

MINDFUL MANTRAS FOR DIFFICULT DAYS

Right now I am {insert emotion}, and this is what {emotion} feels like.

When you're feeling sad, it only makes things worse to deny that you are sad. Allow yourself to be sad, and know that you are sad, and that this is what sadness feels like. The longer you sit with your sadness (or whatever your troubling emotion may be), the more you will realize that it is not a solid state: it ebbs and flows and disappears and reappears.

This is all about feeling your feelings and acknowledging how much something hurts. There *is* pain in life, and in the world, and we must know it before we can do something about it.

This is hard for me, and it's hard for other people, too.

When we struggle, we can feel so alone. Remembering that many other human beings experience the same difficulties can do a lot to alleviate our angst. In *The Book of Joy*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams write that this is “not a denial of pain and suffering, but a shift in perspective — from oneself and toward others, from anguish to compassion — seeing that others are suffering as well.... [A]s we recognize others' suffering and realize that we are not alone, our pain is lessened.”

My favorite example of this: Archbishop Desmond Tutu says that when he cannot sleep at night, he thinks of all the other people in the world, right at that moment, who also cannot sleep, and he is immediately comforted by their presence.

This is what it's like right now.

There's a lot of talk these days about “not accepting” things. In mindfulness, when we speak of “acceptance,” we simply mean the acknowledgement of reality. We accept that something has, indeed, happened, or that a certain state of affairs, are, indeed, the actual state of affairs. It doesn't mean we condone what has happened, or that we agree with it. But we cannot move forward without seeing the present clearly.

In *The Book of Joy*, the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Tutu, and Abrams suggest we remind ourselves, “In order to make the most positive contribution to this situation, I must accept the reality of its existence.”

I can start where I am, right here, right now.

We can be so overwhelmed by the enormity of a situation that we don't know what to do. We easily make small crises much worse by worrying needlessly and thinking eighteen steps ahead. When you feel overwhelmed, ask yourself, “What is needed of me right now?” What do you need to do in this moment? Then do it.



There are many things I cannot control.

We cannot control the nasty outbursts of others, the snow on the driveway, or the traffic during rush hour. Instead of wasting your energy wishing that the present moment were different, take a deep breath and remind yourself that...

There are many things I *can* control, including my response.

What you can *always* control is your response to what has happened. Are you going to shout back at someone in anger, or are you going to pause and consider how this person may also be suffering in this moment? Are you going to shovel the snow in righteous indignation, cursing the gods (and frightening the neighbors), or are you going to get some fresh air and exercise, and maybe build a snowman? Are you going to blare on your horn and slam on your brakes and cut people off, or are you going to turn on some fun tunes and simply *be* in traffic?

No matter how serious or trivial our frustration may be, there is incredible power in taking a moment to pause.

I trust that someday I will find meaning in this.

Victor Frankl wrote “suffering ceases to be suffering at the moment it finds a meaning.” I’m sure you can think of a time in your life when everything fell apart, but as you moved forward, you learned something and found some meaning. Again, the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu remind us, “the path to joy [does] not lead away from suffering and adversity but through it.”

We may not find the meaning right away, but can we trust that someday we will find the purpose in our pain? Jon Kabat-Zinn says that everything is part of the curriculum, so we might as well try to learn.

I, just like everyone else, am “wired” for goodness and joy.

Stories of atrocities and hatred make the news because they are rare. And when they do happen, we absolutely must acknowledge and carefully respond to them.

But we must also not lose sight of our innate goodness. Decades of research in psychology tell us that our natural state is to be cooperative and compassionate. You are wired to be good. And so is everyone else.

You are also wired for joy. In *The Book of Joy*, the authors share the story of Anthony Ray Hinton, an innocent man who spent 30 years of his life on death row. Hinton has forgiven those who sentenced him, and reminds us:

“The world didn’t give you your joy, and the world can’t take it away.”

Our joy is a way of being in the world that isn’t dependent on the circumstances of our lives, but on how we live them. Joy comes through recognizing our common humanity, appreciating what we have, accepting the present moment, and acting with compassion and clarity.

Even on our most difficult days, when happiness is elusive, we can abide in joy.