

# Brilliant Ways to Reduce Stress, Find Balance, and Cultivate Well-Being



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# Do You Feel...

Stressed? Overwhelmed? Exhausted?  
Anxious? Scattered?

The truth is, we ALL feel like that at different times.

It's the human condition.

Today, with the constant demands for our attention and energy, we end up feeling depleted and distracted. In short, we're burnt out.

Do you wish you felt a greater sense of calm and ease during the day? Do you wish you had practices to make time for stillness and silence? Do you yearn for skills to manage your stress, while still getting everything done?

Mindfulness is not a cure-all, but a growing body of research demonstrates that a mindfulness practice reduces stress, boosts the immune system, enhances focus and concentration, reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression, and even helps us sleep better!

This **Brilliant Mindfulness** guide will introduce you to mindfulness, and teach you practical strategies for finding balance, cultivating well-being, and putting you back in control of your life. **Brilliant!**



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## Table of Contents

What is Mindfulness? .....	3
How to Start a Meditation Practice .....	7
10 Things Non-Stressed Out People Know and Do .....	12
7 Ways to Ban "Busy" – and Still Get Stuff Done! .....	18
Next Steps .....	23

# What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a popular buzzword these days. *The Huffington Post* proclaimed 2014 “the year of mindful living,” and *Time* magazine featured the “Mindful Revolution” on its January 2014 cover.



Mindfulness can be defined in many ways — the definition I like is simple: **compassionate and intentional awareness**. Mindfulness is the practice of *paying attention* — to thoughts, physical sensations, and the environment — without constantly feeling the need to *judge* what’s happening or to *make it other than it is*. To cultivate this present moment awareness, we pay attention *on purpose*, with an attitude of *kindness to ourselves and others*.

Words like “meditation” and even “mindfulness” may make us think of berobed hippies or esoteric practices conducted in the mountaintops of Tibet. But mindfulness can be as simple as taking a few deep breaths before an important meeting, or bringing our full awareness to a moment spent with our children. **Cultivating this compassionate and purposeful awareness allows us to be present for the important people in our lives, as our kind attention is the most loving gift we can offer.**

**Mindfulness is our ability to pay attention to the present moment, with curiosity and without judgment.**

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Mindfulness is essentially *a way of being in the world*. It is being **present** and **available**. It is a **fundamental human capacity**. You've probably experienced it before, whether you've labeled it as such or not. Think of a time when you were so engaged in an activity — creating a work of art, playing a sport, reading a good book — that your entire being focused on that one activity. That heightened state of attention is mindfulness.

Mindful Schools program director Megan Cowan describes mindfulness as “a human ability, that, when it is *lacking*, makes life more unbearable.” Mindfulness is a way of meeting our experience with the presence of mind to **respond skillfully** to life's challenges, rather than reacting based on intense emotions.

Mindfulness teaches us an **awareness of the habits of our minds** and allows us to catch ourselves in negative patterns of rumination. We may see that a good deal of our suffering comes from the *stories we tell ourselves about the events in our lives*, rather than from the events themselves.



# Mindfulness is about accepting the full range of the human experience, whether we might label it as “good” or “bad.”

The mindfulness that is taught today in hospitals, clinics, schools, military bases, and corporations is based primarily on **Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR)**, developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn (a researcher at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center) in the late 1970s. He created MBSR to treat patients who suffered from chronic pain, and hadn't responded to traditional treatments. He developed MBSR based on his knowledge of meditation and yoga, stripping them of their metaphysical and spiritual components. **Most amazingly, he found that simply teaching people meditation and mindfulness helped relieve their physical pain!**

MBSR courses today (there are thousands of them across the US) teach basic meditation practices such as body scans and breath awareness, as well as gentle yoga and movement exercises. They are essentially **teaching life skills for coping with the human experience.**

Mindfulness has become a core component of many mental health therapies today, including Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) and Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT). Corporations like Google and General Mills teach mindfulness classes to their employees, and incorporate meditation into the workday.



Mindfulness makes us aware of the small joys we may otherwise be too distracted to see. Sometimes I'm so lost in thought while I do the dishes, I don't see the beauty in my children playing together just outside the window in front of me. Non-judgmental awareness doesn't mean we can't enjoy the goodness that we see. Mindfulness reveals that *the goodness has been there all along*.



Mark Williams and Danny Penman, in *Mindfulness: An Eight-Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World*, describe mindfulness as follows:

“You come to realize that thoughts come and go of their own accord; that **you are not your thoughts**. You can watch as they appear in the air, and watch again as they disappear, like a soap bubble bursting. You come to the profound understanding that **thoughts and feelings (including negative ones) are transient**. They come and go, and ultimately, **you have a choice about whether to act on them or not**. Mindfulness is about observation without criticism; being compassionate with yourself.... [Mindfulness] begins the process of **putting you back in control of your life.**” *[emphasis added]*

Finally, **mindfulness is not an attitude, it is a skill**. It must be practiced and cultivated.

On the next page, you'll learn how to do that!

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# How to Start a Mindfulness Practice



While mindfulness is a simple practice, it's not always easy. We may find it hard to make time for it. We may find it boring. We may worry if we're doing it right.

Luckily, mindfulness is not something you can do “wrong.” No moment of intentional awareness is ever wasted!

The easiest way to begin a personal mindfulness practice is to spend a few moments each day **focusing your awareness on the breath**. This is a traditional mindfulness meditation practice.

(To clarify, “meditation” has a variety of meanings in different philosophical and contemplative traditions. The meditation practices described on the following pages are completely secular, and are based on a specific form of meditation known as “focused awareness.” This practice is what is typically known as “mindfulness.”)

Keep reading for answers to some of the most common questions about starting a meditation practice!

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## How Long Should I Meditate?

If you are new to meditation, **start slowly**. Begin with just **5 minutes each day**. Gradually increase the time over several weeks. When I started meditating, five minutes felt like an eternity. I now practice for 30 minutes a day, and sometimes I am surprised at how quickly it passes!

A few minutes each day is better than an hour on the weekend. Some researchers have found that **as little as 12 minutes a day of meditation over an eight-week period** can produce noticeable changes in the brain, decrease levels of anxiety, and increase immune function and overall happiness and well-being.

## Where Should I Meditate?

Find a comfortable spot where you can sit. You can sit on the **floor** (using a pillow or cushion for support if needed) or sit upright in a **chair**, with your feet resting on the floor. Some people recommend that you do not lie down on your back, but I think you should meditate in whatever pose works for you {unless lying down makes you fall asleep!}

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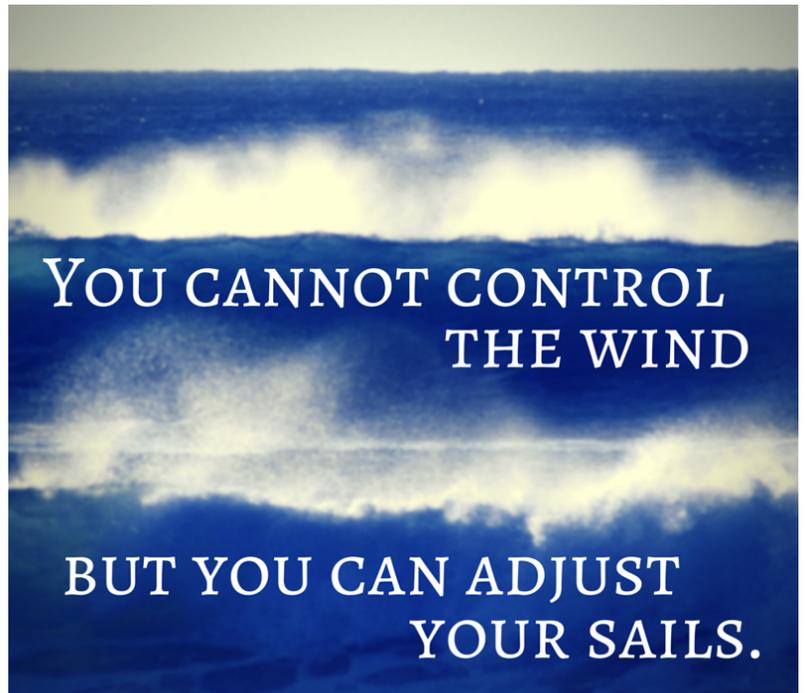


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## What Do I Do?

The easiest meditation technique is to **count the breath**. Count each in-breath and out-breath with the same number: “One” {in-breath}, “One” {out-breath}, “Two” {in-breath}, “Two” {out-breath}, and so on. Once you hit 10 {which rarely happens before your mind has wandered!} you start over at one. If you don’t like counting, you can simply repeat to yourself “*in, out.... in, out...*”

When your mind wanders ~ which it WILL DO {*that’s what the mind does!*} ~ *gently bring your attention back to your breath*. If you need to start over counting because you don’t remember where you left off, that’s fine! The key is to **not criticize or judge yourself** for letting your attention wander. In fact, noticing that your mind has wandered is the **whole point of meditation** ~ you are becoming more **aware** of the actions of your mind!



Even the relatively simple instruction to “follow the breath” can sound a bit vague or confusing. A helpful technique is to bring your attention to **where you most notice the sensation of the breath** — in the chest and lungs? the nose? the belly? That is your **anchor**. Each time your mind wanders, come back to the physical sensations of breathing.

When thoughts arise, it’s easy to get distracted and follow them and engage with them.... A helpful practice is to simply label the thoughts: “*worrying,*” “*planning,*” “*remembering.*” Don’t worry about figuring out the precise label for the type of thought you’re having. Just “*thinking*” will do, too!

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## How Do I Fit This Into My Day?

Find the **time of day that works best for you**. Some people like to begin their day with meditation, others prefer to take a break for meditation at lunch, and for others the best time to meditate is in the evening. The important thing is to make it a habit. After several weeks of a consistent practice, it will become an integral part of your day, like exercising or brushing your teeth! Changing your habits over a period of time actually creates new neural networks in your brain, and the practice will become part of your daily routine.

## But Nothing's Happening!

Meditation is about **non-judgmental awareness**. We need to not bring expectations into our practice. You may experience a moment of profound insight during a meditation session. Or you might be really bored. You might feel restless and agitated. Or you might feel calm and relaxed.

Meditation is about embracing *whatever is* in the present moment. The benefits of meditation — greater self-awareness and self-control, increased calm and empathy — will emerge over time. But each individual session will be completely different.

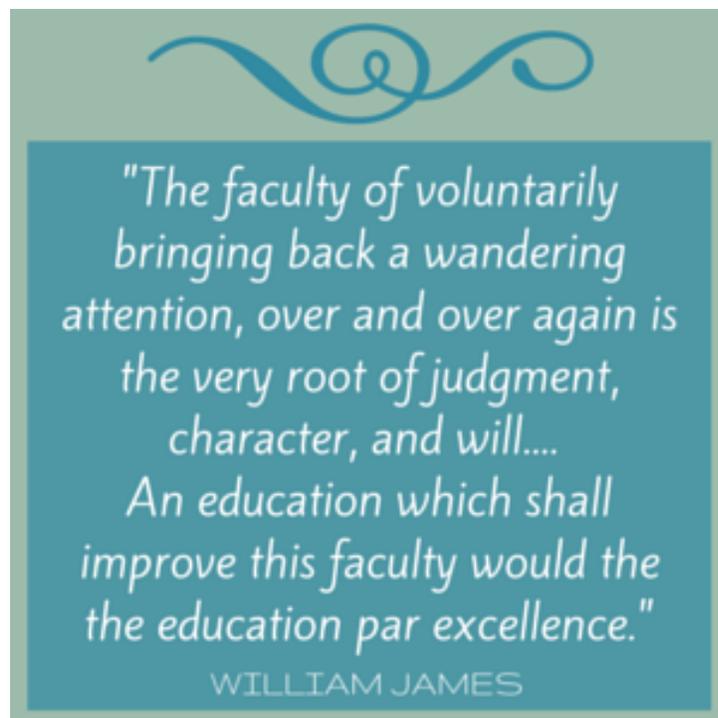


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## Is there an app for this?

Of course! Many meditation apps have cool features such as interval bells {great for calling your attention back to the breath}, customizable background sounds, and interactive features. My favorite is the **Insight Meditation Timer** ~ you can see a map showing you how many people are meditating worldwide at the same time you are! The Insight timer costs \$2.99, but there are other free apps available, such as the **Nature Scenes**

**app** {with customizable background sounds and images} or the **Meditation Timer**. A great app for teens is **Stop, Breathe, Think**, and a great one for younger kids is **Smiling Mind**.



# 10 Things Non-Stressed Out People Know and Do

“Stress” seems to be an epidemic right now — emails to answer, activities to attend, houses to clean, groceries to buy, jobs to do... The pressure seems never-ending.

But here’s what you need to know:

Stress may be a given in our lives...  
but *being stressed out* doesn’t have to be.



## What Non-Stressed Out People **Know**

### 1. They know stress is a **normal** and expected part of life

No one gets a “*Get out of Stress Free*” card in this game.

In fact, we **need** a healthy amount of nervous system activation to get through our days — working and parenting and all the other important things we do require our energy and engagement. You know that list that ranks all the stressful life experiences that people can encounter? There are bad things on that list, like the loss of a job or the death of a loved one. But there are also *good* things on the list, like getting married, buying a house, and having kids.

Change is constant, and change often creates stress.

Non-stressed out people know this. They know stress will show up in their lives, so they're less likely to be knocked down when it does.

## 2. They understand that what makes us stressed out is how we ***perceive*** the stressor

Stress researchers Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman at UC-Berkeley have defined stress as:

**“a particular relationship between the person and the environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources and endangering his or her well-being.”** (from *Full Catastrophe Living*, by Jon Kabat-Zinn)

This definition of stress clearly indicates that stress is about our *relationship* to events and our *perceptions* of them. If you view a particular event as a **threat** (to your physical, emotional, or social well-being), then you'll likely experience it as stressful. If you choose to **reframe** the event, perhaps as an opportunity, then it may not be stressful at all.

Non-stressed out people know to take a deep breath, and assess the situation. They try to see the present moment like a camera would, *noticing what is actually happening*, instead of rashly interpreting the event from their limited perspective. And in that short period of time, a whole world of options open up.

*Between stimulus and response there is a space.  
In that space is our power to choose our  
response. In our response lies our growth and  
our freedom.*

Victor Frankl

### 3. They **know** when they are stressed

Has this ever happened to you? You get home from work, make dinner, start getting the kids ready for bed... and then a small infraction by your child sets off a wildly disproportionate reaction from you.

You were probably stressed out all day, and didn't even know it. We often spend our days in a state of low-grade fight-or-flight arousal, and then even the slightest stressor can set us off.



**Non-stressed out people are in tune with their bodies.** They notice the tense shoulders, the furrowed brow, the tightening chest, or whatever their stress signals are, and then act (see below) to defuse the stress energy before it explodes.

### 4. They know they have **power** and **choice**

Resilient people have a sense of **efficacy**. They know they have a choice in how they respond. They understand the serenity prayer — *they know they can change the things they control, and they choose to live in wise relationship with the things they cannot.*

### 5. They have a sense of **meaning**

Non-stressed out people know the **why** behind their actions. They act with purpose and intention. Even the most mundane task can have meaning — for example, cleaning our home is a way of honoring our surroundings.

And when things go wrong, non-stressed out people find meaning in that, too.

**“What we think are our failures are not failures. They are gifts – revealing extremely useful information – if we are open to being mindful of everything that unfolds in our lives, in a day, or in a moment, and putting it all to good use as grist for the mill.” Jon Kabat-Zinn**

## What Non-Stressed Out People **Do**

### 1. They practice **mindfulness**

With mindfulness, we learn to pause. We learn to see things as they actually are. We learn to drop the story, which only exacerbates the stress, and choose wise action.

The practice of mindfulness is what allows us to notice and experience the buildup of stress, instead of suppressing it. When we ignore and internalize stress, it never gets released.

Think of the zebra in the wild, who gets startled by a lion, and bolts away in a flight response. Once he’s safe, the stress has been released from his body, and he calms down and takes a nap. He doesn’t worry about what might have happened had his offspring had been eaten, or agonize over when the lion will return. (See *Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers*).



If we ignore our stress, it builds up and we never return to a calm baseline. Mindfulness gives us a basic awareness of our stress. And then we can develop **healthy restorative practices**.

***“Under duress we don’t rise to our expectations, we fall to our level of training.” – Bruce Lee***

So resilient people *train*.

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## 2. They **exercise**

Exercise releases feel-good hormones and other chemicals that promote resilience and well-being.

## 3. They get adequate **sleep**

How clear-headed are you without good sleep? It probably goes without saying that we're much more likely to resort to habitual reactions when we're tired. Jon Kabat-Zinn says that resilient people build up a "bank account" that they can draw upon during tough times. **Sleep, exercise, healthy food, and meditation are the most important deposits we can make!**

## 4. They make time for **relationships and intimacy**

We are social beings. Simply sharing our frustrations and talking about what's bothering us can relieve a great deal of our stress.



## 5. They put themselves in **time-out**

Non-stressed out people make time for themselves. They nurture the hobbies that fulfill them and give their minds a break from day-to-day busy-ness. They go for a walk or read a good book or savor a delicious meal. They know that

**self-care is not selfish.**

They do the things that feed their bodies, hearts, and minds. Janice Marturano, in *Finding the Space to Lead*, writes, “Such moments — when we fully inhabit our bodies and our senses are at work on more than an internal storyline, checklist, or rehearsed conversation — are what give life true meaning.”



# 7 Ways to Ban “Busy” ... and Still Get Stuff Done!

One way we can manage our stress is to start banning the word “**busy**” from our vocabulary!

We use that word a lot. It seems that every Monday morning as co-workers greet each other, the standard exchanges go something like this:

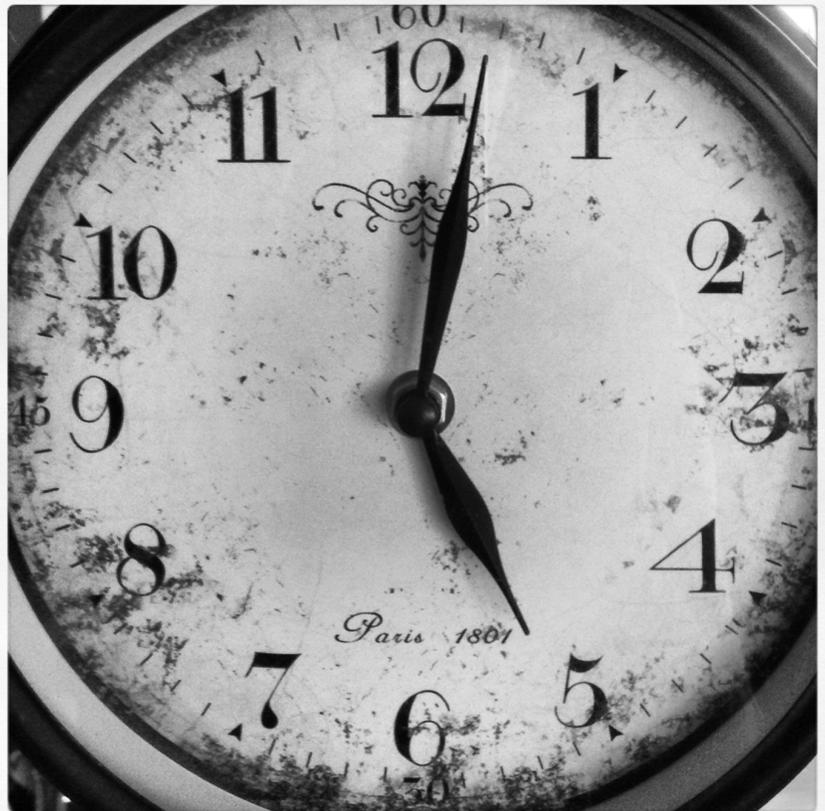
“How was your weekend?”

“**BUSY!**” {Often said with a deep sigh, an eye-roll, or a frustrated shake of the head.}

“Mine, too!”

We rattle off numbers of trips to the store taken or loads of laundry

completed, or perhaps the sporting events attended, essays graded, and meals cooked, and then we head off to *another* **BUSY** week of working and parenting before we head to yet *another* **BUSY** weekend!



*“The problem with our obsession with ‘busyness’ is that we are afraid of failing. We’re terrified we’re going to miss out on something — or worse, our children will miss out on something.”*

Shawn Fink, *The Abundant Mama*

# Why Ban Busy?

Agapi Stassinopoulos writes in this article on the Huffington Post that when we tell people we're busy, we're essentially telling them "I'm talking to you, but I'm really not here." She describes her wake-up moment when her doctor told her she tells her patients to **stop using the word busy**. "It only makes you feel more overwhelmed and not in charge of your time," she told her.

Our words matter. How we *describe* our days and our lives impacts our *perception* of them. When we are "busy," we are hurried and preoccupied and stressed out. "Busy" almost always implies engagement in activities that are not of our choosing — it's business (busy-ness), not leisure.

We tend to glorify "busy-ness" in our culture, as Arianna Huffington writes in *Thrive*. We brag about how little sleep we get and how many hours we work. Carl Honore, author of *In Praise of Slowness*, describes his wake-up call to change his pattern of busy-ness: he actually contemplated buying a book called *One-Minute Bedtime Stories*, which condensed classic tales for kids in order to speed up bedtime so parents could get back to their busy lives!

Paradoxically, banning busy actually makes us **more** effective, for it allows us to be, as Huffington writes, "fully present in ... life, and in the lives of those you love."

So how do we ban busy, and still work and engage in the activities of our lives?



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**1. Stop Multitasking.** Multitasking is a computing term. As amazing as our brains are, they are no match for computers. You are not a computer. You cannot multitask. You will get more done, and feel less overwhelmed, by **focusing on one task at a time.**

**2. Manage Your To-Do List.** I once read that your to-do list should be able to fit on a post-it note. On Sunday evenings, take a look at your week ahead and figure out how you can distribute the items that need to get done into post-it sized chunks throughout the week. And each day, you should **eat a frog.**



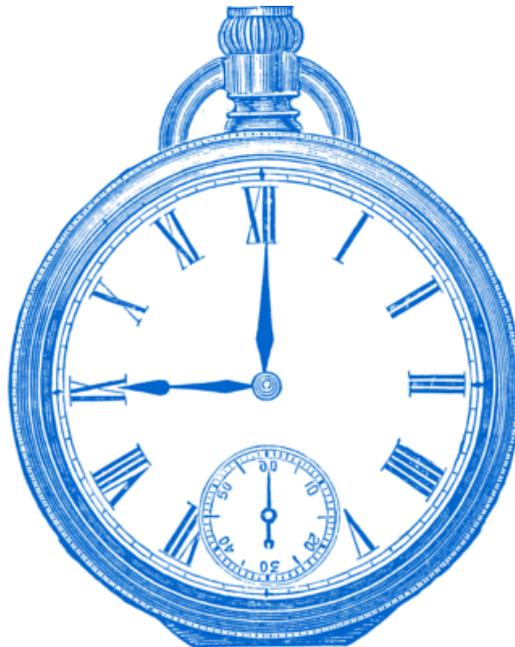
Putting off unpleasant tasks {and then having them hang over your head all day} makes you feel more stressed. When you do the most undesirable task first thing in the morning, you feel productive and can approach the day with a greater sense of ease — and you'll feel less busy.

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**3. Leave Work at Work.** Obviously this can depend on where, and if, we work, but I strongly believe it's important to have a clear delineation between work and home. Several years ago, I decided I needed to stop bringing so much work home — it added to my stress and took time away from my family. It took a few more days to get assignments back to my students, but I was a better teacher, mother, and human being because of it.

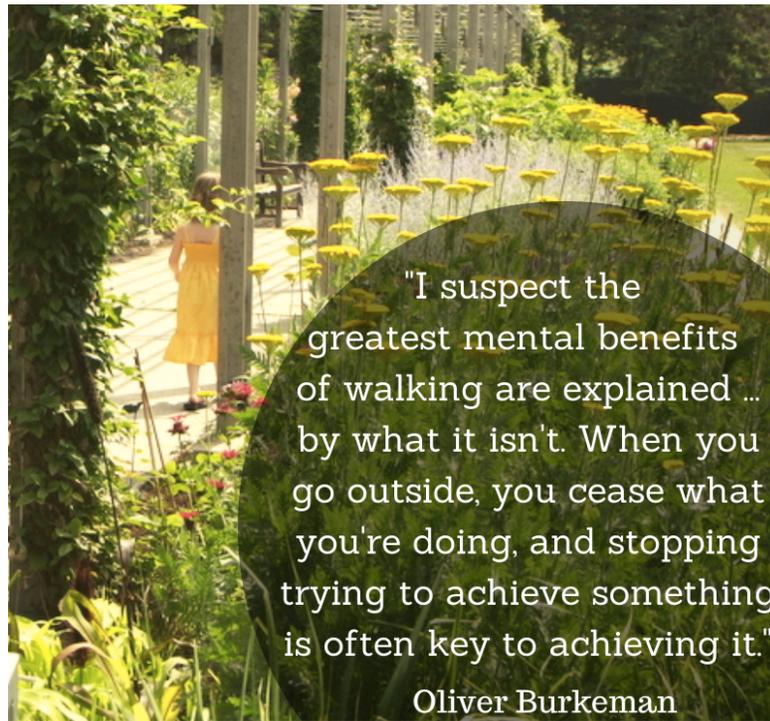
**4. Know It's Okay to Say "No."** We don't have to do all the things we are asked to do. While it may be easy to say no to the things we **don't** want to do, it's a lot harder to say no to the things we really **do** want to do. ***How do we decide?*** Consider if you really have the time or energy to complete a job the way it needs to be done. If you don't, say no; it's not fair to you or the person asking for your help if you take on more than you can handle. Is it something you will do with passion? One of the best pieces of advice I've ever heard is to use the following test: **"If it's not a HELL, YES!, it's a NO."**

**5. Limit Your Time on Social Media.** There's a reason they call it a time-suck. As beneficial as it can be, social media is no substitute for old-fashioned social engagement. **Set a timer** when you check your accounts. When it goes off, you're done. In fact, you can now find apps that will shut down your browser or your phone when your time limit is up.



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**6. Go for a Walk!** Not only is this good for our health, but there's a reason we go for walks to "clear our minds." When I'm stuck in my writing or can't think of an effective lesson, it usually only takes a short walk for ideas to come to me. And just getting outside can work wonders for our stress and mental well-being.



**7. Daydream.** Daydreaming has its benefits too, including the cultivation of creativity, compassion, and self-awareness. NYU psychology professor Scott Barry Kaufman writes, "The latest research on imagination and creativity shows that if we're always in the moment, we're going to miss out on important connections between our own inner mind-wandering thoughts and the outside world. Creativity lies in that intersection between our outer world and our inner world."

Indeed, we can **ban busy** and be less stressed, and still engage in all that we need to do in the world.

And just think of how **powerful** that engagement will be when we are *mindful, healthy, focused, and present.*

# Next Steps...

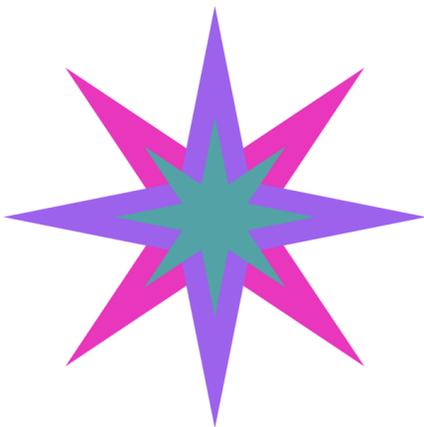
The information provided in this book is just a sampling of the mindfulness practices and instruction offered by **Brilliant Mindfulness, LLC**. If you are interested in learning more about mindfulness, and how it could help you and your organization, whether you are a teacher, school administrator, business owner, or parent, please contact us on our website (<http://brilliantmindfulness.com>, QR code at right), or by emailing **Sarah Rudell Beach**, Executive Director, at [sarah@brilliantmindfulness.com](mailto:sarah@brilliantmindfulness.com).



## We offer the following programs:

- **For Teachers:** Mindfulness and Stress Reduction for Educators, and Mindfulness: For You and Your Students
- **For Students:** Mindful Kids, Mindful Teens, and The Mindful Student
- **For Businesses:** Mindfulness for Stress Reduction and Well-Being
- **For Families:** Mindful Families

We are also happy to discuss customized options or personal coaching services for schools, businesses, or families.



## Brilliant Mindfulness, LLC

*cultivating our innate capacity  
for attention and well-being*

Mindfulness Education and  
Professional Development. **Brilliant.**

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