



Compassion

Wisdom

Courage

# Mindful in Bedlam

By Daniel Labbe



Mindfulness: Nonjudgemental awareness of the present moment.

## So what's the big deal?

With this simple definition mindfulness doesn't sound very impressive, does it? In fact, it sounds lame, but the truth is it is nearly impossible to overestimate the benefits of mindfulness: Personal empowerment, improved health, a sense of peace and well-being, deeper clarity, and more freedom are just a small sample of benefits anyone who maintains a mindfulness practice will gladly tell you about.

Check out this rather extreme but profound example of the power of mindfulness from my own life.

I was recently moved to a new prison. Before this, I was at Old Colony for over five years, and about as comfortable as an imprisoned human can be. As soon as I knew I would be moving to a new prison, my mind conjured up all kinds of dark fantasies about the stress and aggravation such a move would cause. I knew because I had moved before, back in the days when I didn't have a mindfulness practice, and believe me, it was hell.

Anyway, when I arrived at Norfolk prison I spent tedious hours being processed before I was sent to the "Probation Unit," where all new arrivals and guys coming out of the hole (solitary confinement) first go. Great.

I was told that the unit was a large dorm, a human warehouse. Fantastic, I've only been in dorms twice before. Neither

Self-discovery,  
Compassion,  
and a deeper  
sense of  
purpose

How much  
of our pain  
and suffering  
is merely  
mind-made?



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[when you are mindful you are free to choose how you will respond to the present moment rather than react out of conditioning.]

time lasted long or ended well. Needless to say, I prepared myself for stress, anxiety and pure bedlam.

Upon arriving my stomach seized into a tight fist. I entered a large, square room lined with steel bunkbeds. A dozen or so tables and a TV filled the center. My welcoming committee consisted of fifty guys - loud, stone-faced, and chaotic - all eye-balling me and sizing me up. You could say I was feeling a bit self-conscious then.

So, yeah, the first day was inescapably stressful. But because I had a strong mindfulness practice my natural response was to step back and mindfully observe my surroundings and how I reacted to them. When my thoughts fell into an "Oh-man-this-is-terrible" narrative, I let go of the storyline and just observed how I was feeling, without judging it or reacting.

Although that first day was rough, it surely would have been worse without my mindfulness skills. The real pay-off, though, came the next day. Sitting atop my bunk in mid-afternoon I realized something: I felt self-confident, capable, and relaxed. In case you haven't heard, prison is anything but relaxing, but because I was able to use the skills I had been consistently practicing in more stable times, I was able to turn what should have been a miserable, fear-inducing experience into something that actually gave me some joy and a bit of personal pride. Just a few years ago this same experience would have sent me screaming over the edge. Amazing.

As I write this in the middle of the dorm I can honestly say that I feel a sense of self-mastery and connectedness that I would never have believed possible in such a chaotic, negative environment.

Not too long ago my life was fraught with emotional instability, impulsivity, dark depressions, and ineffable stress. Presently, I'm

Suffering exists. But how much additional suffering do we create?

Practice in calmer times prepares us for stormier days.



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handling what any healthy person would consider an extremely stressful situation with surprising ease. Mindfulness, to me, is anything but "lame".

Maybe you experience anxiety, stress, or ~~loss~~ frustration. Maybe you would like to make more decisions based on clear, rational thinking rather than allow your impulses or emotions rule your day. Maybe you would like to be happier, more successful, or healthier. Whatever you seek, mindfulness can help.

Here's a simple way to begin a mindfulness practice.

To start with, see if you can notice when you're experiencing a strong reaction (mental, emotional). When you are able to do this, see if instead of obsessing about it or getting caught-up in it if you can step back and just observe the experience. How does it feel? Where do you feel it? Is your heart pounding? Stomach clenched? Head spinning? Observe this experience without judging or reacting to it, observe it as if you were an unbiased witness. Then take some deep breaths and re-enter the situation.

It helps if you can become mindful of your breathing and your posture a few times a day. Just observe your breath, the position of your body, and ~~and~~ <sup>any</sup> sensations you're having without judgement. You just might be surprised by the results.

Give this practice a shot for at least a week. Then come back and share your experience by leaving a comment on this blog. There's a reason why mindfulness and meditation is taking the health and psychology fields by storm and has been a part of Eastern culture for thousands of years.

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Together, we can create a safer, saner society, and maybe, just maybe, be deeply enriched in the process.

Peace.