



STAR Initiative

## Finding peace of mind in the midst of the global pandemic

Growing up in Seoul, South Korea, it felt the city never stopped turning its wheels. Restaurants open 24-hours. Street signs that never went off. Korean karaoke unending through the night. Fifty-one million people – a population larger than the combined populations of Texas and Florida – living in a country half the size of New England. So, as you can imagine, personal space is something that you dreamed of in your sleep.

One thing I loved about growing up in the city was that it taught me early on how to shut off the outside world. As soon as I stepped outside, my five senses – sight, smell, hearing, taste (yes, you can taste the city), and touch went on high alert and they rarely got a break. On the other hand, precisely because of this, I became much more appreciative of moments of silence and the absence of distraction. I later learned that these qualities were fundamentals of “mindfulness;” though the word was unfamiliar to me, the concept was intimately ingrained in my culture. Mindfulness is a state of mind, in which one focuses on the internal and external experiences of the present moment. By nonjudgmentally acknowledging one’s attention, you allow it to wander and anchor back to the present moment. This may include awareness of bodily sensations and movement, external surroundings, and one’s consciousness and thoughts. You can easily engage in mindfulness practice through a variety of meditation exercises.

When I was little, when I wanted a new present from my parents, I would pray to God in my room. I didn’t care much about who God was. It was someone I could talk to with my eyes closed, just me and whoever listening from the other side. This was my mindfulness moment where I could clearly hear what my mind said and how my heartbeat sounded. As I got older, my mindfulness practice looked a lot different. It became easier for me to bring these quiet moments with me. I could find a moment of serenity whether that be between meetings or during my water break.

In today’s world of global pandemic, more than ever, we need a moment of tranquility in our daily life. Studies have shown that mindfulness meditations reduce symptoms of anxiety, depression and stress in both clinical and non-clinical samples (Edenfield, T.M. & Saeed, S.A., 2012). A brain mechanism study (Zeidan et al., 2013) showed a considerable reduction of anxiety State in healthy adults with no prior meditation experience after 20 minutes of a meditation session. Four days of meditation training significantly increased their mindfulness levels. This is great news for us. It means that we all have a potential to benefit from a few minutes of mindfulness practice during this ever-evolving time. Here are a few tips that you can use to start your mindfulness routine.

**Tip 1: Create a safe space *physically and/or mentally*.** As a child, I remember that it didn’t take much for me to find my safe space. I would sit in my tiny desk with my eyes closed and place my clasped hands around my forehead – this probably would be inadvisable now that we try to

avoid touching our faces, but at that time, there I was. I was instantly in my safe place – calm and peaceful. During the pandemic, I recognize not all of us have the time or space to find our safe place. The beauty of mindfulness is, however, that it does not take much physical space to practice – sometimes no space is even required. All you need is a comfortable posture and clear mind. Spare a few minutes of your attention while brushing your teeth, making coffee, or right before your bedtime. Just remember to slow down, be aware of your presence, and find your safe space physically and mentally.

**Tip 2: Be mindful of how you spend your time.** Many of us are locked down in our home. If you are like me, living in a small apartment, you might not have a lot of variability in your daily activities. Since I started working from home, my dining table has become my office, a virtual meeting room, and of course my very own dine-in station. It is easy to let the day go by without paying much attention to how you spend your day. Your weekdays and weekends can feel the same, especially if you are currently not working. By tracking how you spend your day, you will start recognizing how you want to allocate your time throughout the day. This will also help you reduce the amount time you spend on media and diversify your daily activities. Please note that it is OK to be less productive during this time. Tracking your schedule will help allow you to be aware of your mental availability and prevents you from falling back on becoming an autopilot.

**Tip 3: Engage in mini routine mindfulness exercises throughout the day.** You might remember the study that I cited earlier showing that 20 minutes of mindfulness mental exercise can improve your mood and reduce your anxiety. But, do you know how *long* it feels when you do 20 minutes of meditation for the first time?! If you are not a seasoned meditator, you might be turned off by how boring a meditation exercise feels. It is completely OK for you to start small and later have your own optimal meditation time limit. Two minutes, five minutes, you pick. A guided meditation is often the easiest way to get started and that is how I get my daily meditation routine done. Thanks to technology, there are many Youtube videos showing how to practice guided meditations and smart phone apps (e.g., Headspace, Calm, etc.) available for free of charge. The same as finding your safe space, you can easily implement a 3 to 5 minutes of mindfulness practice routine in your schedule. If you are still unsure where to start, the shower is a great place to practice mindfulness using the five senses. Just listen to the water falling, feel when it touches your face, and remember to catch your attention at that moment!

**Tip 4: Focus on the present time and day.** It is overwhelming to think about what the future would hold. Will I be able to travel to visit my family out of states? Would I be able to start college as a freshman in the fall? Would I be able to find a job after I graduate? All of those questions are important and reasonable. Whether near or far, thinking about the future can bring us a lot of fear and anxiety, which then influence our mood and motivation level for the here and now. Consider making a mental and physical space for your worry so you don't get pulled into your waves of worry. You can block your worry hours (15-30 minutes or so daily) into your schedule where you allow your worry thoughts to arise and put them away when the schedule is up. You can make a worry jar/journal where you keep your worry thoughts together and put away once you write them down. Don't you worry, your worry thoughts will still be

there when you come back to it. You are simply making mental blocks, so your mind doesn't get exhausted by them.

The global pandemic has shaken us all. The ever-changing situation feels daunting. Nonetheless, as the old wisdom goes, amidst the storms, the only way out is to ride through. I know that mindfulness practice might not eliminate my anxiety completely, but it sure will help keep me grounded during this uncertain time and shelter me into my safe place. I hope you all find your safe space whether it is through social support, guided meditation, or professional help as we weather this bad storm together.

To Learn More:

Edenfield, T.M. & Saeed, S.A (2012). An update on mindfulness meditation as a self-help treatment for anxiety and depression. *Psychological Research and Behavior Management*, 5, 131-141. <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S34937>

Zeidan, F., Martucci, K.T., Kraft, R.A., McHaffie, J.G., & Coghill, R.C. (2013). Neural correlates of mindfulness meditation related anxiety relief. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 9(6), 751-759. <https://doi.org/10.1093/scan/nst041>

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