

Living Life Freely to the Fullest: A Compilation of My Mindfulness Practice

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I strive as an OT to teach others how to live life to the fullest, by recovering or developing skills needed for the activities of daily living. Our American Occupational Therapy Association's slogan is "Living Life to Its Fullest" (<https://www.aota.org/brand.aspx>) and we are a science-driven, evidence-based health care profession. OTs address the patient holistically, mind and body. Our profession's origins are rooted in mental health

<https://www.aota.org/About-Occupational-Therapy/Professionals/MH/Community-Mental-Health.aspx>.

I became intrigued at what mindfulness can do for health, having learned about the evidence and so I began reading many books (I reference many throughout this paper and are cited at the end), attending conferences through PESI for my health care license, and practicing mindfulness myself. Now that I've literally walked the walk of mindfulness for almost 2 years, I have transformed my life from within and the title of this is exactly what mindfulness means to me.

Mindfulness helped me learn how to be cognitively aware of my thoughts, using the principles of mindfulness: **non-judgemental** acceptance and **lovingly kindly** letting go "freely" those thoughts, as my title lists. The piece I was missing all my life of knowing I had negative self-talk, was the non-judgemental awareness. Because you bring non-judgemental awareness, you realize that these thoughts & emotions are not who you are. I will get into the Zones of Regulation[®] later, but the most important concepts that transformed my way of thinking are: we are not labeled by our emotions, all emotions are normal, everyone has all emotions, and all emotions pass. As I continually let go without judgement, I began building an inner compassion muscle that has in turn, grown my compassion for myself and in turn, others.

It's a practice- I have not "arrived" at mindfulness, as it is a constant moment to moment practice.

Mindfulness is an awareness of what is right now, what is unfolding right here in this moment. When I began my mindfulness journey, I learned that one moment is simply one breath in, and one breath out. Then comes the next breath in and a new moment unfolds. What happened in previous moments is the past and we can always...begin...again. Before mindfulness I also would get "hung up" on things that happened in the past, things I messed up on, and yet also live for the future. As soon as my children were born, I realized that I want time to now slow...way...down. I would be so focused on wanting time to slow down, that I also could be missing the present.

Jon Kabat-Zinn writes in *Full Catastrophe Living*: "**Life only unfolds in moments. The healing power of mindfulness lies in living each of those moments as fully as we can, accepting it as it is, as we open to what comes next—in the next moment of now.**"

Eckhart Tolle writes, ***“Most humans are never fully present in the now, because unconsciously they believe that the next moment must be more important than this one. But then you miss your whole life, which is never not now.”***

When I practice mindfulness, I live without regrets, I live life without barriers (i.e. cognitive thoughts that otherwise hold me back), and as a result have conquered some mild phobias from practicing mindfulness. I love others harder now, and I live with: letting go judgement, compassion, gratitude, emotional acceptance for all emotions, and loving kindness. These are components to a successful mindfulness practice, as listed in other books & programs which I will discuss here later. I walk away from negativity- forms of the ego (also mentioned later)- and strive for joy. I can always access joy (called regulation- more later) even during the discomfort, and I now do not let emotions label who I am.

Susan Kaiser Greenland (I attended her conference April '17) left her law practice 20 yrs ago to teach mindfulness full time, and states in her book *Mindful Games*, 1.) Teach only what you know from direct experience, and 2) you must have a support system for your practice. If you are reading this as a parent or therapist and are wanting to use mindfulness and teach children, you must take heed to these 2 statements. I began immediately on number one, and number two came both from me/from other qualified instructors as well as from emotional support too.

When i mentioned earlier that I live life without barriers, I owe this to mindfulness of thoughts. As I began reading mindfulness books and sitting with my thoughts (i.e. meditation, or informal meditation such as mindfulness of daily living), I read that thoughts are not facts. While on paper that makes sense & it seems silly to even mention (did you catch me stating “silly” which is quite, judgemental :-)), we unconsciously have about 40,000 thoughts a day that are cycling through our minds. I learned this fact from a conference. Mindfulness is stopping to notice what’s on our mind and letting go... to what IS right here, right NOW. Using our senses (which relates to OT as we address client’s multi sensory needs).

My title includes “freely” and to me, being free of those thoughts that hold us back, is living life to the fullest. Thoughts are always holding us back- whether fear that you’re not good enough to buy then wear glitter tennis shoes, not perfect at every...single....occupation in your life, running in the dark, driving steep hill, or worries to ride a roller coaster (just a few of my personal conquered thoughts). In a nutshell how did I conquer those thoughts? I use my breath as my “anchor” and the thoughts subside. In each of those moments....over & over. (Susan Kaiser Greenland developed the Mindful Games card deck and one is called “Anchor breathing” and extremely purposeful).

Mindfulness helps me live in the Now- I used to be a rigid inflexible planner-ahead of all things in life, and once I realized those are all thoughts making up stories of my future, I let them go to right now. Of course, we need to plan things ahead of time, but I have let go of the rigid inflexibility my brain used to be. I live in the moment. I still make plans ahead of time, but have learned the “accepting” piece of mindfulness, that things can change. The future-based

thinking I would have before mindfulness, would cause me to either fear (or be too excited about) that future event and lose touch of moments unfolding right under my nose. I fear our children leaving the nest and I catch myself with that thought and bring awareness back to right now. I live life now and not in the future, as often as I can practice.

In a wonderful book for children on worries, psychologist Daniel Peters writes: “Our thoughts are responsible for our feelings and behaviors. We need to identify our thinking to help uncover what the worry monster is telling us. Not all kids or even adults can identify their thinking, but everyone can get better at it if they learn how” (Peters, 2013). Psychologist Thomas Greenspon writes: “Everyone carries on conversations with themselves inside their head. This is called “self talk.” Some people might even do a part of their self talk out loud” (Greenspon, 2007).

Remember this:

Thoughts → Emotions → Behaviors

Freeland & Toner (2016), both psychologists, write in their children’s book on imperfections: “Thoughts, emotions, and behaviors are interconnected. In other words, what one thinks affects one’s emotions and, in turn, how one feels and behaves.”

The Zones of Regulation[®] normalizes all emotions with regulation using tools. It’s okay to cry, it’s okay to be mad. Leah Kuypers (OT) writes in the Zones manual, “Self talk (thoughts) are often impaired in students who struggle with self-regulation. Either students aren’t aware of their inner voice or their self-talk is riddled with negative, self-defeating statements” (Kuypers, 2011).

If you remind yourself:

Thoughts → Emotions → Behaviors

then this statement makes sense. You witness poor behaviors in a child, and you can have compassion to figure out that the child is struggling with difficult emotions caused by difficult thoughts. I now look at children with behavior difficulties and have such compassion for them. Oh I would love to help them with mindfulness. And I am trying!

The Zones of Regulation[®] program is recommended for ages 4 and up, although I’ve begun emotional regulation training with 2 year olds by helping them express their emotions by naming it *for them* as best as I can. This is mindfulness = awareness of emotions. It brightens my day when a 2.5 year old finally tells me, “I’m mad!” Because then, I can *help* them. If they can verbally or sign for help, even better- they are likely in the Yellow zone (frustration). Asking for help is one of the biggest tools I suggest for the Yellow zone. As adults, we ask for help by calling a friend or talking to our spouse when we’re worried.

Because, it is extremely important to teach children that they have to (be aware of their worries) but to get them out- written or tell someone. Peters (2013) writes, “The more you talk about the Worry Monster and gang up on him with your parents & teachers the sooner he’ll go away. The Worry Monster does not like being talked about.” He explains it’s very important the child have a trusted adult at the school and I’ve heard parents include this as an accommodation (Zones

tools) in their child's IEP. Again, it's why we call a friend. We get it out. There is also a huge benefit to "talking it out loud" even by yourself.

The Zones of Regulation[®] uses tools to manage emotions (Zones). And the brain part about mindfulness is that our prefrontal cortex (which makes our logical decisions) isn't fully mature until our early 20s, so I cannot expect a 2 year old to know what to do with "mad." So I label his emotion, reflect, normalize ("It's okay to be mad"), sometimes empathize ("When mommy is mad, she goes for a walk")...directing him towards a "tool" to use to manage aka regulate, "mad."

When I visually "see" a child in distress, there is an underlying thought going on in their young brain and I have never before felt so passionate to help children as an OT. Before my mindfulness journey, I was just an OT who addressed motor & sensory skills. I did not know that emotional regulation (how we manage our emotions) is part of, sensory skills. I can now justify this mindfulness of emotions in my evaluations from reading the Zones of Regulation[®] and I list this statement in my reports: "In order to have efficient **self-regulation** skills, a child must be able to integrate these 3 areas: ***sensory processing, emotional regulation, and executive functioning***" (Kuypers, 2011). Now, I am an OT who addresses the child holistically, mind (emotions, sensory) & body (motor skills). The third part- executive functioning- is another new area for my OT expertise and is another topic for another time for me to write about.

More in-depth about my story:

Up until my mid-30s when I began my mindfulness practice, with 3 young boys 5 and under and being a business owner, I walked around happily to outsiders, but struggled with frequent negative self-talk and so much stress. I put on an outside layer that I can handle it all and "perfectly," but inside, I was struggling. As soon as I learned mindfulness-*this non-judgemental letting go*- it transformed my way of living. I no longer shamed myself for thinking negatively or for feeling negative. We are our worst enemy because of the amount of shaming & judging our ego (more later) is streaming in our unconscious thoughts (remember 40,000 thoughts) a day. Once I began practicing, I make time for stillness to practice during daily activities and I can now notice & lovingly let go those critical thoughts.

I no longer push those thoughts away or try to replace them (which then caused them to come back worse). I no longer "label" myself as a "sad person" when I am sad. Instead, the shift with this new practice is, "I am capable of sadness, and sadness is an emotion that passes." **All emotions pass. They do not define us.** This was my ah-ha moment because we all want to be happy- as we do not want to feel sad or angry. It doesn't "feel" good to be sad. So we resist those emotions (more on this later & how to "regulate" the discomfort). Emotions do not define your child. Your child is "Sammy" who has red zone (anger) a lot, but is still Sammy. Susan Kaiser Greenland (2016) states, "I am angry" becomes "I have an angry feeling" which mindfully makes the difference between person and their brain.

I catch these feelings/thoughts, accept, and let them go using compassion. I developed an inner compassion muscle that has brought out my "inner best friend" as a result from practicing

meditation and mindfulness. I now treat my inner self as I would a best friend. I enjoy stillness/boredom as if I am literally having coffee with my best friend. You'll learn this from reading a lot of Loving Kindness & Self Compassion meditation articles & exercises. I still have a lot of work to do in this area for myself but am trying- one moment at a time. As a result of growing an inner compassion muscle, I now have huge compassion for outer life outside of Andrea. This includes people, situations- I can't explain how or why, but owe it to my practice. In Freeland & Toner (2016), the psychologists list a wonderful exercise teaching children about compassion with a fun script and role playing with a teddy bear. The Zones of Regulation[®] focuses also on social skills and has great lessons in their manual (that comes with a printable CD) on Perspectives.

I love reading & watching webinars by Jon Kabat-Zinn (author & MBSR founder) whose books on mindfulness (*Everyday Blessings* is for parents) explain that our mind is constantly labeling things as good/bad, pretty/ugly, smart/not smart...etc. And as soon as you take off those judging "colored glasses" that filter our experiences, you will truly see your child/family/other people for who they are. And not defined by their emotions, thoughts, ideas, or opinions.

This continuous practice on non-judgemental thought awareness helps me on days for example where I choose to not wear make-up. We are all beautiful from within. Let your inner light shine! *Milton's Secret* (Tolle, 2008) is an incredible short story for children that teaches this important concept on inner strength. Highly recommend this book. On a personal note, I banished the scale this past summer as part of my healthy lifestyle and have not regretted it. The scale was creating harsh judgements when I knew that my consistent newer exercise routine & healthy eating were more important than a number. I had to use a mindfulness term called "discernment" (Jon Kabat Zinn talks of this in his book *Full Catastrophe Living*) to determine which was more important for me to live: going by a number once a week, or feeling a healthy feeling from within. Sharing another personal experience- my ego all my life labeled me as "shy." So I felt labeled by that and would even avoid socializing at times. Mindfulness has taught me I am not labeled by "shyness" and that one of the big components in my mindfulness practice (from reading and attending workshops), is learning about connections. We are all the same. And oh the power of connections from our body language- which is part of the Zones of Regulation[®] social skills lesson plans- your smile makes me want to smile- and your arms crossing lack of eye contact can make me feel nervous. We role play in OT on these situations. All related to emotional regulation. Which stems from...our thoughts as discussed earlier. Mindfulness.

How do you practice non-judgemental letting go?

Dan Peters, Ph.D, wrote in his children's book on challenging our worry monster: "A mentor of mine once taught me to say, "Hmm..., interesting..., following an unpleasant thought." I have found since attending the conference with psychologist Jeff Tarrant below in January of 2016, that the word "interesting" is the best word to use when practicing non-judgemental awareness of my thoughts. How "interesting" that both Peters & Tarrant use this word. The other word that you use with children during Zones of Regulation[®] lessons, is "expected versus unexpected" for behaviors/body language and social skills we'd like to dismiss. In the Zones of Regulation[®] we also help children learn to address their defeating self-talk with non-judgemental terms "Inner

Critic” and “Inner Coach.” So when I catch a child verbalizing a self-defeating comment, I non-judgmentally ask them, “Hmm, is that an Inner Coach statement or Inner Critic statement?” And then we work on letting that Critic statement go.

Jeff Tarrant, Ph.D., also specified this when he taught our conference attendees how to meditate for the first time “successfully” during his PESI workshop on mindfulness for therapy (1/14/16: *Mindfulness-Based Interventions to Rewire the Brain*: Jeff Tarrant, Ph.D., BCN, 6 CEUs). I had been “trying” meditation at that point for a few weeks by myself and kept “failing.” Turns out, failing is the point. And in fact, every time we catch the thought wandering us away from our focused breathing work, we non-judgmentally let go back to our breath and that is a bicep curl for the brain! New neural pathways form! Gray matter in our brain changes from this way of letting go. He showed us brain scans (you can Google) and he also led us on diaphragmatic breathing, which he discussed how holding our breath throughout the day when under stress, really changes our body physiologically. He used the breathing pacer, doasone.com, and I use this with children in OT as well as other sorts of breathing apps, too. More to come on the importance of breath focus.

Dr. Emmons writes in the *Chemistry of Calm*, “Many of us strengthen UNHEALTHY nerve circuits through repetitive practice. Every time we repeat a fearful or defeatist thought, we strengthen the connections that make it easier to have that thought again. We feed the cycle of fear, keeping the body under continual stress” (Emmons, 2010). “But if we can stop reinforcing these patterns (by repeated thoughts), they will gradually weaken. And soon we are able to create **new, healthier neural circuits** to take place of old ones. A new thought/skill involves creation of a new neural network in the brain” (Emmons, 2010).” In his book on perfectionism for children, psychologist Greenspon (2007) writes, “learning to judge yourself less harshly and learning to find ways to feel acceptable for who you are...(requires) **practicing** thinking in new ways.”

So how do I create new healthier neural networks in my brain? Sign me up! Ha...it takes work. It takes mindfulness of thoughts to catch the self-talk and “reframing.” By using fun phrases like “so what?” or, “what’s the worst that can happen?” (Peters, 2013). These phrases are really important for those with perfectionism & OCD. These similar phrases are taught in the children’s book *What To Do When Your Brain Gets Stuck* (Huebner, 2007). You first always “sound the alarm” (Huebner, 2007), which I will explain more in depth soon with phrases like “name it to tame it” from Siegel. Then you have to teach the child to “work” at getting their brain unstuck with a plan. The brain needs help sorting, Huebner writes! Huebner writes, “the nervous feeling will end anyway, you just have to get used to it.” And by getting used to it, she means living with the nervousness (of resisting an urge) and using a plan.

I myself practice this because Eckhart Tolle also writes that these negative thoughts/feelings (called the ego) can be *let go* in knowing, “Ego is no longer ego when you know there is ego” (Tolle, 2005). Which is simply, awareness. Mindfulness. You “name it to tame it” (Siegel, 2011). This was a powerful tool for me living a life of sometimes fear and worries. I was also wishing for the future too much, especially in my earlier stages of life beginning in my teens (first it was wanting to go to college, then wanting to get married, then wanting to have kids). In fact, when I was a teenager I bought my first book related to the secret of happiness (I love reading

self-help books because I simply love evolving as a person). I have always “lived for the future.” I now know my secret to happiness- but it’s not called happiness I want because happiness is a passing emotion (also called Green zone). It’s mindfulness that I want, so I **practice**- an awareness & acceptance of whatever emotion is unfolding in the present moment and finding joy to regulate the emotion. Joy is what I seek. It’s called a **practice**, not a destination. I will never “reach mindfulness” because it’s a continuous practice of being aware, accepting, & letting go using non-judgement and loving kindness. Books caution the reader to run from someone claiming to create an end result for you.

I found from reading Tolle’s book *A New Earth* that actually, all that **seeking**, is a form of the ego. As soon as I named it (as “seeking” being the ego), it released me from the agony of living in the seeking mode! I read Tolle’s book in the spring of 2017 and it was truly a transformation for me, and I had already been practicing mindfulness for about a year at that time. But it was the awareness of the “negative” and giving it a name (ego), that started dissolving those negative thoughts for me easier than simply what I had been doing with my practice of letting go. I began **naming it first** as ego, and that made a huge difference. My practice grew so much stronger after reading Tolle’s book and putting a name to it.

One of my larger emotions since the spring ‘17 when I finished Tolle’s book, that changed from ego seeking thoughts, has become **worry for** the future. I worry about our loved ones’ health and our own health. I have been living in a mild state of anxiety over our aging dog’ health, one passed in April and the other 2 weeks ago. Since her death, I have had the layer removed of that worrying. I have to continuously practice letting go of those worrying futuristic thoughts & bring awareness back to living in the Now.

I have discovered through mindfulness why I love working with children. They are the ultimate in mindfulness: they are non-judgemental of how I look/am, they are accepting (innocently) of what I do, and they live in the Now. And because of their living in the Now, I too am transformed into their “world” when I am with them. Whether it’s in OT sessions or at home during floor play with my own children. When our dog passed, my son made a classic in-the-now statement back to me when I told him the next day I was so sad: “But mom, she died yesterday.” They live right now. And so do pets (during our dog’s last days I read an article on pet oncology and it stated this).

Tolle explains that the ego is basically unawareness- seeking, jealousy, anger, complaining, being right, gossiping...and the enemy of the ego? Awareness. Mindfulness is the awareness & non-judgemental letting go of that thought pattern. And we now know as Dr. Emmons stated earlier, how we can grow stronger at practicing and creating new healthier neurons. And I am teaching children to do this now- what a humongous life skill! More later on my work with children.

The best way for me to practice awareness is to 1.) name it, then 2.) focused breathing, followed by 3.) “non-judgemental letting go,” (back to my focused breath). You may have to do this 10 times before that thought fizzles completely away, and that’s the point of mindfulness- it’s a practice, not a destination. It’s a way of living. And as Siegel writes, “you name it to tame it” and

it's so true- I can write this because I practice this way of living. (Remember earlier I discussed some phobias I had conquered? As I was driving up the steep hill, afraid my car would slide backwards (this was a weekly route I had to drive for my job), I began practicing the awareness through my breath. Deep inhale (count to 4 slowly), hold (count to 4 slowly), exhale slowly (count to 4), hold (count to 4)...my breath is my "anchor" (Susan Kaiser Greenland's card game) stabilizing me during this fear, becoming aware of thoughts that are not true. "Hmm my brain thinks my car is going to go backwards. That's interesting...letting that thought go, back to my breath." **Remember: thoughts are not facts.**

In psychologist Peters' *From Worrier to Warrior*, p.102 he cites two fascinating quotes children he works with stated: "The OCD Monster uses stories that are made up, just like in my books" and another child's quote: "When I live WITH it, it goes away; when I fight it, it makes me do it over and over again." These children learned that thoughts are not facts, and the 2nd child is using acceptance and letting go. Tolle writes, "Whatever you fight, you strengthen. And what you resist, persists." Acceptance of thoughts or emotions (of whatever "interesting" thought it is **using non-judgement versus labeling the thought as irrational or weird or stupid-because those are *judgements*) we're having- wins over resisting/ignoring/pushing away. **Acceptance of emotions** (esp difficult ones) is hard! (more on p.8). You have to bring awareness, acceptance, and then let go. Remember from the beginning of this-

Thoughts → **Emotions** → Behaviors

Still curious about this phrase from Tolle- "Whatever you fight, you strengthen. And what you resist, persists" ? Then please read this article later that cites "fighting urges feeds them": <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/life/health-wellbeing/addicted-to-your-phone-surf-the-urge/news-story/4222179e4559a9245b3ed71f76b23026> "suppressing a thought, feeling or sensation ultimately increases it." The article writes, "It's called urge surfing, a technique attributed to psychologist Alan Marlatt, an expert in addiction treatment for impulse control disorder. When the urge to act out a craving comes, you use a variety of techniques to ride the wave to dry land rather than letting the urge dump you in the deep. A typical urge — say, to binge-eat...lasts between 20 to 30 minutes. We often try not to give in but it's well known that "fighting urges feeds them". You can't bully yourself out of them. Research shows that suppressing a thought, feeling or sensation ultimately increases it."

Speaking of, I read a research article that found in order to ignore a craving to **emotionally** eat, play Tetris for 20 minutes and the craving will pass. We form new neural pathways that learn to let go versus give in/feed it (the urge). When I began practicing mindfulness, I found awareness of "urges" all over my life. Urges to check facebook, urges to check my phone, urges to eat chips- mindfulness for me is creating space to identify whether I can pause and then act on the urge or, let go. I find the pull of seeking/urges, very strong when sitting at a red light or waiting in a long grocery line with a screaming child. Mindful eating is a huge topic in many mindfulness programs. You use space to identify whether you're wanting to eat for true hunger or a difficult emotion (an emotion of boredom, emotion of frustration, etc). On page 4 I had discussed how mindfulness has improved my daily activity of health & eating. But remember- I am not "there" with mindfulness of eating- mindfulness is a constant **practice**, moment to moment. I am **accepting** of who I am right Now, not yesterday (ex. wishing for my weight before kids) or the

future (wanting to be a smaller size). Mindfulness is non-judgemental acceptance and letting go of those thoughts of the past and future.

More on Regulation:

You've now learned about the Zones of **Regulation**.[®] For my practice, regulation means managing the discomfort. In the most basic example, my sons come home from school and are not comfortable with thoughts about their Anchor breathing ("it's boring" aka boring is an emotion in the blue zone) but they do it because they're **regulating for** something more exciting to come (playing on their tablet). They're following a visual schedule hanging in the kitchen that is regulating for them. Because, they don't have to think about what to do after school and they feel good crossing each activity off the list, getting closer to the big goal. Same thing as the grocery list. We regulate at the grocery with a list in our hands- so we feel "comforted" that we know what to buy. We all regulate using tools, and children need our help to know when & what tools (page 3 about the prefrontal cortex making our logical decisions not mature until early 20s). I sit here in a quiet room so I can regulate the noisy household. I was in blue zone earlier today about our dog who recently passed, and regulated by playing (being an OT) on the floor with an 18 month old listening to Raffi music. This music completely put me into a "flow state" where I fizzled my blue zone emotions to be literally in the moment with this adorable child. Because, I actually teared up with his mother when I arrived to their house for my EI visit, because she was completely empathetic on the loss of my dog. Connections. We are all the same. We all have thoughts & feelings stealing us away from right now. The Zones of Regulation[®] and mindfulness helped me accept sadness as part of being normal and to accept this Zone. Hard to do, of course. Crying for me, evokes a knee-jerk response of my amygdala that something is wrong with me by crying. That I've lost control. And I am continuing to practice letting go of this statement/thought/judgement, and **to accept** sadness and the tears. I remember tearing up with pride with a patient as she gave me a dog memorial frame that I opened in front of her and other patients in our waiting room. That was a lightbulb moment for me that I am learning and continuing to evolve in my practice. And as my children cry, I constantly am reminding them "it's okay to cry. Blue zone/sadness is normal. Crying is normal." As I stated earlier though, accepting difficult emotions or thoughts is a hard practice, and even harder seeing our children experience. So hard.

How are you regulating right now? Psychologist Daniel Peters writes, "When we do not take care of the health essentials (eat, drink, exercise, sleep), it opens the door for the worry monster to walk in." I find that we need more emotional regulation help when these essentials are lacking. Remember they say we eat more when we haven't slept? Or we're grouchier because we're hungry or really tired? In my story earlier about my EI visit and becoming tearful- I also realized a few hours later that my blue zone was also likely due to skipping my workout that morning and not sleeping much due to sick children overnight. Ah-ha...the essentials were missing! Being mindful of factors that were affecting my regulation. You can always be mindful even hours/days later! I remember in the beginning of my practice, doing some light yoga in the morning while my household was still asleep, and "catching" thoughts of things that happened the day before and realizing I hadn't been quite so mindful. (Yoga is huge in many mindfulness practices and programs. It's a total mind-body experience).

Children and pets are my regulation. And music. And candles/smells. Which again, is why I love my job and why I need a life of pets. We have candles and music playing at our clinic and would love a clinic pet someday. Mindfulness heightened my awareness of my senses- as soon as my thoughts constantly labeling/judging/predicting/remembering subsided with my breath to Now, I was “awakened” to so much- life! Life is unfolding all around us! I see beautiful birds fly by my face, a limb caught on a utility wire, squirrels play tag outside....the first summer I began my practice, I sat watching the waves practicing mindfulness (informal meditation) by catching a thought, releasing back to my breath & the waves....over & over.

We actually have sadly learned how to fear boredom because of technology and as result, regulate uncomfortable feelings like boredom using technology. But we miss experiencing life this way. A while ago, I read a great quote and put this as my screensaver for my phone’s lock screen: “Boredom is lack of awareness.” It’s true. We are seeking distractions all the time to regulate, and when you create purposeful space, you will learn how to regulate without those distractions. Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the MBSR program, wrote about Henry Thoreau sitting at Walden Pond, watching the hours go by and all the beauty he witnessed. At the completion of the MBSR program, you’re required to attend a 6 hour **silent retreat**. (BTW if you google MBSR and any health condition, the research is quite extensive).

The only way I can *regulate during boredom* is to practice my focused breathing and engage my 5 senses. I made up a “5 Senses Game” that I will play with children in OT. Again, awareness is everywhere. You just have to “stop to smell the roses.” I try 5 fingered breathing, making it intentional with 5 fingers. Mindfulness is intentional, on purpose, in the present moment. I am practicing on my regulating of boredom by taking apps off my phone like Facebook and work email. Remind yourself as you read this, that this is *my* practice. For Andrea, I needed to do this. And remember, no judgements here :-).

I find the pull of seeking/urges, very strong when sitting at a red light or waiting in a long grocery line with a screaming child. The awareness of the urge/seeking is the first step and then comes the need to regulate with a tool. I typically use my Anchor breathing as my tool, because it can always be available. I practice informal meditation in these scenarios.

How do I apply mindfulness with children?

The Zones of Regulation[®] program is fantastic for worries (Yellow zone) using mindfulness tools like breathing diagrams & self talk “Inner Coach vs Inner Critic” lessons. The Zones of Regulation[®] program teaches awareness of your Zone, and then you use a tool to work WITH the emotion versus push it away. Dr. Siegel in *Whole Brain Child* mentions that our emotions can change every 90 seconds! Wow! Do we check in that much? Hardly not- and usually only when we’ve exploded or something hurts (interoception). Mindfulness teaches us awareness of the subtle body signals and subtle self-defeating thoughts so that we can become aware of them sooner.

Around 9-10yrs, children are able to notice their thoughts, which I wonder if that’s the age we start to put on an outside mask to hide our worries? Because isn’t it easy to “see” thought awareness in younger children because they show their “worries” and “frustration” so much

more fiercely? For the older children (all of us), interoception will show us what may be going on inside your child. Complaints of headache, stomachache, mood changes, sudden sleep problems-are all related to our 8th sensory sense, called Interoception (discussed more later). Our bodies are constantly talking to us, but we rarely listen. In children today, perfectionism & OCD-like worries are happening more & more. These two difficulties are caused by....thinking. So that's why I am so passionate at helping these children learn mindfulness.

We can teach children positive affirmations such as "I am strong." Greenspon suggests that the child hang statements in their room such as "You aren't your mistakes. You are you" (Greenspon, 2007). As a recovering perfectionist, this statement reflects why on the first page, I learned with my practice that my emotions, thoughts, traits- do not define who I am- who Andrea is. I use two affirmations printed by my bed when waking each morning that I read from Mindup.com: "I got enough sleep" and "I have enough time." I found through my practice, that my thoughts are most negative upon waking each morning. Jon Kabat Zinn in his mindfulness book for parenting, *Everyday Blessings*, mentions that he found time to practice before his household woke up.

As a result of starting my day immediately as coffee brews with meditation(2-5 minutes), I "listened" with awareness that ego was preventing me from meeting my fitness goals. I often would wake up with my alarm clock and go back to sleep, letting ego tell me I didn't get enough sleep and "deserved" sleep over exercise. Now, I go to the gym without "thinking" about it. Remember, thoughts are not facts! Exercise is non-negotiable for me even if I didn't sleep well, because movement for my regulation (physically & emotionally) has proven key. As Dr.Siegel writes in *Whole-Brain Child*, we "Move it or lose it" when feeling an uncomfortable emotion. I often wake with uncomfortable emotions so therefore this works for me!

Why movement for regulation during the day (outside of regular exercise)?

Peters (2013) writes, "Exercise burns adrenaline & makes the heart less sensitive to it (adrenaline)." That makes sense- when we give our bodies a steady dose of adrenaline each day, then when facing stress, we learn how to regulate more easily. Dr. Siegel writes for parents in *Whole Brain Child*, "Although it might feel a bit silly at times, try out the "Move it or lose it" technique. Yoga stretch, jumping jacks, slow deep breaths. Do whatever it takes to regain some of the control you lost when your amygdala hijacked your upstairs brain (more on amygdala below). You'll not only move into a more integrated state yourself, but also model for your kids some quick self-regulation tricks they can use." That's right- we parent our child addressing our own regulation. It's critical for disciplining. You get yourself in green zone before you discipline. You find that inner space.

On page 58, Dr.Siegel (*Whole Brain Child*) writes on the "Move it or Lose It" technique: "Research shows that when we change our physical state, through movement or relaxation, we change our emotional state. Try smiling for 1 minute. Emotion feels first in the body." He gives an example of a 10 yr old running to focus, who was previously overwhelmed & disintegrated. The running/fast movement released angry tension and made him feel relaxed. So, to calm children, get them moving. We include movement as tools for some of the Zones.

Scheduling Regulation: a Must!

I teach child & caregiver that self care has to include time for regulation: 1.) stillness using focused breathing (Anchor games card from <https://www.susankaisergreenland.com/mindful-games/>) for 2 minutes 2-3x/day, 2.) movement (exercise, yoga), and 3.) hourly check-ins on emotion/thoughts using the Zones of Regulation® chart. These self-care activities **must be scheduled into their day**. We use a visual schedule at home that lists Anchor breathing. I love Susan Kaiser Greenland's Mindful Games card called "Seeing Clearly" which uses a glitter ball to explain how our minds get clouded and stopping to notice, clears it. Think back to being in school and how "calm" you felt during class to purposefully close your eyes, lay your head down onto your folded arms on the cool surface (I still recall the smells of the desk!), and wait to be picked during the game "Heads Up, Seven Up." In my mindfulness reading, 10 minutes of diaphragmatic breathing will lower blood pressure. I used my Paced Breathing app while driving and what a difference.

Another activity that needs to be scheduled is a gratitude practice. This too should be scheduled into the day, and most find that before bed is a good time to practice. There are great activities for children. We know from earlier that Tolle writes that ego and awareness cannot coexist. The main way to be aware is by counting your blessings. Gratitude. This is a huge component to a strong mindfulness practice. Susan Kaiser Greenland has a great Mindful Games card called "Thankful with Every Step." I often have an older child complete this with me even in a small space by walking a circle pattern. Counting blessings let go the negative ego. Try it and see.

Regulating Difficult Emotions even as Parent:

As you read this below, remember that mindfulness is an awareness of you. As you see and witness and are part of your child's storm, mindfulness creates a space for you to be a willow tree for your child's emotional storm (Kabat-Zinn, 2014). My mindfulness practice helped me learn the truth to the oxygen mask analogy. Mindfulness is the ultimate in self-care. And this pertains especially when you're in your child's emotional storm. As an OT, I also know what I need to do for my children who are having difficult emotions- I need to be their willow tree. I need to remain green zone as I model tools for them. I take them to the soft lighting in the sensory gym and we lay supine to practice anchor breathing, for example. Remember Dr. Siegel notes that emotions can change every 90 seconds.

Yellow zone includes worries, frustrations, excitement...so for yellow zone strategies, I enjoy reading what psychologist Dan Peters writes about with the amygdala (which we learned about on page 9 for movement). "The amygdala car alarm going off a lot means it's too sensitive...so you tell yourself, "My amygdala is kicking in" and just realizing that, makes it better," writes Dan Peters (*From Worrier to Warrior*). He is suggesting that this "awareness" and naming it (amygdala car alarm going off) has "named it to tame it" possibly. Yellow zone is the main zone I continue to learn & read strategies to use as part of teaching tools for OT and well, myself.

I often walk my OT students over to our hanging brain poster at our clinic (I can show you this picture, just remind me) and I show them the amygdala's picture. (MindUp <http://teacher.scholastic.com/products/mindup/> books for each grade level, come with a large brain poster and love it). I show them when they take a deep breath in, they engage their prefrontal cortex which

then softens & quiets the “car alarm amygdala.” I also have a hanging “flip your lid” visual too next to the brain poster and remind the children, which I discuss next.

In regards to red zone anger, having red zone *feelings* are normal- as mentioned in the Zones of Regulation[®] and *Whole Brain Child* (Siegel). Before mindfulness, I was always judgmental, identified, and shameful to myself for ever feeling anger. When I learned that it’s OKAY to have anger, and to accept anger & use tools...I just continue to model this for others.

The Zones of Regulation[®] is very specific to explain there are Expected or Unexpected *behaviors* for each zone. Dr. Siegel in *Whole Brain Child* makes an important note to say we all “flip our lid” in red zone, and that it’s important to **repair**. What this means is, when you’ve gone in red zone as a parent, it’s important to model your regulation and then repair (he says this includes apologizing) for whatever you need to repair. Dr. Siegel has a wonderful 2 minute video to explain how to show your child the “flip your lid” hand model. I use this hand model all the time in talking with my children and in OT education <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm9CII74Oxw>. Your overlaying fingers represent your prefrontal cortex (I discussed on page 1) and your thumb is your limbic/emotion center. Sometimes our emotions get so so strong that we explode (flipped your fingers out). I love how Dr. Siegel emphasizes apologizing. You can use this with your adult relationships, too. In fact, I’ve talked with many adults who say living a life of the Zones of Regulation has improved how they communicate with others. If you’re yellow or red zone, continuing a heated conversation may not be the best idea, so taking some time away using tools (a quick walk, a closed room to “anchor breathe”) is very important.

More on Interoception:

About one year into my mindfulness, last November 2016, I read Kelly Mahler (an OT)’s book on *Interoception*, which is our 8th sensory sense. Remember I mention playing the 5 Senses Game when you’re in blue zone boredom? What about adding another sense- Interoception. Interoception is our awareness of body sensations & feelings. I was so excited to finally tie in my OT skills into my own mindfulness practice. She writes that the 8th sensory system, interoception, is controlled by our brain’s insula, which allows us to answer the question, “how do I feel?” (Mahler, 2016). This article online below states, “Once you notice you are having a strong emotional reaction, the next step is to describe, or name it – whether to yourself or out loud. For example, saying mentally “I am feeling angry” or “I have a tight ball of nerves in my gut.” Choosing words to describe subtle emotions jump-starts your executive brain and calms down your emotional limbic brain. <http://powerofted.com/name-it-and-tame-it/>”

Daniel Peters, psychologist, lists the health essentials that include movement/exercise that we may overlook for our children. These feed our Interoception sense- our internal awareness of hunger/thirst- which also affects our emotional regulation. I think you can relate if you’ve ever skipped a meal and become very grouchy! Your body is screaming, “feed me!” at that point instead of the gentle knocking of grumbling hunger pains that were happening a few hours beforehand. Peters writes, “When we do not take care of the health essentials (eat, drink, exercise, sleep), it opens the door for the worry monster to walk in. We need steady dose of protein throughout the day. Many kids experience low blood sugar- hypoglycemia- usually few

hours after breakfast & it looks like people feel with anxiety- dizzy, sweat, weak, increased heart rate- can wrongly think it's anxiety" (Peters, 2013).

Psychologist Dan Peters' book has some great Interoception activities for children, as well as Freeland & Toner's book mentioned earlier. Kelly Mahler's *Interoception* book has good handouts and activities on matching emotions to body signals. Susan Kaiser Greenland's Mindful Games has a card on this interoception that I love. You name what's on your mind *and* what your body is feeling. In the moment, without thinking about it. Quickly! It's fun! I often use this card in OT sessions. <https://www.susankaisergreenland.com/mindful-games/> Kelly Mahler has an Interoception Assessment you can use with children from AAPC publishing.

I write goals in OT to address children's emotional regulation working on Interoception, usually starting with matching emotions to the Zones, role playing the Zones, and most importantly teaching tools to use in the Zones, specific for the child.

Sharing my personal experience with Interoception: Turns out, I am under-responsive to Interoception. I don't feel internal body signals and emotions until they are very strong. I often worked through lunch, ignoring body signals. Before mindfulness, I wasn't stopping to name my interoception related to emotions. I likely was pushing the uncomfortable ones under the carpet and always judging myself for being anything but happy. This summer, I found that my best way to regulate uncomfortable strong emotions, is to go for a walk. This is in addition to my normal morning exercise routine (boot camp, running) and can happen in just 5 minute breaks in my day. With the combined movement and being surrounded in nature, I am able to "see clearly in my glitter ball" and name my emotion. In fact, I often talk out loud on my walks to help "name it to tame it" aka what emotion I'm feeling. Walking was a huge tool that helped me regulate strong emotions of grieving with our pets' loss. Walking continues to be a huge tool for me, especially in yellow/frustrated zone (so, I "move it or lose it") or needing to transition from work to play, esp on days I work from home. I use "move it or lose it" with children coming to me from a long school day and need movement to reach their threshold.

What is Living Life IN the Fullest as my title states?

Mindfulness is the answer. Mindfulness during daily activities (or termed "informal meditation") simply means performing a daily activity while focusing on your breath, using mindfulness to accept/let go of thoughts. I wash the dishes & drive while practicing for example. Dr. Jeff Tarrant, mentioned earlier, recommends setting your wristwatch to beep on the hour as the signal to check in with yourself. Tolle writes that we often are unaware of our feelings throughout the day because we walk around unconsciously of what we're feeling. But once we practice this "awareness" of checking in with our feelings/thoughts, we then bring conscious living into play. Which is why we schedule this check-in for our children 2-3x/day minimally. And that's what my mindfulness practice has been for me- a constant checking in with my thoughts. When you practice mindfulness (on purpose, in the present moment, without judgement) that looks like me setting a kitchen timer for 10 minutes (aka on purpose, intentionally), sitting down on the floor with my toddler, and practicing from within- I play with him, and every time I notice my thoughts wander during these 10 minutes, I let them go (non-judgmentally) and bring awareness back to my breath & to my toddler. An ah-ha article I

want to share is this- we have 40-50k thoughts a day. How often are you letting your mind wander away from what is unfolding in front of you?

https://www.huffingtonpost.com/bruce-davis-phd/healthy-relationships_b_3307916.html

In conclusion, I will never claim mindfulness is easy. Especially when under physical pain or strong emotions. But when you truly are living a life of unfolding moments versus living in thoughts (past or future), you will find true joy. I look for joy now during discomfort. When I am blue zone, I listen to music for joy. When I am mad, I find quiet space for joy. I can always access joy. I no longer seek the secret to happiness. Happiness is simply green zone- an emotion. It passes by, just like all other emotions. Joy is a way of living.

Two reminders as quotes on regulation:

1.) From the Zones of Regulation, ® Kuypers writes: “Learning to self-regulate is a life-long process that even we as adults are always trying to improve upon.”

2.) “Every day we have thousands and thousands and thousands of internal thoughts, emotions, stories and experiences. Emotional agility builds our capacity to engage our inner world in a way that is courageous, curious and compassionate. The first part of emotional agility is “showing up” to your emotions or facing your emotions.”

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2016/09/23/forcing-positive-thinking-wont-make-you-happy-says-this-harvard-psychologist/?utm_campaign=buffer&utm_content=bufferd4420&utm_medium=social&utm_source=facebook.com:

Which is, mindfulness.

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ACTIVITY TO TRY NOW:

Informal meditation for sitting here right now:

Set a timer or don't, but just start breathing- and by breathing I mean paced, slow: in for 4, hold for 4, out for 4, hold for 4. Repeat. (the Military call it "box breathing"). If no timer, then you can try 5 finger breathing which is breathing slowly paced, in and out per finger side, pausing at the top and bottom.

**Once you've established this diaphragmatic breathing, then here is the meditation: breathe in and say to yourself "in". Breathe out say to yourself "out." Since mindfulness is intentional and on purpose, you are making this intentional decision to focus on your breathing, and using a timer is critical for my practice because my mind wanders a lot and begins to wonder when the exercise will end. A timer makes an auditory signal that it has ended.*

This will always settle my "glitter ball" every single time. Susan Kaiser Greenland taught this (self talk of "in/out") to the attendees at her conference this past April, and is the BEST tip that has helped me fall asleep in times I need help and when I am trying to meditate and cannot settle. Every single time. You use paced breathing & the in/out self talk.

Keep practicing! :-)

You can do it... starting, now!

Breathe with me now....a deep breath in.... and let go of the thoughts holding you back from living life freely to the fullest!