the first time. Some people find this practice uncomfortable. It can be difficult to sit still and observe our emotions, even for a short time, if we're used to doing something quickly to distract ourselves from them. If this was your reaction, keep practicing the exercise—with time it will become easier to look in on your experience nonjudgmentally. Sometimes people wonder if they are completing the exercises correctly. Remember that the goal of this exercise is not to do it perfectly. If you notice that you are being judgmental or that your mind has wandered to the past or future—good job! Noticing these patterns is the first step to changing them. Finally, sometimes people find this exercise very relaxing. Keep in mind that the goal *Mindful Emotion Awareness* is not necessarily to relax you. The goal is to teach you to observe what comes up in a nonjudgmental, present-focused way. If you are completing the exercise in a neutral mood, it may very well be relaxing. But if you are looking in on an emotional experience, it may not be as calming.

Mindful Mood Induction



Once you begin to get more comfortable observing your experience in a nonjudgmental and present-focused way, the next step is to practice (p. 70) applying mindful attention when you are in an emotional state. Remember, building mindful awareness is like building a muscle—you have to keep increasing the resistance to continue the progress. It is more difficult to be nonjudgmental and present-focused when feeling a strong emotion.

In order to practice mindful awareness in an emotional context, we use a simple method to bring up intense emotions—listening to music. You should choose songs that are particularly meaningful to you. You can experiment with a variety of songs that bring up different emotions for you. If you have difficulty choosing a piece of music, you may want to try some of the suggestions on the list available for download from Appendix D: Additional Online Tools. As you listen to each piece of music, practice being nonjudgmental (“it makes sense that I’d think about my ex while listening to this song”) while attempting to prevent yourself from getting carried away by the past or the future (“that was a long time ago—I’ve made changes to my life since then”). You can use the same **Mindful Emotion Awareness Form** that you used for the meditation to record your experience with this exercise.

Anchoring in the Present



Once you have formally practiced *Mindful Emotion Awareness* for at least a week, the next step is to incorporate this skill into your daily life. Again, you have been working to build your mindful awareness muscle with the previous two exercises, so now it is time to flex it in emotional situations. We call this skill *Anchoring in the Present*. The goal here is to hit the pause button any time you notice an emotion starting to build so that you can deliberately choose a

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response that is consistent with the present moment, rather than being driven by the past or the future.

The first step is to pick a cue that you can use to anchor yourself to the present when you are feeling emotional. As mentioned earlier, one of the best cues is your own breath because it is with you wherever you go, but any concrete sensation will work (e.g., the feeling of your feet on the floor). By focusing on your cue for a few moments, you will pull yourself out of your emotional experience and back into the present. Once you've used your cue to step outside of the emotion you're feeling, the next step is to look in on your response in a nonjudgmental manner. This is called doing a "three-point check" to remind you to take stock of your thoughts, physical sensations, and behaviors. Once you're aware of your response, (p. 71) you will then ask yourself whether it is consistent with the demands of the present moment. In other words, does your emotion fit with what's going on right now? If you find that the intensity of your emotion is being driven by the past or the future, the last step is to try to adjust your response to be more in line with what's happening here and now.

Steps for Anchoring in the Present

Follow these steps whenever you notice an emotion is starting to build:

1. Use your cue (breath, feeling of the floor beneath your feet) to ground yourself in the present moment.
2. Do a three-point check:
 - a. What are you thinking right now?
 - b. What are you feeling in your body right now?
 - c. What are you doing right now? What do you feel like doing?
3. Ask yourself:
 - a. Is my response (thoughts, physical feelings, behaviors) consistent with what is going on right now?
 - b. Am I reacting to something from the past or a prediction about the future?
4. Bring your response in line with the demands of the present moment.

Here's an example of how this skill works: Imagine you're out to lunch with a friend. While she is talking about her week, you notice that you are becoming more and more irritable as you are distracted by thoughts about an unreasonable deadline your boss has set for a project. Your thoughts are racing, but you are able to pull your attention to your breath for a few seconds. Then you do a three-point check (thoughts: "I'm never going to finish in time"; physical sensations: sweating, muscle tension; behaviors: picturing yourself telling your boss off). You are able to remind yourself that you are not interacting with your boss *right now* and that there's not much you can do to work on the project while you are in this restaurant. You refocus your attention on your friend, telling yourself that you'll dedicate time to problem-solving your work situation once lunch is over.

Keep in mind that *Anchoring in the Present* takes a lot of practice. You may find that you have to return your attention to the present over and over again during the course of a short period of time. Remember, *Mindful Emotion Awareness* is like a muscle—every time you bring yourself back (p. 72) to the present it is like doing a bicep curl for your attention. In time, you will be

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able to hold your awareness in the present longer and catch yourself sooner after you've wandered to the past or the future.

To help you learn this skill, practice anchoring yourself to the present any time you begin to feel an emotion. Record what you notice on the **Mindful Emotion Awareness Form** you've been using. Samples of completed **Mindful Emotion Awareness Forms** are shown in Appendix B on p. 171.

Treatment Goal Check-In

Use the space to below to reflect on how using *Mindful Emotion Awareness* can bring you closer to the goals you set in Chapter 4. Also note any progress you've made toward your goals.

Summary



In this chapter we discussed the importance of observing our emotions in a nonjudgmental and present-focused manner. We noted how judging our emotional experiences usually makes them feel worse. We also discussed how our emotions are often rooted in what has happened in the past or what could happen in the future. We then practiced three exercises designed to promote mindful (nonjudgmental, present-focused) awareness toward our emotions. The first exercise was a meditation that can be used to get a sense of what *Mindful Emotion Awareness* feels like. The second exercise involved practicing nonjudgmental, present-focused attention in the context of a strong emotion—we used a musical mood (p. 73) induction to bring on strong emotions in a controlled way. Finally, our *Anchoring in the Present* skill is the real-world application of *Mindful Emotion Awareness*. We discussed four steps that can be used to employ nonjudgmental, present-focused attention when strong emotions come up in our daily lives.

In the next four chapters, we will be looking more closely at each part of your emotional response: thoughts, behaviors, and physical sensations. By now you probably have a pretty good idea about how each part of your experience is escalating your emotional response. We will be teaching you specific skills for each component so that you respond to your emotions in a helpful way that, in the end, reduces your symptoms.

Homework



First Week

- Set aside time to practice the *Mindful Emotion Awareness Meditation* at least once a day for one week. Use the **Mindful Emotion Awareness Form** to record your experience. Again, you may wish to make photocopies of this form or download additional copies from Appendix: Forms and Worksheets.
- Continue monitoring your weekly experiences using the **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (as well as the **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotions Scales**, if you're using them).
- Remember to use the **Progress Record** to record the total scores from the **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (as well as **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotions Scales**).

Second Week

■ Complete the *Mindful Mood Induction* at least three times by listening to songs that bring up an emotional response. Use the **Mindful Emotion Awareness Form** to record your experience.

■ Additionally, use the **Mindful Emotion Awareness Form** to practice *Anchoring in the Present*—bringing your attention back the present moment any time you notice an emotional response is starting to build.

(p. 74) ■ Continue monitoring your weekly experiences using the **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (as well as the **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotions Scales**, if you're using them).

■ Remember to use the **Progress Record** to record the total scores from the **Anxiety** and **Depression Scales** (as well as **Other Emotion** and **Positive Emotions Scales**).

Self-Assessment Quiz



Answer each of the following by circling true (T) or false (F). Answers can be found in Appendix A.

1. In this treatment, *Mindful Emotion Awareness* means focusing on how bad your emotions might feel.

T F

2. In this treatment, *Mindful Emotion Awareness* means learning to approach your emotions in a nonjudgmental, present-focused way.

T F

3. Accepting your emotions means resigning yourself to “grin and bear it.”

T F

4. Most of the time we are focused on the present moment, instead of thinking about the past or worrying about the future.

T F

5. Learning to be mindful is easy and doesn't take much practice.

T F

(p. 75)

(p. 76)