IMPACT Conference · Wellness Day · June 12, 2026

The Neuroscience of Mindfulness

Session 1 · 1:15 – 1:35 PM

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Session 1 Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this session, participants will be able to:

- Define mindfulness and its core principles
- Identify how chronic stress activates the brain's survival response
- Describe the roles of the reptilian brain, amygdala, and prefrontal cortex under stress
- Demonstrate a simple grounding technique — Feet on the Floor — for use in daily practice

What Is Mindfulness?

"Being fully present in the moment, without judgment."

— Karen Hohlweck, MMTCP

On Purpose

Intentional attention
not autopilot

Present Moment

Right here, right now
not yesterday or tomorrow

Non-Judgmentally

Observing without
labeling or criticizing

We Are More Alike Than Different

At our core, we all share the same innate human needs:

To feel seen

To feel heard

To feel valued

To feel loved

And yet — so often, our reactivity gets in the way of that connection.
Not intentionally. But automatically.

Mindfulness invites us to pause before the reactivity fully takes over.

Your Brain Under Stress

Still wired like our early ancestors — built for survival, not modern life.

1. **Reptilian Brain (Brainstem)**

   Our most primitive survival system.
   Fight · Flight · Freeze · Fawn

2. **Amygdala (The Alarm)**

   Fires first. Floods the body with cortisol & adrenaline.
   Emotional hijack — before we can think.

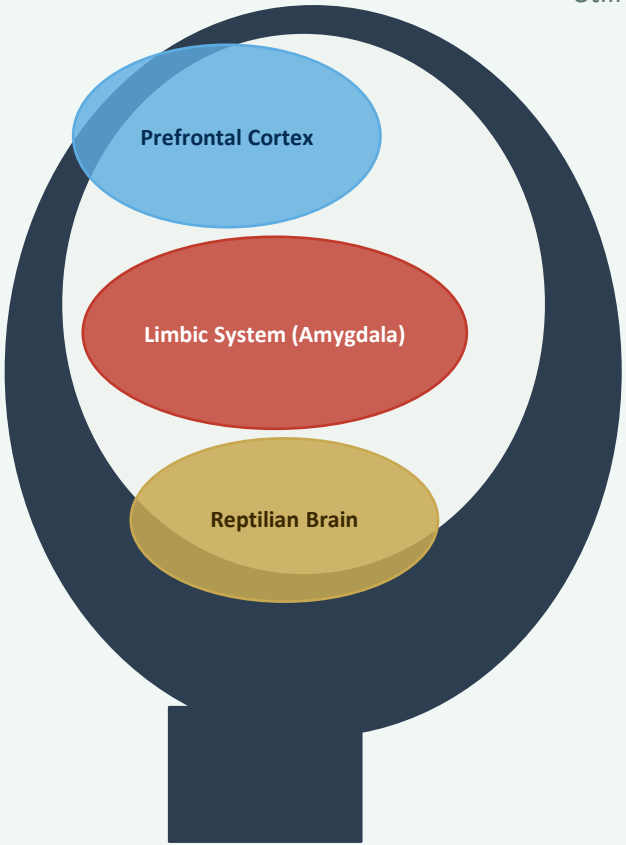
3. **Prefrontal Cortex (Goes Offline)**

   Rational thinking, empathy & decision-making shut down.
   But it comes back online when we pause.



The Three-Part Brain

Still wired like our early ancestors — built for survival



1. Prefrontal Cortex — The Thinking Brain

Develops: Fully matures around age 25

Role: Reasoning, empathy, decision-making, emotional regulation, impulse control

Under stress: Goes OFFLINE — we lose the ability to think clearly or respond wisely

Mindfulness: Pausing & breathing brings it back online

2. Limbic System / Amygdala — The Alarm System

Develops: Active from birth, evolves through first 6 years

Role: Processes emotion, fear, memory, and threat detection

Under stress: HIJACKS the brain — floods body with cortisol & adrenaline before we can think

Mindfulness: Calms the alarm — amygdala literally shrinks with practice

3. Reptilian Brain — The Survival Brain

Develops: Present at birth — our most ancient brain

Role: Controls breathing, heart rate, sleep, hunger, basic survival functions

Under stress: Triggers Fight · Flight · Freeze · Fawn — instantly, automatically

Key insight: Still wired for threats our ancestors faced 200,000 years ago

Reptilian fires → Amygdala hijacks → Prefrontal Cortex goes offline

PAUSE

Notice

"What am I feeling right now?" Upset · Exhausted · Overwhelmed · Hurt

Name It to Tame It

When we name what we're experiencing, we activate awareness instead of remaining trapped in automatic reaction.

Take a Breath

One slow breath activates the parasympathetic nervous system. The prefrontal cortex begins to come back online.

Where Do I Feel This?

Tightness in the chest · Tension in the jaw · Heaviness · Constriction

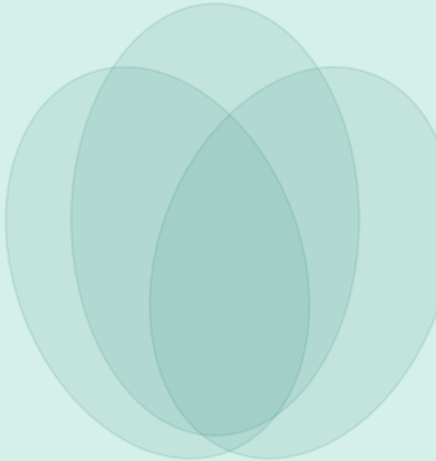
Neurons That Fire Together Wire Together

Donald Hebb, 1949 · The foundation of neuroplasticity

Every time you pause instead of react,
you are building a new neural pathway.

Every mindful breath,
every moment of awareness,
every act of self-compassion

— is literally rewiring your brain.



Guided Practice

Feet on the Floor

1. Feel both feet flat on the floor. Press down gently.

2. Notice the weight, the pressure, the contact with the ground.

3. Breathe in slowly through your nose... hold gently... release through your mouth.

4. If your mind wanders — that is okay. Simply notice, and come back to your breath.

5. Take one more breath. Feel yourself here, in this room, in this moment.

6. ***I am here. I am safe. I am present.***

You can return to this anchor anytime today — at the bedside, in the hallway, in any difficult moment.

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The Body

Awareness, Sensation & Coming Home to Yourself

Session 2 · 2:50 – 3:10 PM

Karen Hohlweck, MMTCP

Session 2 Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this session, participants will be able to:

- Describe the connection between emotional stress and physical body sensation
- Apply the Name It to Tame It technique to physical sensations in the body
- Investigate sensation with curiosity — noticing quality, intensity and change
- Practice a guided body scan meditation

From the Head…

…to the Body

In our first session we explored what happens in the brain under stress.

Now we go deeper — into the body itself.

The body keeps the score. Long before the mind knows something is wrong, the body is already speaking.

Mindfulness teaches us to listen.

Mindfulness Is Already In Your Day

You don't need a cushion or a quiet room. You just need this moment.

Mindful Eating

Notice the smell, the texture, the taste. Chew slowly. Feel the food in your mouth. Eating is not a task — it's an experience.

Mindful Walking

Toes first, then heel. Feel each step. Walk not to get somewhere, but simply to notice the ground beneath you.

Non-Dominant Hand

Eat, brush your teeth, or stir your coffee with your non-dominant hand. Break the habit. Arrive in the now.

What Does Your Body Know?

The body speaks long before the mind catches up.

Stress, emotion, and unprocessed experience all live in the body.

When something difficult happens — a hard conversation, a moment of grief, a patient interaction that stays with you — the nervous system holds it.

We carry it in our shoulders, our jaw, our chest, our gut.

Most of us were never taught to listen there.

Mindfulness changes that.

Name It to Tame It

Now bring that awareness into the body.

What do you notice right now?

Pain	**Tightness**	**Tingling**	**Burning**	**Heaviness**
Tension	**Numbness**	**Pressure**	**Warmth**	**Constriction**

Where exactly is it? Can you locate it precisely?
Does it have a shape? An edge? A color?

Simply naming the sensation begins to shift our relationship to it.

Investigate With Curiosity

Not to fix it — just to know it.

Is it constant?

Or does it come and go? Does it pulse, ebb, shift?

What is its quality?

Sharp, dull, heavy, burning, tight, numb, buzzing?

Does it have edges?

Where does it begin and end? Can you trace its boundary?

As you focus on it —

Does the sensation dissipate... or does it become stronger? Just notice. No judgment.

What happens when you breathe into it?

Gently direct your breath toward that place. What do you notice?



Guided Practice

Body Scan

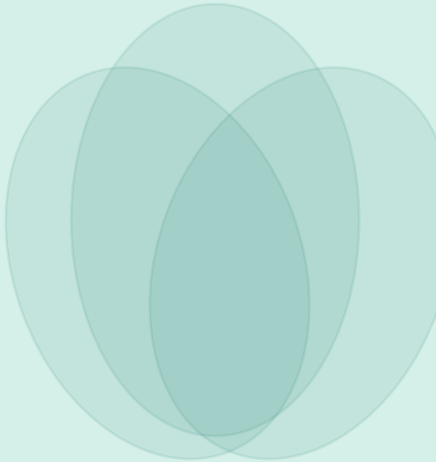
1. Close your eyes or soften your gaze. Feel your feet on the floor.
2. Slowly bring your awareness up through your body — feet, legs, hips, belly, chest, shoulders, arms, neck, face.
3. Pause wherever you notice sensation. Don't try to change it. Just notice.
4. Name what you find — tightness, warmth, tingling, heaviness. Name it gently.
5. Breathe into that place. Ask: is it constant or does it come and go?
6. As you focus your attention there — does it soften... or intensify? Just observe.
7. ***You are not your sensations. You are the one noticing them.***

The Insight

By simply bringing awareness to sensation,
we change our relationship to it.

We are no longer trapped inside the experience.
We are observing it.

And in that space between sensation and reaction —
there is choice.
There is freedom.
There is healing.



We'll return together at 4:25 PM for our closing session.

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The Heart

Self Compassion & Loving Kindness

Session 3 · 4:25 – 4:45 PM

Karen Hohlweck, MMTCP

Session 3 Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this session, participants will be able to:

- Define self compassion and explain its role in preventing provider burnout
- Apply a loving touch or kind inner voice as a mindfulness tool in moments of distress
- Identify personal needs in a difficult moment and respond with self care
- Practice a guided self compassion meditation

The Journey So Far

Session 1 — The Brain

We learned what happens inside the mind under stress. We found our anchor.

Session 2 — The Body

We dropped into the body. We named what we found. We learned to observe without judgment.

Session 3 — The Heart

Now we bring it all together. We turn toward ourselves with the same kindness we offer others.

What Is Self Compassion?

It is not self indulgence. It is not weakness. It is survival.

We offer compassion to our patients every single day.

We sit with their fear. Their grief. Their uncertainty.

We hold space for some of the hardest moments of their lives.

And then we go home. And we forget to offer that same kindness to ourselves.

Mindfulness is not just about awareness. It is also about how we meet ourselves once awareness arrives.

A Loving Touch

When awareness arrives — meet it with kindness.

Hand on your heart

Place one hand gently over your heart. Feel the warmth. Feel it rise and fall with each breath.

Soft touch to the cheek

A gentle hand to the face — the same gesture you might offer someone you love.

One deeper breath

If touch does not feel comfortable, simply take one longer, slower breath. Let that be your gesture of kindness.

Loving words

If you cannot touch — offer words instead. Speak to yourself the way you would speak to a dear friend.

Words You Might Offer Yourself

Speak to yourself the way you would speak to someone you love.

“I am here.”

“You are okay.”

“This is hard right now.”

“I have got you.”

“You do not have to carry this alone.”

“What do you need right now?”

"What Do I Need Right Now?"

Treat yourself as you would your best friend.

When you feel overwhelmed, depleted, or triggered — pause and ask yourself this question. Then actually answer it. And then actually give it to yourself.

- A sip of water
- A few deep breaths
- A short walk outside
- To call a friend
- A moment of stillness
- Rest without guilt

You cannot pour from an empty cup. Taking care of yourself is part of caring for your patients.

Guided Practice

Self Compassion

1. Find a comfortable position. Feel your feet on the floor. Place one hand on your heart.

2. Take a slow breath in... and let it go. Feel the warmth of your own hand.

3. Bring to mind something you are carrying today. Just notice it, without judgment.

4. Offer yourself the words you most need to hear. Speak them gently, silently.

5. *May I be kind to myself in this moment.*

6. *May I give myself the compassion I would freely offer a friend.*

7. ***You are enough. You have done enough. You are enough.***

Thank You

It has been an honor to share this time and these tools with you.

Curiosity · Compassion · Courage

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