



Practicing Peace

Stacy Lewis

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Easy ways to bring more presence and possibility into your days

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Author photo by my son, Orlando.

Beginning...



*You develop an enthusiasm for no longer watering those
negative seeds, from now until the day you die.
And, you begin to think of your life as offering endless
opportunities to start to do things differently.
— Pema Chödrön*

Mindfulness (being aware of the present moment throughout one's day), sitting meditation (a dedicated time to notice whatever is arising in my mind), and mothering (practicing kindness and finding my honest, open heart) are inseparable for me.

They have set me on a path I never would have imagined for myself. But now that I've set out, I can't imagine turning back.

So, one step at a time, I keep walking.

What began as the desire to share the mindfulness "tricks" I've used over the years blossomed into this e-book about practicing peace.

You're reading it now.

In it you'll see what practicing mindfulness, meditation, and mothering (myself as well as my kids) looks like in my life, what I do and when.

As for *why* I do them, I'll tell you now:

I do these practices because I'd like to be more kind... to myself, to my children, to my husband, to my family, to all beings.

I'd like to have more space within and around me so I might hold my own experiences, the experiences of my children, more of the world, within me.

I'd like to take actions that come from my heart.

Will these practices do all that for you?

A typical Buddhist might reply: Try them, and find out for yourself.

What I do know is that after eight years, I'm beginning to feel old patterns of behavior subsiding while new patterns emerge.

Slowly but surely.

It is true that there is no instant cure for years of momentum. **Think of the way you were raised, of the way your parents were raised, of the way your parents' parents were raised.** Think of how many years you've spent bottling things up or spitting things out. Think of stopping a speeding train.

These are the things my teachers would tell me, and then they would emphatically add, "What you are doing is making a difference. It *will* make a difference for your children."

But I was a teenager rolling her eyes, *How could they possibly know what I am going through?*

I was hanging my head in shame, *If only they knew how many times I've failed!*

It took me a long time to appreciate their advice, and it wasn't because I chose to believe them, it was because my own experience gave me no choice. I could sense the tide turning within myself...

Who knows when you will feel that shift? Maybe you've felt it already.

Stop and listen; each moment provides an opportunity anew.

An opportunity to practice.

The first chapter in this e-book is about finding **mindfulness** "in the moment," and includes practices that ground and center me, and help prevent me from speaking or acting in anger or irritation.

The next chapter is about **self-connecting**. Sometimes there is something deeper going on that needs my loving attention before it can resolve; sometimes I remain entrenched in patterns that simple in-the-moment awareness can't dispel.

In the last chapter, I share what my own sitting **meditation** practice looks like and some simple sitting instructions, in case you're thinking of giving it a try.

But first, a disclaimer:

I am not a perfect parent (and I no longer want to be :-).

I make demands. I yell. I lose it.

I apologize.

We eat out too much.

I go days, sometimes weeks, without meditating.

The reason I have so many methods of reminding myself to be mindful is because *I am generally not that mindful*, and I need help.

I hope what I share helps you, too.

Mindfulness



*Mindfulness is the miracle by which we
master and restore ourselves.
—Thich Nhat Hanh*

Perhaps you've heard about how our brain works.

That when we're triggered emotionally, we can be immediately thrown into our "reptilian" brain, which is all about fight, flight, or freeze.

That the prefrontal cortex (our "mammalian" brain) is the one that houses creativity, collaboration, awareness, and all that jazzy stuff I truly value as a parent and person.

I had no idea how much time as a parent I would spend acting like a lizard.

Luckily, it turns out that we can help evolve our brains right out of the muck into the light.

I can feel what it's like to be in reptilian mode, and I can feel what it's like to be in my prefrontal cortex.

I can also feel what it's like when I am in both at once, and often that is what these mindfulness techniques help me accomplish: to rest in my mind while observing and feeling my responses rather than acting them out.

Another disclaimer:

I am not an expert on mindfulness or meditation or the reptiles and mammals living in our brains. This is just my personal interpretation of information that is out there, and all that follows is my personal experience.

Here are some of the ways I bring mindfulness into my days ...

Markers

I learned this in my introduction to meditation course.

Choose a simple activity you do every day and use it as a "marker."

Activities might be brushing your teeth, putting the key in the ignition, opening the fridge, picking up the phone, turning on the tea kettle, hearing your child say your name, etc.

Every time I began my chosen activity, I took a moment to relax my belly, perhaps closed my eyes, and took a few breaths.

I brought my attention to the task.

If I was opening the door, I brought my attention to the feel of the handle in my hand.

If it was my child saying "mama," I brought my attention to the sound of his voice or to what I was feeling in my body.

I tried to stay for three breaths.

Then, I made an intention to carry that presence forward with me while I completed the task or moved on to something else.

My teacher's suggestion was to choose one activity a week, and then add another one in each following week for six weeks.

Mindfulness Bell

This idea came from Thich Nhat Hanh's book [Peace Is Every Step](#).

The practice is to use the mindfulness bell and/or a quiet space to help members of the family re-center and reconnect, either alone or separately.

Ring the bell is a reminder and an encouragement to care for ourselves while we find our way back to center. As my youngest child says:

“When the mindfulness bell rings, you can hear your heart.”

There is an implicit understanding that sometimes our actions and words will only cause harm, and that refraining from them is in everyone’s best interest.

{That actually took me a while to learn. *Ahem.*}

We have the bell in a certain part of the house, and anyone can go there at any time and ring it.

Like this: I am running around trying to get us all out the door, find shoes, get clothes on, make snacks, etc., and Orlando rings the bell.

Or this: I am overwhelmed and having a difficult time focusing. I sit down and ring the bell. The kids regard me quietly.

Ring the bell gives us the opportunity to get in touch with ourselves so our actions can continue from a place of care and kindness.

I've written more about using it [here](#), and [here](#).

Soft-Belly

Finding a soft belly is just like it sounds. You can try it now.

Bring your attention to your belly... relax your stomach muscles... and now breathe in, feeling your breath filling your belly. Let your belly rise and fall with each breath.

Now, go back to how you were sitting before. Breathe in without the intention of having a soft belly.

Notice a difference?

I mainly use soft-belly as a silent reminder to myself throughout the day... just checking in and letting my stomach relax can cause a huge energy shift for me.

I've also used it when I notice my stress rising or I am starting to feel antsy. I take a breath and focus on relaxing my belly.

It helps ground the energy of all of us.

Here's an example:

I was heading upstairs to get clothes for the kids, and I heard a bang and a cry (sounded like Orlando).

My first response was exasperation — we had spent the morning crashing into each other, literally and metaphorically, and I was tired.

As I turned to head back down the stairs, I turned my attention to my belly, taking time to breathe deeply while I walked (I could tell by the cry that he wasn't seriously injured).

By the time I arrived to Orlando, I felt ready to comfort — rather than admonish — him.

There is an important difference between:

“I feel stressed so I must think of something else!”

and

“Here I am feeling stressed... I am going to go inward and notice... using my breath as an anchor, resting my attention there, on my belly and my breath.”

Being kind to yourself matters.

Wrapping Up

Most mindfulness techniques help me because they **shift my awareness to something that is undeniably here and now**, which grounds me and creates a refuge from which to experience my emotions.

So, instead of thinking “I wish I hadn’t said that! I am so terrible. I’m failing, and harming my children...” and experiencing a terrible sinking feeling, I might notice my hands (placing my attention there, feeling coolness or whatever) while allowing the remorse or sadness (a welling-up feeling, tingly cheeks) to occur and be felt.

Something the Buddha taught about mindfulness...

- We remember and reflect on our past behavior, and notice what has been harmonious and what has been harmful, and we choose to feed what has been harmonious and let go of what has been harmful.
- We experience the fullness, and the reality, of the present moment.
- We create an intention for our future (this is not the same as an admonishment or a resolution... it is more like "*May I be...*").

These practices feed my awareness; my awareness helps me clearly see my behavior; seeing clearly allows remorse; remorse gives rise to my intention; my intention creates the possibility for healing.

This cycle is never-ending. I am not healed, but I am healing. I feel this cycle moving through me or me through it, and I am realizing — I'm hoping — that it will be going on for a long time.

Why not begin now?

Choose one technique and give it a try.

Self-Connection



*Everyone has inside himself, what shall I call it?
A piece of good news.
— Ugo Betti*

Mindfulness practices help me get through each moment at a time, but **sometimes there are bigger things going on.**

Sometimes it's simple and external (am I hungry? tired?) and sometimes it's complex and internal (what fundamental and possibly mistaken belief is being engaged right now?).

Let's start with simple.

Physical Needs

My sister-in-law once had a list, scrawled in crayon on a big piece of craft paper, on her refrigerator that said something like:

EAT
DRINK WATER
TAKE VITAMINS
DRINK TEA/CAFFEINE
GET OUTSIDE
CALL SOMEONE
START OVER

They were reminders to herself to take care of her basic needs before barreling through whatever situation was at hand. That list saved her life.

(Have you noticed that nothing in this e-book is something I made up? I am so grateful that this information has come to me from so many sources.)

My check-in looks like this:

- Eat.
- Drink water.
- Rest. Even for just a moment – maybe a [one-minute meditation](#).
- Minimize noise. Can I wear earplugs? Move somewhere else?
- Minimize clutter. What's one single task I can do that will help?
- Have we been in the house a long time?
- Call someone (usually my sister-in-law, who is a good friend).

What's your list?

Feelings and Needs

This one comes from nonviolent communication (NVC). They are all about the [feelings](#) and [needs](#)!

This exercise sounds simple: Try to identify your feelings and needs and make requests rather than going around acting unaware, triggered, grouchy and making demands. (Or maybe that's just me.)

But that's like saying, just start speaking French, *immédiatement*. And it's pretty hard to say anything in French if you don't know the first thing about the language...

So what do you do before you speak? You listen, you absorb, you practice, you sound like a fool.

But pretty soon, you're standing around your kitchen, saying, "When you throw your brother to the ground like that, I feel totally sad and stressed! I want to help you both feel safe. Would you be willing to ask for my help [next time](#)?"

A lot of people pooh-pooh NVC, but if the alternative is saying, "Knock it off! How many times have I told you to stop!" and the response is cold-eyed looks from my eight-year-old and dazed sadness from my five-year-old...

I'll take the NVC, please.

What I like about NVC is its ability to help me become accountable for my own feelings and needs and to get in touch with my beautiful vision of how things *could be*.

If an inspired request comes from that, great.

But there are many times that I don't actually make a request of another person; instead I end up changing my own behavior or shifting the way I've been relating to things.

Listening In

This is a process that incorporates Hakomi Therapy and Focusing.

Are you ready to listen to your body?

This is how I do it:

I sit quietly and let my body settle. I sit for as many minutes as I would like, and then slowly turn my attention inward, with a sense of welcoming whatever is there.

I sit with my eyes closed. I notice if there is any part of my body that draws my attention.

If so, I can put my hand on that part of my body, and ask it (silently or aloud) what it wants to tell me or how it's feeling.

Or I just wait and listen.

Turning inward and waiting with a genuine, soft curiosity is almost always enough.

Sometimes just a word appears, such as "heavy," "stuck," "jumpy."

I might repeat the word back. "Heavy." (Again, with the soft curiosity.)

Sometimes this brings an energetic shift, a sense of relief, just like how our kids can respond when they feel truly seen.

Sometimes an image or a phrase will come. Sometimes tears.

I have a therapist that I can follow-up with these things about, but I also journal or contemplate them on my own, ask for guidance in a dream, or do whatever woo-woo thing I feel like. 😊

Here's an example:

I had a very tense upper back after a particularly stressful family emergency a few months ago. I could feel the pain but it was in the background. I was new

to the whole listening in thing so I sat down to try it. The back pain was acute, and my attention went right to it. When I placed my hand there and silently asked what it was feeling, the response was, “Sad,” and the feeling of sadness deepened. It was like I could feel it now when I couldn’t before. I sat with the feeling, and then I asked what it needed. I heard, “Warmth, comfort.” I had gone days noticing my aching back but had never taken the time to actually listen and understand what it might need.

Wrapping up

If I am tangled up in the stuff of self, I am often overwhelmed, inflexible, reactive.

By offering open, nonjudgmental presence to myself, those feelings have the opportunity to be heard and subside/transform...

I'm free to return to the present moment, to step into life, into the flow of how things actually are.

I'm available to the people and beings around me.

When I first began going to Hakomi therapy and taking nonviolent communication classes, I would have these persistent thoughts that I was being indulgent, myopic, and wasting everyone's time.

But I'm beginning to understand that it is when I am *not* aware that I have a higher chance of being indulgent, myopic, and squandering the chance we've all been given.

Self-connection is not just about connecting with one's self.

For me, it is about connecting with myself so I am able to connect with others — the people here in front of me, in my house, across the street, around the world.

It is about being here, *really here*, together.

Meditation



*Having a meditation practice is a way
of fully entering your life, without reservation.
– John Tarrant*

Meditation is where my journey toward peace began, and it remains my foundation. It's been almost eight years and I am still learning, still entering my life.

When you meditate, when you sit and notice without assessing how you're doing, you just show up for your life. In the moment of meditation, nothing is required of you. It's enough to be here on the planet, to experience a moment of presence, to fully honor the gift of being alive. ...

If we don't show up for our own life, we tend to ask other people to fill in the bits we won't show up for. That makes it hard on them. So love begins with really showing up. And practice helps. — John Tarrant

That's what I do when I sit on my jazzy little meditation bench. I show up. I practice.

Sometimes I fidget like mad, sometimes I feel really peaceful and calm. Sometimes I write blog posts in my mind. Sometimes I replay conversations. Sometimes I worry. Sometimes I beat myself up. (Imagine that!)

Whatever I am feeling or thinking or scratching, my commitment, as long as I am sitting on that meditation bench — and hopefully even when I'm not — is to do it with awareness and without judgment.

It's as simple as 1-2-3 infinity.

1. I notice what's happening ("thinking," "planning," "rehearsing," "feeling anxious").
2. I relax, and find my soft-belly.
3. I notice what's happening ("hearing," "thinking," "tingly-ness").
4. I relax, and find my soft-belly.
5. I breathe, and notice the feeling of my chest and stomach rising and falling.
6. I notice what's happening...

To demystify the whole mediation experience, I'll share with you what my sitting meditation practice looked like for a time:

The kids and I would wake up (all together in the same bed). Rom would already be at work.

Sometimes I would mediate before breakfast, while the kids played.
Sometimes after.

The kids would be in their room while I meditated in the office (across the hall from them).

Sometimes I would sit for ten minutes before someone came in to ask, to tell, to cuddle.

Sometimes twenty. One day, I sat for twenty minutes and then journaled for at least another twenty. Amazing!

Sometimes I would sit for a few minutes, go downstairs to help Mica in the bathroom, and come back and meditate some more.

Sometimes I would meditate for a few minutes, answer a question, meditate for a few minutes, hold a crying kid, meditate for a few minutes, get up and close the door, sit down, and say, “Maybe another time.”

Almost eight years ago, when I began, I hardly did sitting meditation at all. I was new to the practice. I was new to motherhood.

I did what I could.

That’s what I’m always doing: what I can. I am committed to showing up for the bits that I can.

And bit by bit, breath by breath, I do.

You can too.

Here’s how:

Sitting Meditation for Beginners

adapted from senior insight meditation teachers

- Choose the amount of time you'd like to sit. It can be ten minutes, twenty, thirty. Three. :) Especially if you're a beginner, I would recommend finding a time when you won't be interrupted, but again, do what you can.
- Sit comfortably. Try to find a way of sitting that feels comfortable and allows you to be both relaxed and alert. If you are new to the practice, I'd suggest sitting rather than lying down.
- Close your eyes, and sit quietly for a few moments. Bring your attention to different parts of your body and let them relax. Your eyes... your mouth... let your hands rest softly... soften your belly.
- Bring your attention to your breath — to the rising and the falling of your abdomen with each breath. Just stay there being aware of it for however long you'd like, or until something else comes into the forefront of your awareness.
- Notice whatever is now in your awareness. If you hear children playing or birds chirping or a truck revving, notice it softly as “hearing.” If your mind wanders — and it *will* wander — notice that it's wandered. You might simply say to yourself, “thinking” or “wandering mind.” If you feel sensations in the body, you might note, “pressure” or “heaviness.”

- After the noting, return to a feeling of relaxation (soft eyes, relaxed mouth, unrounded shoulders, soft belly) and bring your awareness to your breath.
- There is no need to judge whatever you notice. ... thinking is not bad, just is. Whatever is coming into your attention, just is. Including judging. :)
- You don't have to stay absolutely still the whole time, but try to be aware of when you're moving, scratching an itch, readjusting, etc. Change positions if you feel uncomfortable, but again, try to be aware of your intention and energy while doing do so. And then relax, and return to the breath.

After about ten minutes, I can usually tell that I'm more settled. But sometimes I sit the whole time and never really feel settled. The point isn't to reach bliss. The point is to become aware of what's going on.

Relax, notice, return to the breath.

Relax, notice, return.

I am always beginning.

So are you.





I'm Stacy Lewis — I explore and create connections between **peace, community, and motherhood** and share my findings with you, so that we each can have the blessing of finding our own true hearts.

Since becoming a mother eight years ago, I find myself (over and over again) within an ever-expanding understanding of the importance of relating peacefully. To each other, and ourselves.

I began [meditating](#) when my first-born was an infant. I've studied [nonviolent communication](#) intensively. I had another child. I became a client of [Hakomi therapy](#), a mindfulness-based form of assisted self-discovery, and am now training to become a therapist. Our family moved from our single home to a [cohousing community](#). We've [unschooled](#) from the beginning, from that tiny incipient seed of knowing I wanted my children to be sovereign.

All has been part of this amazing process of opening up to my one true heart.

I'd love to hear from you — heart to heart — how you're traveling, what you're discovering, the sky you're looking up into.

Join me under [the sweet sky](#).

Resources

Mindfulness

[Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life](#) (book) by Thich Nhat Hanh

[Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames](#) (book) by Thich Nhat Hanh

[Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation](#) (book) by Daniel Siegel

[Meditation Research Roundup](#), a short article about the brain-meditation connection

Nonviolent Communication

[Respectful Parents, Respectful Kids](#) (book) by Sura Hart and Victoria Kindle Hodson

[Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life](#) (book) by Marshall Rosenberg

[NVC Online Academy](#)

Focusing

["Searching for the Truth,"](#) an article about Focusing by David Rome

[Overview of Focusing](#) (includes lots of links), a page by Scott Noelle

Hakomi Therapy

[The Hakomi Method](#), an explanation from the Hakomi Institute

[Hakomi Resources](#), links from Sweet Sky

Meditation

[Insight Meditation: A Step-by-Step Practice on How to Meditate](#) (book + two CDs), by Salzberg and Goldstein

[Beginning Meditation Instructions](#) (online audio) by Kamala Masters and Steve Armstrong

[The Beginner's Guide to Insight Meditation](#) (book) by Arinna Weisman

[Meditation Myths Debunked](#) (blog post) by Nadia Ballas-Ruta

[Momma Zen](#) (book) by [Karen Maezen Miller](#)

[Buddhism for Mothers](#) (book) by Sarah Naphthali

[How can I learn to meditate?](#) from Sweet Sky