

Steve Costello

# **7 Pillars of Mindfulness in 7 Days**

STEVE COSTELLO

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# **7 PILLARS OF MINDFULNESS IN 7 DAYS**

7 Pillars of Mindfulness in 7 Days

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steve Costello is an experienced psychologist and passionate about the value of mindfulness. Although it wasn't always that way.

Taking a brief sojourn into the past, Steve recalls how he was always concerned with what other people thought and why they thought what they thought.

Sleepless and stressful nights laying awake worrying about what other people thought eventually brought on a crash and the aftermath was deeper than the physical injury caused by a simple sporting accident.

Too many "thoughts", some expressed, others pieced together, many errors of judgement added to an already stressful job led to a personal disaster that became the greatest challenge Steve has ever faced.

Thanks to a very perceptive physical therapist who taught mindfulness in addition to his profession, Steve saw the power of the present moment and accepted the gift of the present.

A doctor said Steve would never walk again, today he can walk, run, ski, and ride his mountain bike in the French Pyrenees.

Some might call it a miracle. Steve calls it the power of mindfulness.

# INTRODUCTION

If we want to change our future, we can only do it in the present moment. We can't think of a wonderful outcome in the future and as if by magic it manifests. So, one way or another, we have to act because it takes action to change things.

It sounds simple, right?

However, we all know how life has a habit of dropping unforeseen twists on our path or changes that we would rather not have to manage. At least not right now because we are busy doing something else.

It's stressful and there are plenty of stressors in our lives without adding more.

The point of this e-book is after reading the final page, you will have a plan that will work consistently as often as you need it to ground yourself in the present moment, manage changes that head your way and turn those changes into compelling future outcomes. All from within this, the present moment.

Regardless of your level of experience or understanding of mindfulness, everything starts with a beginner's mind and in a few hours, you will have constructed the seven pillars that will form your personal temple. A temple built to withstand the challenges life will inevitably throw your way.

Is there a catch?

Only one.

As the fictional master Yoda said, "Do or do not. There is no try".

# 7-PILLARS, 7-DAYS, HOW MANY HOURS?

You could read this e-book cover to cover without a break, and you would learn something.

Or you could follow a chapter a day for seven days, read the content and practice the exercises. At most, you will need an hour each day and you can practice the exercises as your day unfolds.

Nobody will notice what you are doing, and the exercises will help with your day rather than add an extra chore.

# YOUR CHALLENGE

Our Daily challenges, or the minor irritations and annoyances that are part of our everyday lives such as rush hour traffic, cancelled trains, lost keys, unpleasant co-workers, harsh weather, arguments with friends or family, can build on one another and leave us just as stressed as some of the big life changing events like moving home, death or divorce.

Think of one thing that comes up in your life fairly frequently. Just one thing that if you removed it, your daily stress levels would decrease.

Simply make a note. We aren't going to dwell upon it right now.

There is considerable scientific research about the value of mindfulness and everything you will find here is evidence-based.

So, let's get started with building our first pillar.



# 1 PILLAR-1 A BEGINNER'S MIND

A mindset that is willing to experience everything as if it is the first time.



Starting with a brief trip back to our beginner's minds of childhood when everything was new, exciting, fun, interesting . . . potentially mind-blowing! Such a massive amount of learning and new experience packed into a few short years.

Most of us may not have vivid recollections of those early years other than shared memories or anecdotes from people who witnessed our childhood.

What happens to all of that learning over time?

Related experiences add to it, events confirm it, people remind us, we remind ourselves. Habit's form and strengthen.

It doesn't matter whether it's right or wrong. Our learning informs our world and contributes to the people we become.

Of course, we might receive new input or experience and change our minds about how we respond to the world. Some people will agree with our worldview; others won't. C'est la vie – Such is Life and, you don't need me to remind you of the challenges that can bring about.

Mindfulness doesn't usually take trips to the past because it focuses on this, the present moment.

There are however a few notable exceptions and useful tools that can help us get back to the past when a trip down memory lane is necessary.

Have you heard of a Zen Koan?

They are stories, dialogues, questions, or statements used to provoke doubt.

By provoking doubt, we have opportunities to learn.

***Zen koans can be traced back to collections of sayings gathered by Chinese priests in the 12th and 13th centuries.***

Here's one:

What was your original face; the one you had at birth, before your life-experiences moulded the face you have today?

Reflect on the differences.

Are there any changes that you would like to make?

As I said, many of us will have no recollections, yet that is OK. We are not about regression therapy here, just some simple comparisons between then and now. So, we can use our observations of babies and small children or, the stories people have told us about ourselves.

My infant grandson is a perfect guide.

He smiles a lot and is very sociable. Almost everything he encounters is new. I can see it by the looks of concentration and fascination on his face. He shows me common objects like they are the greatest discovery ever.

Life is an adventure, everything must be taste-tested, everything is a new beginning from which he extracts learning and pleasure.

His beginner's mind is open to all the experiences he encounters with his always on curiosity.

He sees things as they are, his mind is open and ready for whatever comes up.

The mind of the beginner is free of expert habits because in the experts' mind there are fewer possibilities and options. If we have a mind full of preconceived ideas, subjective intentions, or habits, we are not open to things as they are.

***Is one of the goals of life to lose our beginners mind?***

Basic skills or knowledge become increasingly more complex. Do we ever really go back to basics once we consider ourselves to have expertise in something?

Yet, if we can retain our beginners mind, we can see things as they are and realize their original nature and value.

We are free from presumptions about how things work and are not filled with expectations about outcomes.

The curiosity to understand things at a deeper level opens us up to possibilities, because until we look, we don't know what's possible.

***Assembling the First Pillar***

Breathing is the start of all mindful practice and apart from keeping us alive, it comes with a list of benefits and some of these are evidence-based as opposed to anecdotal.

Mindful breathing grounds us in the present moment and has been shown to reduce stress and anxiety, help recover from burnout, provide some pain relief, and decrease negative thinking.

One of my yoga teachers demonstrates a breathing pattern that breathes in for 4-seconds, hold the breath for 5 and breathes out for 6-seconds. All of these numbers can be adjusted for personal comfort and to avoid side-effects such as light-headedness.

My preferred method is known as 4-7-8 breathing. Again, you can adjust the numbers but do keep the same ratios.

The method you adopt is entirely personal. The point is that all mindful activity is associated with purposeful breathing.

When a challenge arises. Pause and breathe. Focus on the breath, not the event.

Your mind should be concentrated on your breathing. During your breathing break, the way to keep your mind on your breathing is to forget all about yourself. Just sit and notice your breathing.

Studies show that 6 weeks of practicing breathing that focuses on controlling breath movement, may have a positive effect on a person's heart rate variability, which correlates with stress, and improvement in cognition and anxiety.

Here's a challenge for the following 24-hours.

As you go through your day notice what happens in your mind when you need to respond to something.

Check in with how you feel in that moment. Don't judge, be curious, just check-in.

While you're doing that, repeat the breathing exercise.

Each time a new event or challenging thought comes up. STOP and breathe, notice the calm this brings about before responding.

Every time you do something new today, check in with your breathing. Make it a positive habit, the benefits are amazing.

Just breathe and have a wonderful day.

### ***That One Thing***

Getting back to that one thing you would like to remove from your life, breathe through it.

When it comes to mind, pause and focus on your breathing for a minute and repeat as often as necessary.

According to science, it takes an average of 66 days for a new behaviour to become automatic. Keep practicing that breathing.

### ***Zen Koan***

What was your original face; the one you had at birth, before your life-experiences moulded the face you have today?

Reflect on the differences.

Are there any changes that you would like to make?

## 2 PILLAR-2 A CONSTANT EVALUATION OF THINGS

Mindfulness has been shown to enhance self-insight, morality, intuition and fear modulation, all functions associated with the brain's middle prefrontal lobe area.

Research also shows that mindfulness has numerous health benefits, including increased immune functioning, improvement to well-being and reduction in psychological distress.

In addition, mindfulness practice can increase information processing speed, as well as decrease task effort and having thoughts that are unrelated to the task at hand.

Here's a wonderful quote from Rumi. He was a 13th-century Persian poet, Islamic scholar, theologian, and Sufi mystic.

“Look past your thoughts, so you may drink the pure nectar of This Moment”.

This is what Mindfulness asks.

And a simple definition . . .

Mindfulness is the awareness and balanced acceptance of the present moment. It is being open to or receiving the present moment whether it's agreeable or disagreeable, just as it is, no judgements. It's not more complicated than that.

It's also a little like joining the gym at new year. Easy to do, easy not to do.

As a psychologist, I use Mindfulness to help my clients cope with stress, depression, anxieties. . . and for example, enhancing psychological well-being helps to manage physical pain and have better memory.

If we can learn to be mindful of our emotions we can also learn to shift to more positive mindsets and work towards being better or, happier people.

In the previous chapter, I asked you to check in with how you feel in moments when you need to respond to something.

No judgement, just curiously checking-in.

Judgment is a constant evaluation of things: right or wrong, bad, or good. Whether you are aware of it or not, judgment takes place frequently in our lives and often serves to prevent us from authentic connections with others, as well as being open to creativity.



*Here's an interesting thought from His Holiness the Dalai Lama,*

*"Love is the absence of judgment".*

*We Live in Constant Evaluation of Things.*

Can you tell me honestly, what happens in your mind when you see somebody who appears vastly different to you in appearance or attitude?

What happens when there is a storm, and you need to go out?

Do you ever feel bad because you think you are not well dressed, compared to somebody else?

We live in a constant evaluation of things. Our minds trigger past experiences and information. And they do not come only from our own experiences. But also, from those of our parents, society, and past generations!

*Here's a story about the weather from a Zen Master.*

Some people may feel annoyed or frustrated if they see the rain when they wake up in the morning.

The thought that later they will see the sun doesn't occur.

If our mind is concentrated on ourselves, we will have this kind of worry.

If we accept ourselves as a part of life's great activity, we will have no worry.

We may think,

“Now it is raining, we don't know what will happen in the next moment. By the time we go out it may be a beautiful or a stormy day.

Since we don't know, let's appreciate what we have now”.

This is a positive attitude.

Even in the midst of difficulties. This is the way.



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***Do you find yourself sometimes?***

Having an emotion (e.g., falling in love with someone) and judge it as good or bad? This judgment leads to more emotions!

Or, repeating to yourself that you “shouldn’t have had that thought”? More negative emotions.

Have you ever judged your body or self in comparison to others and feel that you are not attractive or as good as they are?

***Does judgement serve?***

On a positive note, well maybe . . . The evaluation of others, of situations, and of ourselves has helped us in our survival. Look back at history. That might require some judgment though!

We still think judgment brings us security. It’s considered a way to deal and escape from (real or perceived) danger.

Yet many of our judgments do not serve. On the contrary, they do harm. Did I just make a judgment call?

If we are perpetually occupied to evaluate, class, label, or analyse, we create turbulence in our internal dialogue.

When we judge, we have thoughts, emotions, and take actions that can create self-imposed suffering. Coming with judgment are fear and anxiety, anger, uncertainty, and other negative emotions. They prevent positive energy from circulating freely.

“Judgment often serves to prevent us from authentic connections with others, and our genuine self. It acts as a barrier that disconnects us from the richness, beauty, and nuance inherent within the universe”.

If we can free ourselves from judgments, we are open to a greater expression of love towards ourselves and others. We have deeper and more meaningful connections. It helps us discover the true beauty of the world around us.

Relating to mindfulness, non-judgment means intentionally assuming the mind-set of an impartial witness.

There are a number of Mindfulness Techniques that can help with this.



***This chapter is about Focus Mindfulness.***

Practicing mindfulness with an emphasis on focus involves looking inward to observe what is happening in your mind's stream of consciousness.

Here's an example.

My morning at work had been difficult. Back-to-back and challenging clients, demands from higher management. It was one of those could go wrong, did go wrong mornings.

Fortunately, I had a free afternoon so when I eventually got out of the office at 14:00, I headed home, changed, and aimed my mountain bike toward the forest.

The terrain over the first 5-kilometers wasn't particularly difficult. Undulating and sandy with a scattering of broken branches. I rode hard and fast as though my life depended on it. Until a loud metallic crack forced a sudden stop.

In that moment I was angry and frustrated with the things that had happened in the morning. My world had conspired against me and there were plenty of doors at which to lay the blame.

My frustration increased when I discovered my rear gear-set in two pieces. Poor manufacturing, surely?

. . . and then I laughed. In particular, I laughed at how I had become so embroiled in situations that I could not control.

So, instead of charging off to the forest after my challenging morning, it may have been helpful to examine what was going on in my mind by visualizing and plucking those events from my stream of consciousness.

This can also be described as "eyes on the road" or, the trail, in my case. Just focus on that singular experience. What led up to feeling so stressed? Just the events, nothing else. Leave out the emotion.

A wonderful way to do this is by using a simple variation of the Leaves on a Stream metaphor.

Start by finding a comfortable and quiet place to sit.

Focus on your breathing until you feel a relaxed rhythm.

Eyes closed or open, whatever you prefer. Imagine a gently flowing stream. This could be a stream you know, it's entirely your choice.

As you look at the stream, you will see events relating to your current situation floating slowly by on leaves.

Pick up the first and curiously examine it. No judgement: treat it as though you are seeing it for the first time.

Without any judgement or opinion. Just look and curiously observe.

When you are done, place the event back on a leaf and let it drift away down the stream.

Repeat this process for as long as you wish.

### ***Going a Little Deeper***

#### **A little “ACT” theory first . . .**

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) is a mindfulness-based treatment approach that explores how our emotions, thoughts, and beliefs can distract us from leading a fulfilling life based on our personal values.

ACT is a powerful treatment that has been used effectively to help treat workplace stress, test anxiety, social anxiety disorder, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and psychosis. It has also been used to help treat medical conditions such as chronic pain, substance abuse, and diabetes.

Through the practice of mindfulness meditation, we can learn to stay present in our here and now, and to accept our feelings, situations, and ultimately ourselves.

#### ***There are 6 core principles of ACT.***

#### **Cognitive Defusion**

Cognitive defusion necessitates stepping back and observing the language we speak to ourselves without becoming caught up in it.

Recognizing that our thoughts are an ever-changing stream of words, sounds and pictures and nothing more than short-lived private events, defusing our thoughts means they have less impact and influence.

Here's a quick defusion exercise for you.

Recall an upsetting and recurring negative self-judgment.

This is where you might say something to yourself like, "I am incapable", or "I'm stupid".

Hold the thought in your mind for several seconds. Believe it and notice how it makes you feel.

Now insert this phrase in front of your thought:

"I'm having the thought that I am . . . "

Notice what happens when you run the thought again with the "I'm having the thought . . ." phrase at the start.

The point of this exercise is to change your relationship and distance yourself from the original thought.

Not to erase the thought, rather to see it as "just words" and now you may be aware of where my favourite saying comes from, "be careful what you say, you are listening".

## **Acceptance**

With curiosity and without judgment, acceptance makes room in our mind for unpleasant feelings, sensations, urges, and other private experiences.

By accepting, we allow them to come and go without fighting them, running away, or giving them too much attention.

This Leaves on a Stream meditation is another exercise to help you practice cognitive defusion, which can help to soften the attachment you have with your thoughts, and therefore allowing greater choice in your actions related to your values.

You will find a Leaves on a Stream script in Pillar 7 – Letting Go.

**The Present Moment**

As you read these words, you are experiencing the present moment.

If you need to keep restarting your reading of this section because your mind keeps drifting off to what you will eat for dinner or the movie you watched last night, you are no longer experiencing the present moment.

Operating in the present moment brings complete awareness to your here-and-now. You are showing up.

Openness, curiosity, interest, and receptiveness focus your attention on, and engaging fully in this moment.

**Observing Self**

The observing sense of self accesses a perfect sense of self.

It has a continuity of consciousness that is unchanging, ever-present, and resistant to harm.

Here we know that we are not our thoughts, feelings, memories, urges, sensations, images, roles, or physical body.

The observing self knows that these phenomena change frequently and are secondary aspects of you.

They are not the essence of who you are.

**Values**

Here we Clarify what is most important to you, deep-down.

What sort of person do you want to be?

What matters?

What is meaningful to you?

What do you stand for in this life?

**Committed Action**

The goals you set are guided by your values. You take effective action to achieve them.

***Time-Out***

I've been asked about Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) and ACT.

Are they similar?

ACT differs from CBT in that rather than enabling people how to better control their thoughts, feelings, sensations, memories and other private events, ACT teaches them to just notice, accept and embrace their private events.

Here's a challenge.

Choose an event from your life.

It could be from today, recent, or distant past, it really doesn't matter so long as you can remember the detail. It can be a dream image, a memory, a painful feeling . . .

Remember to keep your focus by using breathing to stay grounded in the present moment.

Look at your event as though aspects of it are flowing through your mind on your stream of consciousness.

When an aspect of the event grabs your attention, visualize picking it from the stream, place it on the palm of your hand and look at it curiously.

You are a curious and impartial observer.

What do you see?

Identify only what you can see. Not what you think might be or should be there. No judgment calls.

When you feel ready, place the object back into the stream and watch it drift away. Focus on your breathing for a few moments and repeat with a different event or, return to your activity of the day when you are ready.

Here are a few reflective questions.

How do you feel now?

Was it difficult to observe without judgment?

What else came up while you were observing?

Where you able to detach from those “other” things?

Practice brings excellence. The more you run this exercise the easier it will become to detach without judgment.

Here’s a simple exercise.

Make a note each time you find yourself judging something during your next day.

Add them up at the end of the day and reflect.

### 3 PILLAR-3 PATIENCE

How were your judgment scores?

I really tried not to judge anything yesterday. I didn't get 100% no judgments although when I did catch myself starting to judge something, I stopped. Took a few long, slow breaths and did manage to short-circuit my judgment.

It's not surprising that we judge. I was watching an episode of a TV series with my family and was surprised at the number of judgments the characters engaged in, in just 40-minutes.

Of course, TV drama is exaggerated but never-the-less, this particular programme is based on the lives of a family and reflects many things I identify with from my own family life.

I'm sure that the writers didn't intend to highlight that judgment is deeply rooted in our society, but they did an excellent job of showing that it is.

It's going to take some patience with the process of mindfulness if we are to succeed in any quest to become curious, non-judgmental and impartial witnesses.

I do want to stress though that non-judgment does not mean that you "approve" everything, especially things that go against your values.



Although we can learn to move into a place of emotional stillness and peace of mind. This will allow us to connect with our creative energy and help change our worlds in meaningful ways.

But let's talk about patience as it relates to mindfulness.

Patience is a form of wisdom that allows us to give ourselves space and time to have our experiences as highlighted in this short story.

Buddha and some disciples went on a journey in which they would have to cross many territories and cities.

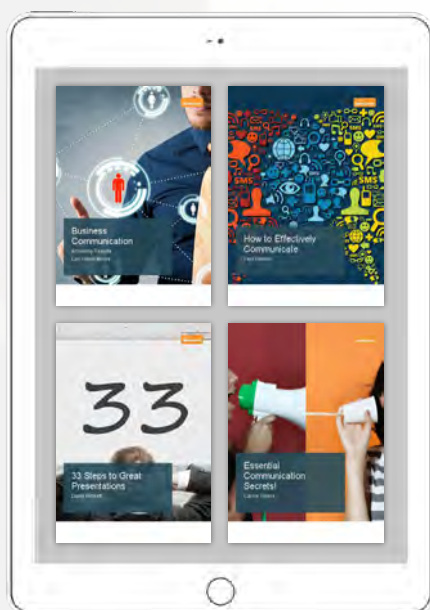
Spotting a lake in the distance. They decided to stop for water.

Buddha said to his youngest and somewhat impatient disciple: “I’m thirsty, please bring me some water from the lake”.

When the disciple arrived, he noticed that a wagon of oxen was crossing the lake and the water had become cloudy. The disciple said, “I can’t give the teacher this muddy water to drink”.

So, he went back and told Buddha.

A little later, Buddha asked the disciple to go back and bring him some water. The water was still dirty.



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“We can’t drink that water. We should walk to the town to get something to drink”.

Buddha didn’t answer or make any effort to move.

After a while, he asked the disciple to go back to the lake and bring him water.

The disciple didn’t want to challenge his master, so he did as he was asked, even though he was angry because he didn’t understand why he had asked him to go back again. Since the water was muddy and they couldn’t drink it.

When he arrived, he saw that the water now looked clear and collected some and gave it to Buddha.

He looked at the water and said to the disciple, “What have you done to clean the water”?

The disciple didn’t understand the question. He hadn’t done anything.

The Buddha explained, “You waited and let it be. Therefore, the mud settled on its own and now the water is clear.

Your mind is like that too! When it’s muddy, you have to let it be. Give it some time. Don’t be impatient. On the contrary, be patient. It’ll reach a balance on its own. You don’t have to make any effort to calm it down. Everything will pass on its own as long as you don’t hold on to it”.

The central theme to this story is patience. It’s about knowing how to wait, respecting time, and pausing when circumstances demand it. This is especially true where your thoughts are concerned.

If you find yourself feeling overwhelmed or stressed, the more you think about it, the more the circle of repetitive thinking is likely to grow and lead to more thoughts of overwhelm or stress. The more challenged you allow yourself to feel, the greater the challenge to your patience and, what is known as the “Monkey Mind” grows.

According to Buddhist principles, the “monkey mind” is a term that refers to feeling unsettled, restless, or confused. It can also be viewed as our inner critic.

The monkey mind resides in the part of your brain most connected to the ego and is responsible for those can’t do anything right feelings. It also challenges creativity and prevents us from moving forward with our tasks or passions.

It insists on being heard, and often demands a lot of self-control to shut it down. It is also the part of your brain that becomes easily distracted, so if you want to get anything done in life, your challenge will be to shut down the monkey mind.

There is no doubt that working on our patience can go a long way to calming the monkey mind.

So, how can we improve our patience in a world of quick results, faster everything, frequent demands?

***Let's take a brief patience break to consider the thoughts  
of Buddhist monk, Ajahn Brahm.***

“It is very rare to find a human being today. They are always going somewhere, hardly ever being here. That is why I call them ‘human goings’”.

We are surrounded by opportunities.

The next time you feel “impatience” in relation to anything, see this as an opportunity to practice mindfulness of your thoughts.

Become curious at the thoughts passing through your mind.

Are they all true?

How are they making you feel (feelings, not judgments)?

The next time you see a sign such as a traffic light or pedestrian crossing sign. Don't try to rush before it turns to red.

How does this make you feel?

Repeat this exercise several times and ask yourself:

Does it become easier or more difficult to be patient?

When you visit a large store and are ready to checkout. Join the nearest queue you see. Disregard how long it looks.

Do any “impatient” feelings arise? If they do, treat them with curiosity rather than impatient reactions.

Listening to what another person wishes to say is potentially a big test of patience.

Focus on listening to what they are saying.

If you find yourself formulating your response as they talk, you aren’t listening.

Giving the impression that you are listening is called pseudo-listening.

Listening can take immense effort and is excellent patience training. Each time you practise, you train your brain to become more patient.

It takes patience to become a great listener and some of the greatest listeners can be found in the extraordinarily successful.

We can make another word from “Listen” which is a skill required in Listening.

**SILENT**

## 4 PILLAR-4 NON-STRIVING

Cultivating this attitude involves not trying to get anywhere – letting go of attachment to any outcome – allowing things to be as they are.

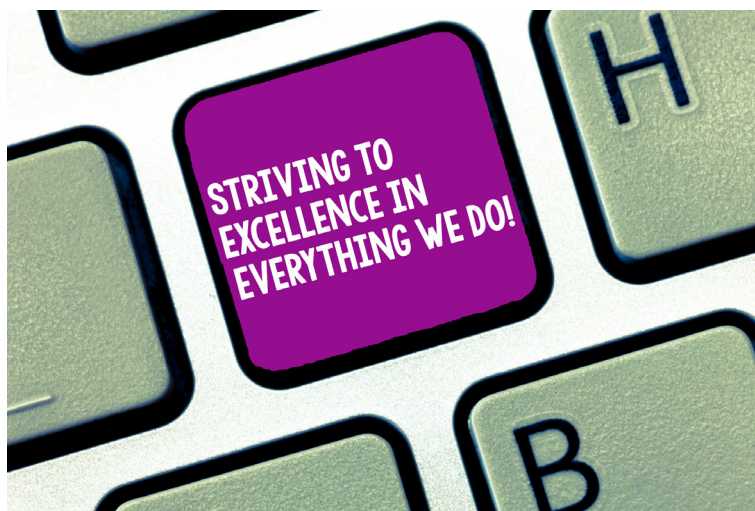
Trying less leads to being more.

This doesn't seem to be making much sense, does it? Especially if we are immersed in a competitive, goal-oriented culture as I most certainly was before I spectacularly crashed out of my hard-earned successful career.

Constant pushing and striving resulted in a disabling diagnosis of fibromyalgia after a simple knee fracture.

Twenty-one years on from my crash, I still consider myself to be a “recovering striver” who occasionally relapses into the striving environment.

So how, in this pressurized world where expectations are high, can we adopt a non-striving approach to life?



Non-striving takes patience and a non-judging attitude that embodies an openness to the present moment, exactly as it is.

Even this seems to be counter-intuitive. During challenging times, it is completely natural to strive to escape or fix our challenges. If we are unemployed, it is reasonable to make plans and take action to support ourselves.

When we see the extinction of an animal or melting of the ice caps, it is understandable to want to change things. Action is a natural human response and through presence practice, we learn to hold the present moment and a longing to protect this world.

Non-striving in mindfulness enables pausing from our internal and external striving activity. When thoughts arise that say, “I wish things were different”, we learn to relate to these with acceptance.

We are not saying, “things are OK as they are”. We are being present and from presence we can move forward.

***Here’s a practice exercise.***

Every day choose an activity to loosen your grip on the outcome.

For example, whatever the weather, you go for a run or walk daily to keep fit.

The goal is clear; now add the intention to enjoy the scenery and greet people you meet along the route. You are not looking for things to be different, the wind to change or the rain to stop. There is no anticipation of what is or is not.

## 5 PILLAR-5 TRUST

This chapter is about having trust in yourself, honouring your experience and the knowledge gained.

We can't suddenly become Zen mindfulness practitioners. We need to trust the process and the experience and knowledge we gain from it.

All the challenges in this e-book will help with the process and frequent practice will fix it.

The challenge for this chapter moves on to Awareness Mindfulness.



Unlike focus mindfulness (Pillar 2), practicing awareness emphasizes the external instead of the internal. Awareness focuses on the mind from an outside perspective. When practising mindfulness from an awareness perspective, the aim is to view your mental activity as if it belongs to someone else.

In general, awareness mindfulness can be described as looking at your thoughts and feelings from outside your usual self-centred experience and observing your mind as a stream of consciousness that belongs to somebody else and . . . without attaching judgment of course.

Start by taking your mind inwards for a moment by focusing on the breath. Take a few gentle deep breaths, from the belly. In, hold and out. Relax. Let go. Continue to focus on breathing for as long as you wish.

Now take your mind outwards. See your thoughts, feelings, moods, and sensations as objects on leaves floating down a stream, coming into view and vanishing from sight. Simply watch without judgment or analysis. Just watch them pass.

Next, pluck an object from the stream and focus on it. Let the other sensations and thoughts go by in the background. Note any new thoughts or feelings that arise from observing this object. Sit with these thoughts and feelings for a moment.

Whenever you're ready to leave this object behind, deposit it on a leaf and let it float downstream.

Practice this exercise when something happens that stirs an emotion or provokes you to respond to a situation from your emotions.

Sometimes, mindfulness exercises like these bring up challenging thoughts or emotions that might be rooted in your past. This is not unusual and more often than not, those thoughts will fade as you progress with your day.

If you find that this becomes a challenge in itself, please leave comments or questions in the Facebook Group associated with this e-book. Details are on the final page. If you don't use Facebook or, if your experience is personal and you don't wish to share in the group, please don't hesitate to send an email.

## 6 PILLAR-6 ACCEPTANCE

Acceptance is seeing things as they really are in each moment, rather than as you would like them to be or as the worst interpretation may present; in other words, taking things as they come.



Acceptance is practiced with curiosity, without judgment and makes room in our mind for unpleasant feelings, sensations, urges, and other private experiences.

It is a crucial element of mindfulness.

By accepting things as they are, we allow them to come and go without fighting them, running away, or giving them too much attention.

This does not involve any form of passivity, fight, or flight. Neither does Mindful Acceptance allow excuses to ignore a challenge without taking positive corrective action where appropriate.

We face our challenges in a caring, objective, curious and non-judgemental way.

Here's a self-practice exercise that is great for working on acceptance. It's also wonderful for chilling out too!

Find a place where you can easily see the sky. Any time of day works.

Close your eyes for a few moments and focus on your breathing until you feel calm and relaxed.



Open your eyes and gaze at the sky.

You are not interested in the weather, what is now, what may be later. Just pay attention to what you see. Be curious, don't judge.

Be like a mirror, no distortions, reflect without judgement.

Don't allow sounds to become an excuse to stop.

The wind, emergency vehicle passing by, people talking, children playing, a pneumatic drill . . . these are the sounds of life, let them be.

If they pull you away from your objective which is only gazing at the sky. Concentrate on your breathing and refocus on the sky.

You will be distracted.

Refocus.

Stop this exercise when you are ready. Not because something distracted you.

### Practical Application

As with all the pillars of mindfulness introduced in this e-book, frequent practice is required.

The sky meditation does help, and it is a perfect steppingstone to solving live challenges.

## 7 PILLAR-7 LETTING GO

Letting go is about intentionally releasing control and allowing ourselves to fully participate in our experience. This is central to mindful living.

*"Let go or be dragged".*

*Zen Proverb*



‘Holding on’ to our values, beliefs, and ‘letting go’ occurs in both the physical, muscular sense and in an emotional sense. We are not all taught how to let go emotionally during our early years and it becomes more difficult as we age.

Let’s take stress as an example.

When we feel stressed, it’s common for a headache, stiff neck, muscle tension . . . to develop. Which muscles give discomfort depends on the type of stress and the body’s physiological response.

We habitually hold on to what is pleasant and push away what is unpleasant. Clinging, and pushing away are both reactive states and distance us from mindful living. We fixate on our values and beliefs and hold on as if it would be a great threat to let go of any that no longer serve us. As if our life depended on clinging to our world view. We push and strive to achieve or attain what we want.

So, what is letting go in an emotional sense?

The simple, if not frustrating response is, being with things as they are. As The Beatles sang in 1970, “Let It Be”.

If we can mindfully “let it be”, we develop an open, relaxed, non-judgmental acceptance of what is, and no action is necessary.

If we are unable to let it be, our perceptions continue to drive our reality and become a breeding ground for afflictions. Being able to let things be discards notions and ideas that contribute to our suffering.

In India, there is a method of catching monkeys by cutting a hole in the top of a coconut, then attaching the coconut to the base of a tree. A banana is placed inside the coconut. When a monkey slides its hand in to get the banana and holds onto it, its closed fist is too big to slide back out. The monkey becomes trapped because it refuses to let go.

Similarly, we become trapped when we refuse to let go. We can't move on to something better or a new way of thinking because we cling onto the old. Our attachment to things being a certain way holds us in a static place.

1. Think of one thing in your life where you had difficulty accepting and letting go and write it down.
2. Identify your triggers

The first step of letting go is to identify what triggered your need to control things.

Here are a couple of examples:

- Do you find yourself anticipating the reaction of your people who have said hurtful things to you in the past?
- Does your friend's success lead you to question your own life and make you stressed out about whether or not you'll experience something similar in the future?

Once you realize what your triggers are, you can start to find methods to let them be.

One simple method is to take a breath and remind yourself that the need to control doesn't arise from a true “fight or flight” situation.

### ***Unload your feelings . . .***

Sometimes, the need to control is a reaction to unpleasant feelings arising from our thoughts about “things”. Emotions become difficult to regulate, and you might be craving a sense of certainty because you don't want bad feelings to dominate.

Unprocessed thoughts and suppressed emotions don't help you feel a sense of contentment. In fact, they do the opposite by contributing to stress, anxiety, and illogical outbursts.

One way to process your thoughts and feelings is to write them down.

A "mental dump" of your thoughts about things can help chase negativity out of your system.

***Distance Yourself . . .***

Sometimes, our need for control relates to other people's opinions and behaviours.

A colleague makes jokes that rub you the wrong way, even after you've asked them to stop.

You have a disagreement with somebody, and you're feeling frustrated that you can't make them see things your way.

We need to let go of the emotions that make us want to control other people's actions.

Here's a great story that highlights the point.

A group of blind people touched an elephant to discover what it felt like. Each person touched a different and only one part of the elephant. Afterwards, they compared notes and discovered they were in total disagreement. They argued about what the elephant is.

Each convinced that their interpretation was right.

All are right and wrong because their perspectives are limited.

The story highlights how our beliefs hold a limited perspective and not the full picture of reality.

If we are convinced that our ideas and ours alone are right, we may find ourselves in negative conflict situations.

On the other hand, positive conflict is constructive. Opposing ideas can bring breakthroughs in thinking, learning and relationships.

***Think about it like this.***

When we're angry with somebody, we tend to think repeatedly about the thing they did, which keeps us emotionally engaged with how we think we were wronged.

Psychologists refer to this repetitious thought pattern as, 'rumination'.

To deal with rumination, create some psychological distance.

Some people may require physical distance. If that's not possible, focussing on other aspects of your life, or seeing the event from the perspective of another person helps.

Seeing it from the outside, coaxes your mind to look at the situation more abstractly and the specific details of what that person did will be less available and have less influence on your emotions.

***Make a date in the future.***

Something happens, somebody said something that bothers you and you don't have time to worry about that right now.

Schedule a little rumination time for later.

This sounds odd, right?

Planning worry time for later has an interesting effect.

People report that it makes them less likely to worry, because in the interim, they realized that it's not worth filling their head with things they don't have any control over.

Over the longer term, it became easier to manage uncertainty and unpredictability.

***Uncertainty is a part of life.***

When something uncertain arises in our lives, we often question and generate "what-ifs" to establish some certainty when we're uncomfortable with the unknown.

A mindful approach is to build uncertainty tolerance and we can start by asking a couple of questions when uncertainty occurs:

What is useful?

What is not useful?

Letting go of the challenging thoughts and emotions generated by the uncertainty and planning solutions for 'what is useful' will relieve some uncertainty tension.

For example, worrying about our health, or the health of a loved one is common.

If this encourages you to eat a healthy diet and exercise, a little worry can be a good thing so long as it is not causing severe anxiety and mental chaos. Concerns and worrying about developing a serious disease or health condition is a very real problem for many people, which can negatively impact other areas of life.

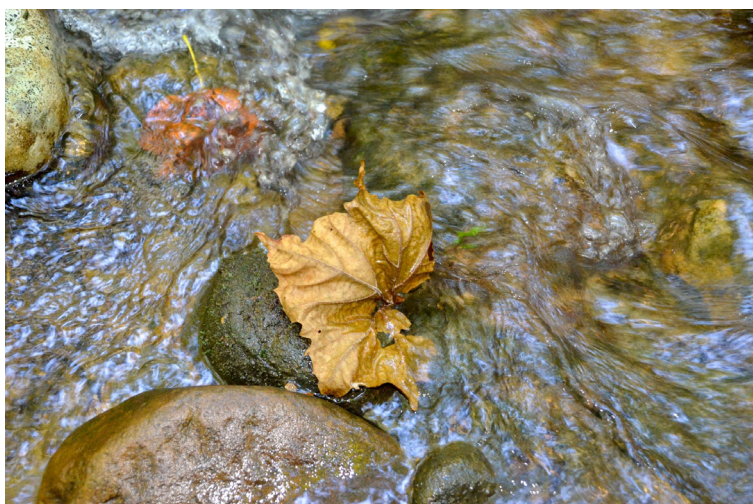
The answer lies in doing your best to live a healthy life and accept that some aspects of health are out of your control.

### ***Worry Tip***

We can learn to develop some control over our worries, making it easier to let them go as they emerge.

Use a note pad to write them down. Don't analyse, just write down enough so that your notes make sense before returning your attention to what you were doing.

### ***Leaves on a Stream***



The following guided meditation is specifically about letting go.

This exercise teaches how to step back from our thoughts and view them as mental events passing through the mind rather than absolute truths. You are encouraged to **look at** the passing events rather than **from** your thoughts.

As mentioned earlier, the psychological term, cognitive defusion, provides a powerful way to deal successfully with painful, unhelpful, self-defeating, or self-limiting thoughts and beliefs.

Research has validated the effectiveness of cognitive defusion techniques for psychological wellbeing and has shown that it can reduce discomfort and believability in self-relevant negative thoughts more so than attempting to distract from or control such thoughts.

The following exercise involves looking into an imaginary stream. If you can't visualize a stream, you can use a video or static image. This is your stream. You decide what it looks like.

If you have difficulty with the stream metaphor, there are alternatives.

You may wish to substitute the stream and try this exercise later with pieces of luggage on a moving conveyor belt, cars driving past outside your house, passing clouds or birds in the sky. These ideas will make sense as you read the script.

***The goal is to improve your ability to unhook from your thoughts.***

It is necessary to practice this technique with every thought that arises, both pleasant and unpleasant, helpful, and unhelpful.

This exercise can be effectively used during moments of distress such as when you are experiencing rumination or are fused with particular challenging thinking.

At the end of some paragraphs, you will see (**Time Pause**). A pause is necessary although it is for you to decide how long you need.





Whatever happens during this exercise, remember to practice non-judgement and curiosity.

Sitting comfortably, allow your shoulders to drop and relax, and plant your feet firmly on the ground. If you are sitting on a floor, feel the sense of contact between the contact points of your body and the floor beneath you.

Gently close your eyes, and for the next few breaths bring your full focus of attention to your breathing. Notice the feeling of the air flowing in and down into the lungs, and into the belly as you inhale. Hold your breath and notice the sensation before exhaling. Feel the release of any tension as you let the air out slowly.

Now, imagine that you are sitting by the side of a gently flowing stream.

This might be a stream that you know, or something you create in your mind with your imagination. If there is a light breeze blowing as you sit by the stream, dappled light shimmering on the water, soft green grass beneath you, that is perfectly acceptable.

Imagine the stream however you like, it's your imagination, your stream (**Time Pause**).

There are leaves floating on the surface of the stream, and these leaves are gently flowing past you, downstream.

Your goal for the next few minutes is to see if you can take every thought that pops into your head and place it on a leaf.

Your thoughts may show up in your mind in the form of words, or pictures, or something else. Whenever a thought arises, simply place it on a leaf, and let it float away.



Do this regardless of whether the thoughts are positive and enjoyable, or negative and challenging. Simply place each on a leaf and let them float down the stream (**Time Pause**).

If you are assaulted by thoughts. Don't worry. Select one to place on a leaf and allow the others to go. They will return.

If you notice that your thoughts stop momentarily, just continue to watch the stream. Eventually your thoughts will start up again (**Time Pause**).

Allow the stream to flow at its own rate. There is no need to try and speed it up. The aim here is not to wash the leaves away, rather allow them to come and go in their own time. You are just sitting and watching. (**Time Pause**).

If your mind says something like "I can't do it" or "This is stupid", place those thoughts on leaves, and let them float by (**Time Pause**).

Occasionally, a leaf may get stuck. There is no need to force it to float away. Just sit and watch and eventually, another leaf will give it the nudge it needs to float downstream (**Time Pause**).

If feelings, such as boredom, impatience, or anxiety arises, simply acknowledge them. Say to yourself "Here is a feeling of boredom", "Here is a feeling of impatience", "Here is a feeling of anxiety". Place those words on a leaf and allow them to drift away (**Time Pause**).

Occasionally, your thoughts will hook you, and you will lose track of the exercise.

This is normal because our attention naturally wanders, and it will happen repeatedly. As soon as you realize this has happened, come back to your stream (**Time Pause**).

Continue placing each thought that pops into your mind on a leaf, and watch it slip by (**Time Pause**).

Again, and again, your thoughts will hook you. Remember, this is normal. As soon as you notice this has happened, simply come back to your stream (**Time Pause**).

Now this exercise is ending, begin to let go of your imagined stream and bring your attention back to where you are.

Notice what you can hear.

What you can feel.

When you're ready, open your eyes and notice what you can see.

Take another minute to sit quietly before carrying on with your day while you hold on to this sense of presence and spaciousness from thinking.

**Six questions for reflection follow:**

What did you notice?

How did you visualize your thoughts (i.e., words, images, or something else)?

Did your mind get hooked by thoughts? If so, were you able to unhook yourself and come back to the stream?

Did any negative or painful thoughts show up? Were you able to place these thoughts on leaves and allow them to float by at their own pace?

Did you maintain non-judgemental curiosity?

How do you feel now?

# YOUR PERSONAL TEMPLE



As I said in the introduction to this e-book, after reading the final page, you will have a plan that will work consistently as often as you need it to ground yourself in the present moment, manage changes that head your way and turn those changes into compelling future outcomes. All from within this, the present moment.

Here's a Brief reminder of the pillars.

## 1. **A Beginner's Mind**

You have a mindset that is willing to experience everything as if it is the first time. When a challenge arises, you pause and focus attention on your breathing.

## 2. **A Constant Evaluation of "Things"**

Albert Einstein said, "the mind that opens to a new idea never returns to its original size".

If we are closed to innovative ideas, thoughts, opinions . . . we lose our sense of curiosity.

You are curious about your experiences.

## 3. **Patience**

"It is very rare to find a human being today. They are always going somewhere, hardly ever being here. That is why I call them 'human goings'" (Ajahn Brahm).

We are surrounded by opportunities.

The next time you feel “impatience” in relation to anything, see this as an opportunity to practice mindfulness of your thoughts.

Become curious at the thoughts passing through your mind.

Are they all true?

How are they making you feel (feelings, not judgments)?

Practice the patience exercises.

#### 4. **Non-Striving**

Non-striving in mindfulness enables pausing from our internal and external striving activity. When thoughts arise that say, “I wish things were different”, we learn to relate to these with acceptance.

We are not saying, “things are OK as they are”. We are being present and from presence we can move forward.

Choosing an activity to loosen your grip on the outcome helps with this and a wonderful way forward is to place yourself in an observer position.

Does the observer suggest a different way of completing this activity?

#### 5. **Trust**

We can’t suddenly become Zen mindfulness practitioners. We need to trust the process and the experience and knowledge we gain from it.

Observing your thoughts and feelings from outside your usual self-centred experience and watching your mind as a stream of consciousness that belongs to somebody else is a positive place to start.

It is stressful to respond to situations from our emotions. Watching the inner-space where our thoughts reside is the beginning of the end of the conditioned mind.

#### 6. **Acceptance**

Acceptance sees things as they are in each moment.

It is not about how you would like them to be or as the worst interpretation may present.

Acceptance is taking things as they come and is practiced with curiosity, without judgment and makes room in our mind for unpleasant feelings, sensations, urges, and other private experiences.

By accepting things as they are, we allow them to come and go without fighting them, running away, or giving them too much attention.

This does not involve any form of passivity, fight, or flight or, excuses to ignore a challenge without taking positive corrective action where appropriate.

We face our challenges in a caring, objective, curious and non-judgemental way.

## 7. **Letting Go**

Holding on to what is pleasant and pushing away what is unpleasant is tiring.

Clinging, and pushing away are both reactive states and distance us from mindful living.

Fixating on our values and beliefs and holding on as if it would be a great threat to let go of any that no longer serve us is energy draining and takes us outside the present moment.

As if our life depended on clinging to our world view. We push and strive to achieve or attain what we want. If we can't let go, we will be dragged.

# CROSSING A RIVER

This tale of two monks and a woman is a well-known Buddhist parable.

*Two monks were traveling together. They came to a river with a strong current where a young woman was stood looking at the river and unable to cross alone.*

*She asked the monks if they would help her across the river.*

*Without a word one of the monks picks her up, crossed, and set her down on the other side.*

*The second monk joined them. He looked as though something had upset him.*

*An hour passed as they travelled on. Then two hours, three hours . . . Finally, the now quite agitated second monk spoke out.*

*"Why did you carry that woman when we took a vow not to touch women"?*

*The monk replied, "I set her down hours ago by the side of the river. Why are you still carrying her"?*



How might this story have been written if the second monk had read and applied the messages in this e-book?

You may recall that I asked you to think of one thing that comes up in your life fairly frequently at the start of this book and to make a note.

Just *one thing* that if you removed it, your daily stress levels would decrease.

Have you applied the pillars to your “*one thing*”?

Have they made a difference?

If you wish to share your experience, you can leave your thoughts at one of the resources below.

# RESOURCES

To celebrate the publication of this e-book, you are invited to the free Facebook Group; “Living the Gift of Now” where all members can expect discussion, free mindfulness tools and events.

<https://facebook.com/groups/livingthegiftofnow>

Discussion and application of mindfulness theory to practice.

<https://banish-doubt.com>

Thought provoking posts and discussion.

<https://facebook.com/StevePCostello>

<https://www.linkedin.com/in/stevepcostello/>

Book a free fifteen-minute Q & A call.

<https://calendly.com/steveexgro/15-min>