



## **Mindfulness Built for Two**

**By Kate Cohen-Posey**

Are you a regular meditator but feel stymied when it comes to making mindfulness a vital part of client treatment?

You aren't alone. Solitary meditation is one thing; two-way mindfulness in an attuned relationship is another.

A regular sitting practice eluded me until I discovered Tim Desmond's *Dialogical Based Mindfulness* (2016) and then, later, mindfulness-centered psychotherapy (now called Hakomi, Weiss et al., 2015). I fell in love. I learned how to summon states of curious, compassionate consciousness as *the* agent of change in therapy sessions. Every approach I had learned over fifty years coalesced. I began to dance with my clients mindfully. But not all of them.

When clients come to us in crisis with racing thoughts, potent emotions, and harsh inner voices, didactic approaches to awareness training are not easy. After noticing their breath for a few minutes, people may be accosted by thoughts: *I can't do this; It's just another thing for me to fail at; or I have too much to do*. Beginners need to practice persistence before they experience meditation's benefits, like improved concentration, reduced reactivity, and even lower blood pressure. In a culture where immediate gratification is expected, people often give up.

## Interpersonal Mindfulness: Chatham

When I saw Chatham's name on my schedule, my heart sank. Thus far, I had not found the spigot to turn off his firehose of words. Attempts to establish treatment objectives slipped through my fingers like sand. *What am I supposed to do to help this person?* I thought.

And so, we began our fourth telehealth session. Chatham was going on about his investments and then launched into the details of a conflict over the equity in a house he owned with his mother and how she "manipulated" him into doing a 9-1-1 check. In a voice edged in ire he said, "She found out I would respond to her in an emergency. She has so much power over me!"

Somehow, I managed to establish a therapeutic alliance by rephrasing key points of the topics he unleashed, saying, "All of these issues are truly important; how can this session help you with them?"

To my astonishment, there was a brief pause, and Chatham asked, "Is my anger valid?"



In mindfulness-based therapies, the next classic move is to connect people with their bodies. Arousing thoughts are accompanied by somatic sensations. Focusing on tightness, heat, or heaviness in the body is like dropping an anchor to steady a ship in a stormy sea. Sensations are a great focal object for mindfulness.

But, before I could even ask Chatham how he noticed his anger, my "difficult" client added, "Wow, my heart is really pounding, and there's all this tightness below my shoulders."



## From Brain-Body Connection to New Perspectives

I began my mindfulness spiel. "You're so observant to *notice* those sensations . . . Maybe you can tell how strong they are on a 0 – 10 scale." He reported they were a ten plus. This intensity suggested that he needed resourcing, so I offered a suggestion to help him contain his intensity. "Perhaps there is a picture of your dog on your desk," I said. He affirmed with a nod. "You could *focus* on that picture, possibly on its eyes (*for a hit of oxytocin*), and *be curious* if the sensations in the chest change . . . They could get stronger, or your heartbeats could slow down. Could you *tell me*

what you're *noticing* now?" He confirmed that his heart rate had dropped slightly, but he still felt tightness beneath his shoulders.

"Good!" I said, "You're doing great. We're just *observing* your body, *not thinking* about the things you mentioned before. The part of you that notices is so powerful. It might say to any tension that is left, 'You have every right to be here . . . We can handle you.'" Chatham yawned and pardoned himself. I continued. "It's so good that you yawned . . . It's a sign that everything is slowing down, and yawning can cool the brain . . . Maybe *you'll discover* something else in the body after that yawn."

I carried on this mindful dialogue until Chatham reported, with a puzzled expression that all the tension was gone, and his heart rate was normal. I asked if he was willing to do a little exercise, explaining that I would take over some of the words he said and suggested that he *notice* anything that happened in his body, his mind, maybe a memory or an image, or even calming quiet. He nodded slightly; I repeated, "Your mother found out you would respond to her in an emergency."

Chatham responded soberly, "Duh, that's what any son would do." His negative cognition, "*She has power over me,*" had transformed into a positive statement of agency.

## Ties that Bond

It is well known that the counselor-client alliance is a key factor for successful treatment. Desmond begins building a connection in an ordinary state of consciousness: "Do you want to talk about some of the things that are happening in your life or explore what could help you with all of this?" His use of client choice is brilliant. It subtly distinguishes between chatting versus having a desired outcome and underscores the idea of a collaborative partnership.



A Hakomi session often begins with mindfulness, either with clients using their own practice or the counselor giving a few simple instructions: "You can connect with yourself in whatever way is good for you, maybe *noticing* how deep air goes down, how long you exhale, or something else, taking all the time you need to *find out* what is calling your attention." The words "find out what is calling your attention" evoke an intention.

Once the issue *du jour* has been established, both parties are on the same page. However, this is only the beginning of the interpersonal linking needed for two-way mindfulness. Chatham's inner work starts with an *acknowledgment* that validates his reality— "All these issues are truly important."

Desmond begins this poignant joining by asking, "Let me make sure I understand . . .," and then names specific feeling states and desires. Hakomi uses "contacting" tags: *baffled, huh? . . . a little gloomy; tears just behind the eyes . . .; a nice breath there . . .* These pithy phrases name emotions and nonverbal expressions. Comments are expressed tentatively, often beginning with the word *maybe* or ending with a quizzical, *huh?* Bonding with someone requires curiosity about all the nuances of their experience until therapists have their own felt sense of the person's struggle.

The final step in inter-hemispheric connection involves feedback. After Chatham's heartbeats slowed, I suggested, "Maybe you can *tell me* what you're noticing now." This allowed me to assess how he was responding to my prompts. Feedback is essential to dialogical mindfulness. It requires people to report their internal experience as it shows up.



## From Looking For to Letting Come

Once the dialogue that bonds is developed, proper mindfulness can begin. But what is mindfulness? Jon Kabat-Zinn's well-known definition could be reworded in the affirmative: *paying attention on purpose, with loving presence, moment by moment* (2003). Author and Buddhist teacher Sylvia Boorstein's (2024) depiction is well-suited to interpersonal mindfulness: *Receiving the present moment, pleasant or unpleasant, without either clinging to or rejecting it*. This is a tall order for solitary meditation, but having an engaged "outside Witness" makes receiving unpleasant moments without rejecting or clinging doable. We might think of this as an external Witness evoking another person's internal Witness.

While working with Chatham, I aroused inner awareness by using such words as

"Be curious."

"Notice."

"We're observing, not thinking."

"The part of you that observes might say to any tension, 'We can handle you.'"

Evocative language changes can-you questions into hypnotic truisms: "You can notice anything that happens in the body, the mind, maybe a memory or even calming quiet." Covering all possible responses implies that something will emerge.

## In the Present Moment: Leslie

The practice of mindfulness requires making the shift from past to present. As some clients tell their stories, recent or remote events can seem devoid of life. This was the case with Leslie, who matter-of-factly proclaimed during our telehealth session, "I'm obligated to my mother because of how terrible I was as a teen."

She was now approaching 40. Asking her to recount the details of her never-told youthful "transgression" opened a doorway to the present.



After a childhood of being sheltered from movies, parties, doing anything with friends, exorcisms to root out gay tendencies, and bullying that she said “she deserved,” Leslie finally found freedom in college. On a lark, she bought a sixty-dollar bouquet of flowers for her girlfriend on the family credit card. The next time she came home, her mother launched into a lecture. “Sending flowers to another woman; how could you?! I’m disgusted!”

In a faltering voice, Leslie divulged, “I started choking her; I lost all control. I could have killed my own mother.” Her chest heaved as she sobbed and whimpered. I encouraged her to take her time until the emotional gush subsided.

“So much guilt, huh?” I snuck into a pause. “I’m curious how you notice that regret.” Leslie reported great heaviness in her chest and goosebumps on her arms. I encouraged her to take a moment to be with the heaviness. After a bit, I said, “I’m wondering what the twenty-ish you was thinking just before she grabbed her mother’s neck.”

“It felt like my mom was choking me with her words, so I choked her back,” she said in an edgy voice. “I would have been charged with intent to kill in a court of law. After distancing for years, I now bend backward to cater to her every whim.” Past happenings became present with weightiness in the body, mental anguish, and catering behavior. Re-living buried sensations and associated emotional fallacies made the memory malleable. Once opened, inner wounds are operable.

### **From Past Falsehood to Nobel Truths**



Desmond might suggest an *exercise* in compassion: “You can discover what happens inside when you tell yourself, ‘Even if you reacted rashly, the hurt twenty-year-old-you deserves some tenderness.’”

In Hakomi, *experiments* offer a missing experience. Feeling understood may be what is most lacking during life’s rough patches. Speaking to her younger self, I illuminated

the painful points of Leslie’s tale: “Really terrified yourself . . . So many years of bottled-up anger . . . Seems like a part of you stopped you from going too far.”

Then, I offered the essential missing element: words that reversed defeating beliefs acquired in formative years. The intent of stating positive positions is to unearth any notions that block taking in new truths. Asking Leslie permission to consider a novel possibility, I proposed, "You can tell your twenty-year-old self that she can trust herself . . . she will never strike her mother in the future."

There was a long pause before she replied, "I need to protect my mom because if her own daughter would hurt her, other people could do even worse."

I labeled that as a *thought* that could be true or not true (mindfulness of thoughts). The session continued to sashay from soma to psyche and back again.

While Leslie was still deep inside her thoughts, I asked if I could tell her a little-known fact, and with her consent, I said, "Assaults on women are more likely to happen by relatives." I let that sink in for a few moments then added, "The past many years of distancing and then later being at her beck-and-call prove you gained restraint."

She noted that the sadness in her stomach lessened. What followed were recollections of her sister's vitriol and her brother's violence. I tossed another positive prompt into the pool of mindfulness: "Maybe your siblings are not yours to control."

Her mind meandered beneath an un-furrowed brow. "They are both like the wind, like a cool breeze," she murmured. Moment-to-moment mindfulness was becoming more spacious. Leslie had left the well-traveled roads of negative thoughts into transcendent meadows full of mysterious wisdom and ethereal images. Perhaps therapy needs to aim higher than defeating beliefs and schemas to dwell in the present moment, just noticing, without the need to change what is forever changing.



I asked permission to speak to the college kid who had lashed out at her mother. After she offered an agreeable nod, I said, "It really did feel like your mom was choking you with her words . . . After years of being a target . . . being so sheltered . . . and even exorcisms . . . it's understandable that you grappled with her."

Leslie's breath slowed, but she looked attentive. "It's like I'm seeing the branches swaying on a tree . . . The leaves are moving; some are floating . . . This has been so liberating."



### **From Separate Selves to Transpersonal Unity**

In Chatham's case, mindfulness of somatic sensations bore mental flexibility. For Leslie, the past had become a prologue to a life of maternal servitude. This required an evocative recounting of preceding events to awaken body memories. A balm full of understanding and new knowledge could then be applied to mend former misunderstandings. Not only had I jumpstarted Leslie's inner Observer as the witnessing therapist, but my words had sparked lost inherent realities in transpersonal time and space.

Mindfulness built for two evolves into an open focus where whatever arises frame-by-frame is named, observed, allowed, and supported. New connections are made, and sometimes, voices beyond time and space appear, delivering noble truths by studying what has been percolating in the silent depths of the mind.





### **About the Author:**

Kate Cohen-Posey is an associate clinician at LifeStance Behavioral Health. Facilitating clients as they manage life's challenges inspires her, brings her joy, and provides her with new knowledge. Always on the cutting edge, Kate immersed herself in interpersonal mindfulness methods in 2021. Her background in one-to-one services enabled her to write books, which blossomed into presentations focused on integrative programs worldwide and two psychotherapy tools: *The Handy Brain Model* and *Brain Change Cards*®.

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