



Ryan M. Niemiec

The Mindfulness and Character Strengths Workbook



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About the Author

Ryan M. Niemiec (pronounced “knee-mick”), PsyD, is a leading international figure in the education, science, and practice of character strengths that are found in all human beings. Dr. Niemiec is Chief Science and Education Officer of the renowned Values in Action (VIA) Institute on Character, a nonprofit organization in Cincinnati, Ohio, that leads the global advancement of the science of character strengths. He has been at the center of this work, positively impacting many millions of people.

Ryan is also an award-winning psychologist, certified coach, annual instructor at the University of Pennsylvania, and a member of the special guest faculty at five coaching and positive psychology institutes. Ryan received the Distinguished Early Career Award from the American Psychological Association and was awarded Fellow of the International Positive Psychology Association (IPPA), also serving on their Council of Advisors. He is cofounder and president of the Spirituality/Meaning Division of IPPA.

Ryan has authored 14 books, over 100 academic papers, and several hundred user-friendly articles (his blog on *Psychology Today* is called What Matters Most?). His books include the bestselling consumer book *The Power of Character Strengths* and books on stress management, strengths in teens, positive movies, and strengths for disabilities/abilities. He is also the author of the two leading practitioner-focused books in positive psychology – *Character Strengths Interventions* and *Mindfulness and Character Strengths*. The latter book contains the evidenced-based program he founded, mindfulness-based strengths practice (MBSP), now used by practitioners and researchers in more than 50 countries. He created an MBSP Certification in 2021, the first character strengths certification program. Ryan has led hundreds of mindfulness-based program sessions for clinical and lay audiences and has led the MBSP program in particular over 20 times.

Ryan cofounded Blooming Strengths Sangha, an open, global mindfulness and character strengths community that focuses on practices, experiences, and mindful-living community building. His lineage name, in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh, is Fullest Breath of the Heart, and he is an aspirant for ordination in the Order of Interbeing.

Ryan lives in Cincinnati with his wife and three young, zestful children. His highest strengths are hope, love, honesty, fairness, spirituality, curiosity, and appreciation of beauty. In his leisure time, he practices tai chi, plays tennis, basketball, and chess, and is a zealot of Michigan State University athletics, a collector of vintage and rare Pez dispensers. He also engages in creative writing and in building communities in mindfulness and character strengths.

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Gratitude

I am grateful there are authentic and meaning-filled organizations such as the two that are central to the creation of this book – the VIA Institute and Hogrefe Publishing – and the wonderful people that help these companies shine.

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With thankfulness to my family, friends, and other colleagues, past and present. I acknowledge, with a sense of interbeing, that none of what I do is alone and all I do is a culmination of countless experiences and efforts of you and others across numerous generations. From an immediate perspective, I bow to my Mom, Dad, siblings, wife, and three children. Love to “R4 x M” always...

Dedication

*I once had this conversation with a wise person: I asked them,
“Of all the great teachings out there, what is the best practice you would recommend?”
“There is only one practice that matters,” they said.
“Really?! Which one?” I asked.
“The one you do.”*

I dedicate this book to my wise teachers, past and present, all who reside in my present.

One of my wise teachers is my son Ryland who reminds me that mindfulness should be playful and enjoyable. He dislikes brushing his teeth so to improve the experience, one morning when I was helping him brush I asked him to take a slow inhale and exhale while brushing. After the inhale, which he found a bit odd, he exclaimed out of nowhere, “Chicken!” Now, hundreds of times later, as I support him in brushing, we take an inbreath, exclaim “Chicken!”, roar with laughter, and continue brushing.

This is true mindful teeth-brushing. May I always learn from you, my gentle and loving boy, Ryland.

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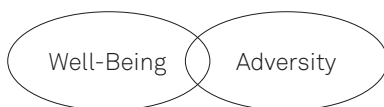
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Preface

A student asked a Zen master, “What is the most important thing?” and the Zen master responded with, “The most important thing is to remember the most important thing.”

With mindfulness (your curious and open awareness) and character strengths (the best, core parts of you), you always have the most important things within you. As you learn, practice, and discuss these areas, you’ll take notice of your kindness and fairness, you’ll feel more gratitude and hope, you’ll uncover your bravery and perseverance, connect with your honesty and humility, and readily use your curiosity and spirituality. You’ll see that mindfulness and character strengths are pathways to the most important thing, and they are the most important thing itself.

What is your “most important thing?” For me, it is my family. Is family not a manifestation of our love, kindness, forgiveness, social intelligence, humor, gratitude, and mindful attention? For someone else, the most important thing might be work productivity or contributing to others. Is that not a manifestation of perseverance, zest, self-regulation, hope, kindness, creativity, and mindful effort?



Mindfulness and character strengths are within all of us, and they are for all of us – regardless of age, gender, occupation, education level, country of origin, beliefs, and personality type. The many benefits of mindfulness and of character strengths are captured in the graphic above. Modern science points to these two overarching buckets of benefit – the uplift to our well-being and the facing, coping with, or overcoming of adversity.

Within each, there are many streams of benefit such as enhancing happiness, inner peace, meaning in life, improved health, better work performance, and more positive relationships in the well-being bucket. And in the adversity bucket, there is stress management, illness coping,

reducing relationship conflict, and handling anxiety, sadness, and anger. Both mindfulness and character strengths help with well-being and with adversity. Imagine what bringing them together can do!

I wrote this Workbook for two main reasons: One, there are no available books for the general public on the integration of character strengths and mindfulness. Two, I heard over and over again from practitioners leading *mindfulness-based strengths practice* (MBSP) sessions that they needed a user-friendly book for their MBSP students, employees, and clients. This is that Workbook to serve both purposes!

Therefore, this Workbook is a stand-alone resource for anyone. If you are not part of an MBSP program or group, then you might view this Workbook as a guidebook supporting you. View the Workbook as containing your own personal *self-development sessions*! You might take 1 week per session (give or take) and really dig into your personal growth, and engage in the explorations, activities, and suggestions in the worksheets. May this Workbook be like a peaceful yet challenging friend, supporting you on your life journey.

And, this Workbook can (and should) be used as a companion for those participating in MBSP groups or individual MBSP sessions or workshops. The facilitator of MBSP will naturally have the MBSP manual found in *Mindfulness and Character Strengths* (2nd edition), which was written for practitioners who lead MBSP programs and who study the integration of mindfulness and character strengths. MBSP facilitators will often recommend that participants attain this Workbook you have in your hands. You’ll be able to follow along in this Workbook session-by-session with the 8-week program of MBSP. You have the activities, worksheets, home practice suggestions, and more (!). It is all right here, and I hope it will help you make the most of the MBSP experience, help you connect with others in your MBSP community, and support you on your life journey.

If you are interested in learning more about what MBSP is, then you can read Reading Activity 1.1 in Session 1.

The MBSP program is being used across the globe, having reached every continent (except Antarctica), with an estimated hundreds of MBSP facilitators (in-person and virtual) from all walks of life – coaches, psychologists, business professionals, human resources specialists, teachers, parents, and scientists. They report that participants experience large benefits from the program. The latest science is showing their findings are not unique to them. When MBSP has been compared with the most popular mindfulness-based program on the planet (mindfulness-based stress reduction/MBSR), MBSP has come out as stronger every time.

All of this means you have arrived at the right place. Whether you are hoping to manage stress and problems better, are seeking growth and self-improvement, or are helping others to do the same, this Workbook will be an important and supportive tool for your journey.

May this Workbook brighten your journey, lighten your tension, and deepen the joy and meaning of your life.

Ryan M. Niemiec
July 2023

bringing the two together and developing them in unison?

Here is a summary of the importance of bringing mindfulness and character strengths together.

Mindfulness without character strengths is deflated. Many people who engage in mindfulness or meditation practices quickly lose focus, find their interest wanes, and hit so many detours that they give up. Character strengths provide energy, substance, and direction to the practice of mindfulness. Strengths help you to start and then maintain a practice of mindful walking, of mindful listening, or of mindful meditation. They lead you to get the most out of mindfulness practices.

Character strengths without mindfulness are hollow. The mindless use of our character strengths is commonplace (think of an automatic “Thank you” or “I love you” that we offer without even thinking about it, without conscious use of your character strengths of gratitude and love). At times we may speak in ways that are superficial and unconscious, and at other times judgmental or unbalanced. As mindfulness is applied to character strengths, however, use of them becomes focused, like an archer directing an arrow to a bull’s-eye. Your relationships are enhanced. Meaning is deepened. Fulfillment is reached.

Mindfulness, Character Strengths, and You!

In this Workbook, you will:

- Discover and deeply understand your inner capacity to be mindful and to see and use your character strengths.
- Identify your signature strengths, overused strengths, and underused strengths, and how to improve each.
- Examine ways you can connect character strengths and mindfulness in your life to enhance your well-being and manage problems.
- Learn new ways to apply mindfulness to your character strengths and, in turn, to apply your character strengths to daily mindful living.
- Build your mindfulness/character strengths toolbox by gathering numerous practical strategies that can be used throughout your life.
- Take immediate action with your character strengths and mindfulness.

A wonderful way to grow your self-awareness is to explore your mindfulness and character strengths from multiple angles. This Workbook guides you through doing that

by offering a variety of questions, activities, and opportunities to reflect on your thoughts, feelings, ideas, actions, and behaviors. In the process of connecting the dots, you can formulate a plan to bring your strengths and mindfulness into your everyday life.

This Workbook will help you explore your mindfulness and character strengths and support you with reflection questions. Let’s try it now:



What got you interested in mindfulness and/or character strengths?



What excites you about these topics?



What brought you to this particular set of self-awareness tools?



What do you hope to accomplish by engaging with this workbook?

Session 1: Mindfulness and Autopilot

There is another world. And it is in this one.

Paul Eluard

A story to remember

There was a quiet entomologist who attended a mindfulness-based strengths practice (MBSP) program. He described himself as a loner and was clear to say, “I study bugs, not people.” In the first session he explained that when he does talk, he talks a lot, noting this probably had something to do with his difficulty relating to others and filling up the silence due to his uncertainty around people. He explained one of his intentions in MBSP was to develop more mindful speech, saying, “I want to speak less, listen better, and most of all, understand more.” As the group dynamic unfolded, he flowered. Bringing mindfulness to his autopilot speaking and hearing others describe his creativity, kindness, and fairness, would often bring him to tears. These were parts of himself that were always there, but he was now opening up to them. He heard stories from group members about showing love for their father, and he wished he had shown more love to his father before he passed away. He focused on understanding this – understanding himself and his loss and suffering and also understanding the group member’s experience. As his journey progressed, he summarized his experience as – “Perhaps I don’t study bugs or people, I study the interconnection among all forms of life, and I wish to continue my understanding of those connections.” This now-curious entomologist took great care to attend to his autopilot mind and grow in mindfulness and strengths, resulting in deep and ongoing personal impact. This is possible for each one of us.

What Is Mindfulness?

What comes to mind when you hear the word “mindfulness”? Write your responses in the space provided below each question.

Whether you wrote down brushing your teeth, showering, shaving, making coffee, or driving to work, you can readily discover your autopilot mind. The mind is quick to wander off into thoughts, memories, previous conversations, and plans for the day. Often, the last thing we are focused on is the toothbrush, the soap, or the measuring spoon we're holding. Regarding the activities you just wrote down, can you relate to the idea of your mind on autopilot?

Before moving on to the “why” of mindfulness, there's one more important point to know about the “what” of mindfulness. Mindfulness does not mean to stay in the present moment. No person stays in the here and now. Rather, mindfulness is the *return* to the present moment. It's catching the mind when it wanders off and returning it back to the task at hand, back to your breathing, back to the person you're with, back to the colorful leaves on the trees around you. You might find this phrase useful: *Catch your autopilot mind, as soon as possible*, or *Catch AP-ASAP*, for short. Then return your mind to the present moment.

Why Does Mindfulness Matter?

Is it time to wake up?

Scores of studies show there are substantial benefits to waking yourself up with the practice of mindfulness. It benefits the brain and the immune system. It boosts our well-being, reduces our stress, and improves our social relationships. It helps people to lessen the impact of a wide range of medical and psychological disorders, and it leads them to feel more in control of managing their symptoms.



DID YOU KNOW?

Research shows that when we think about ourselves, make decisions, and interact with others, we are doing these actions with lots of personal blind spots. We all have pockets of unawareness about who we are and how we are coming across to others. Research also shows that mindfulness can help overcome these blind spots (Carlson, 2013).

Start a regular meditation practice (you'll learn about different practices to try at the end of this session). Be curious about what insights you might experience. Be open to seeing yourself in a clear way – strengths, struggles, and everything in between!

You Are Lucky

As we practice with mindfulness and observe our mind and body more and more each day, we become aware of a couple interesting realizations:

- 1. We are lucky to have found mindfulness:** This sentiment – if we allow it to sink in – becomes palpable on a feeling level, not just a concept level. This capacity within us – to notice and be present fully to what matters most to us – is a capacity to be incredibly grateful for. The intention here is *not* to proclaim one is blessed, more lucky than others, or privileged. The capacity for mindfulness of oneself, of others, and of the world is for any human being to access and is not the sole occupation of a particular group of people, a particular kind of person, or relegated to certain beliefs, language, country, status, or ability. It is a capacity we can develop within and therefore improve ourselves.
- 2. We do not have the luxury to be mindless:** You may notice more and more how precious your time is – and how limited it is. You probably want to make the most of your time and therefore be present with who and what is in front of you. You may take this sentiment further and say to yourself – how could I have the audacity to be mindless or go through life like an automaton when so many people cannot do what I can do (e.g., walk, hear, think deeply, work, eat without help, relate closely to others, and so forth)? How dare I take these for granted? While this is true, we want to be gentle, patient, and compassionate with ourselves as we progress forward in our self-understanding and growth.

As we progress through this Workbook, we can make an effort to hold all of this together – our “luckiness,” our self-gentleness, our eyes toward personal growth, and our compassion for others' suffering.

In addition to the science, on a practical level, mindfulness “wakes us up” to life. We take a fresh look at what is happening within us and around us. Our tendency to just sleepwalk through the motions of life decreases, and our awareness and appreciation of life increases. When we recognize ourselves on autopilot, our mindfulness kicks into gear. As a result, we not only notice the positives all around us and deepen our connections with others, but we more clearly and honestly assess our challenges and difficulties, which affords us the ability to manage them better.



Your MBSP Toolbox

Session 1: Mindfulness and Autopilot

Key Insights

- The *what* of mindfulness is the self-regulation of your attention. This means you decide what you put your attention on (e.g., someone's smile, a sip of coffee, your inhale and exhale).
- The *how* of mindfulness is your mind's openness, curiousness, and acceptance to whatever you put your attention on (e.g., someone's smile, a sip of coffee, your inhale and exhale).
- When you are in *autopilot mind* you are in thinking mode – not attending to your senses, feelings, and inner experiences. This is a normal state of mind that is our default mode much of the time.
- You can learn to tap into *mindful mind* at any moment with *Catch AP-ASAP* (catching your autopilot mind, as soon as possible).

From the Science

- When we think about ourselves, make decisions, and interact with others, we have a number of gaps, biases, and personal blind spots. Research shows that mindfulness can help us overcome many of our personal blind spots (Carlson, 2013).

For Your Exploration

- When are you most prone to go into autopilot mind?
- When are you most prone to be awake (or in a mindful mind)?

Pearl of Wisdom

- You are lucky to have discovered mindfulness, this internal capacity that helps you to be present to what matters most to you in life. Therefore, we do not have the luxury to be walking through life chronically in autopilot.

Expand Your Toolbox

- Beginner's Mind Meditation (Audio Track 1): Eat one bite of food or drink one sip of water as if for the first time, using all of your senses.
- Mindfulness With a Routine Activity (Practice Activity 1.1): Consider a daily activity that you typically do on autopilot, lost in your thinking or distraction, and engage in that activity with mindfulness, giving it your full attention each day.

**Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice (MBSP)
Activities and Tracking Sheet: Session 1**

Suggested Activities for This Week

- Beginner’s Mind Activity (Audio Track 1). Listen to at least once.
- Body-Mindfulness Meditation (Audio Track 2). Practice ×1/day.
- Practice mindfulness with one routine activity each day (the same activity all week) and record your observations in Practice Worksheet 1.1.
- Look at Reading Activity 1.1. Overview of Mindfulness-Based Strengths Practice.
- Reflect on a You at Your Best experience (listen to Audio Track 3).
- Track your experiences on this sheet or in your journal.

Day & date	Type of practice & time length	Strengths used	Observations & comments
Monday Date:			
Tuesday Date:			
Wednesday Date:			
Thursday Date:			
Friday Date:			
Saturday Date:			
Sunday Date:			