

Suggested Guidelines for Mindfulness Group Facilitators

A "mindfulness group" is usually five or more participants that meet together each week around the Mindfulness Fundamentals themes and practices. The purpose of the Mindfulness Groups is to support each person's process going through the course. By sharing your experiences, each participant will benefit from the discoveries of all the members. Also, having some accountability to a group makes the course more of a conscious part of yours and everyone's day. Each group will have its own particular identity and style. There's no right way to do it. These guidelines are just a starting point to discover what format works for you.

Starting a Mindfulness Group

Once you've decided to start a mindfulness group, please let us know. If your group is open to anyone in the course, we will post your information on the course forum so participants can get in contact with you.

Responsibility of the Facilitator(s)—Create a Positive, Safe Environment

The primary responsibility of the facilitator(s) is to create a good environment for open discussion to take place. A major factor toward that end is a feeling of safety for all. Your group may choose to have co-facilitators or shared group facilitation. This can take the pressure off one person to solely create a safe and rich space for discussion.

- **Confidentiality**

Rules about confidentiality, when the sharing is personal, should be agreed on at your first meeting. It can be as simple as "whatever is said in the group, stays in the group."

- **Flow and Balance of the Discussions**

People vary greatly in their ease of speaking to a group. Some are shy, others extroverted. Make sure that everyone has a chance to be heard and that a few people do not dominate the discussion. This is essential to healthy group dynamics. Your group may decide to use a "talking stick" which is held by the current speaker who is not interrupted. Besides taking a more directive role if someone is too dominant or controlling, the facilitators should also speak up if the group is getting side-tracked. Some groups may emphasize personal sharing if there is a sense of trust and intimacy that develops between the participants. Others may prefer to not be as personally revealing, focusing more on general observations about their process of cultivating mindfulness. The clearer the leaders and members are on the right balance between personal and general discussion, the better the group will be.

- **No Unsolicited Advice**

Facilitators should discourage judgments or comments about how anyone is doing. Remind members not to give advice unless asked.

- **Monitor the Energy of the Group**

If there is a sense that the vitality and commitment of the group members is waning, then that needs to be addressed. Members can discuss what's needed to make the group more alive and juicy. Perhaps all members can take responsibility as "vibe watchers."

- **Meeting Intervals and Commitment**

Groups will vary in how often they meet. We recommend meeting at least once a week. See what works for you in a way that will best provide continuity while not feeling like a burden of "one more thing to do." This should be a nourishing activity for the leaders as well as other members. Commitment to attend the meetings is a significant factor in the success of your group. After the initial meeting, it is

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recommended that members who decide to participate commit to attend every meeting unless business, travel or unforeseen circumstances make attending impossible. At the end of the course, the members can reevaluate their commitment and assess whether the group itself should continue.

Suggested Meeting Format

The meeting format will be influenced by how long each session will be. Decide on a time frame that will work for as many people as possible. Groups might meet anywhere from 1-3 hours. Below are some suggested meeting components:

- **Start with Silent Mindfulness Practice**

We strongly encourage that each meeting start with a short period of quiet practice time (5-10 minutes) so that everyone can let go of the day, settle and get in touch with themselves. You can always listen to the guided practice MP3 that becomes available in the first week's materials.

- **Personal Check-In**

The meditation can be followed with a personal check-in by each member. The check-in is a skillful way for each person to share what they are finding in working with the weekly practice themes or any issue/question that's coming up which they would like to discuss as a group after everyone checks in. The time spent on the check-in will vary depending on how many people are there and how long the group will meet. The group can decide how much time it wants to spend on this part and how in depth the sharing might be. For instance, the group may decide to let each person take 5 minutes to check in. (Or more or less.) It may be good to have someone ring a bell or set a timer as a reminder for the person to wrap up their check-in. Remind members of how long each person should take for their sharing, if the check-ins become too drawn out.)

- **Discuss the Weekly Practice Theme**

After the check-in, the discussion of the weekly practice theme can take place as well as any issues that were brought up from the check-ins. This might also include going over the worksheet practices and questions. It's helpful for everyone to have a sense of how long the discussion will be.

- **Encourage Statements of Intention and/or What Was Learned**

Before the end of the meeting, participants may want to state their intention with regard to what they think will support them in their practice between meetings as well as any idea they will take from the group. (For example, "I plan to practice mindful breathing everyday for five minutes." "I'm going to take a mindful walk in nature this weekend." "I intend to notice my emotions when I'm around my children.")

- **Provide an Opportunity for Feedback on the Meeting**

After the main discussion, take some "process time" for members to express how the meeting was for them. Often this will just be a few minutes, sometimes longer. It gives a chance for each person to give feedback about what is or isn't working for them in the group. That way everyone can benefit from individual observations and hear any ideas that would make the group stronger, rather than leaving the meeting feeling disconnected from the group. Saying what's truthful and useful, without blame, can make for a deeper sense of honesty and mutual commitment.

Skype Group Facilitation

For those who wish to connect on a more national or international level, a facilitated Skype group is also possible. All participants will either need a Skype account or set up an account on their computer. These accounts and phone calls/ conferencing are free and easy to set up. If video conferencing is desired, group members do have to pay a monthly fee. This option, although nice, is not necessary for the purpose of this group. Skype group members do need a computer with working sound and voice speakers or working portable speakers and headset.

Setting Up Your Group on Skype

To make it easier on the facilitator, we suggest having each group member add your contact information to their Skype account first and not the other way around. You will then receive a contact request from Skype asking if you want to add that person to your contact list. This will cut down on time spent entering in everyone's contact information. Once you've confirmed all the contacts, you can create a Skype Group. Skype has made it easy for a facilitator to call a group of people all at one time. This can be done by creating a contact group. The following directions tell you how.

1. Once you have logged into your Skype account, click on [Create a group]
2. Start by naming and saving your group. Click on the [Save group in Contacts] button on the upper right hand side.
3. It will ask you to name the group (ex: Mindfulness Group) and then hit 'OK'
4. Now you're ready to add participant to your group. You can drag and drop the group members from the contact box on the left to the upper right box where it says "Drag contact that you want to add here".

Special Facilitation Considerations

Facilitating a group phone call is, of course, logically different from facilitating a group in person. In addition to the guidelines above, here are a few extra suggestions to consider.

- **Consistent Start and End Time**

It's important to having a consistent weekly scheduled time to start and end the phone call just as you would for an in-person meeting. This will help group members commit and be on time for the call.

- **Have an Agenda**

It is very helpful for people to have an agenda before each meeting. You are welcome to follow the "Suggested Meeting Format" above. Whatever your meeting's agenda, send it out in an email a day or two before the phone call so people know what to expect.

- **Attendance**

It can be helpful to have people announce when they've entered the call "hi! This is Susan." That way you and everyone else know who's on. One of the nice things about a Skype call is that you can also see who is on although you might not be checking it once the call begins. Allow a few minutes for everyone to join the call before starting.

- **The Flow of Discussion**

To help the flow of speaking and avoid people talking over each other, it can be useful to have the facilitator call on each group member to share during such times as the personal check-in. This means the facilitator needs to keep track of who's on the call and whose turn it is to speak. At other times, such as discussions about the week's theme, you might try an open discussion format where group members chime in when they would like to add to the discussion. For this format, ask group members to state their name before they start to speak. This helps to prevent people speaking over each other. If more than one person states their name to speak at the same time, the facilitator can then delegate who goes first and then who will follow.

- **Photos**

It can be a nice touch to have everyone include a photo of themselves in their Skype profile. This can be done by following these simple instructions:

1. Sign into your Skype account
2. Click on 'Skype' in the upper left tool bar. This will show a drop down menu
3. Put your cursor over 'Profile' and click on 'Change Profile Photo'
4. You can take a picture with your webcam (if you have one) by waiting for your image to show in the center of the screen and then click on [Take a Picture] at the bottom right of the screen. If

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you don't have a webcam, you can choose a photo off of your desktop by clicking on [Choose file] found on the bottom left of the screen.

If you have any questions about group facilitation or need a little guidance, please let us know. We are happy to help in any way we can.

Good luck and let this be an enjoyable and nourishing experience for you.

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