

**Today on The Lerner Podcast, author Whitney Stewart shares mindfulness exercises with us. Whitney's latest book, *Mindfulness and Meditation: Handling Life with a Calm and Focused Mind*, covers the practice of mindfulness and gives exercises for examining emotions and managing stress. School Library Journal called the book "straightforward and refreshing."**

**What inspired you to write a book about mindfulness for teens, Whitney?**

That's a good question. The answer to that really goes back to my teenage years. I was a very stressed out kid. And I had a lot of reasons to be stressed out. I came from a troubled background; there was a lot of stress in my family. There was alcoholism and drug addiction in my family. Those issues were really hard to deal with. And I didn't know how to deal with it. And I didn't know how to ask for help.

And more particularly, at a certain point, in my freshman year of high school, I was strong, I was confident, and I thought I could handle all these issues. And I got to high school and I was a big athlete. And then I had a knee injury. The doctor told me, the surgeon told me that I had to quit sports. And this devastated me. I defined myself as an athlete, as a strong woman, as a go getter. And I had to quit sports. And that sent me spiraling into depression. I didn't know who my friends were now, because my friends were all out playing in the sports teams, and I wasn't there. And I was alone a lot. I didn't know how to deal with my depression, and my spiraling thoughts of negativity. And added to that, you know, the trouble that I was feeling at home, and you put all that together, and that's a heavy load for a teenager.

I finally went to a yoga class, this was back in the 70s, before yoga was what it is today. People didn't know about it back then. But when I started to learn meditation, I sensed a calm that I had never experienced before. And I really sensed it physically. And it allowed me to relax a little bit, to give a little space around my worried mind.

And I thought to myself, now as an adult, in a much better place than I was when I was a teenager, that I would like to help teens find a way through their own difficulties and challenges. And even if they don't have the kinds of troubles that I was going through with chemical dependency in the family, or stress from not being able to play sports, or whatever the issue is, even if their lives are going along pretty well, most likely, most teens feel pressure somewhere in their life or confusion somewhere in their life. And mindfulness is just a way to pause, to be able to look at your internal life, to find your own wisdom, that sense of self and connectedness to others. And I thought wouldn't it be great to be able to write a book that gives teens some very concrete ways of practicing mindfulness and helping themselves find a more balanced life?

**How do you think social media has affected that?**

Of course, social media is a place where teams can connect and really find their sense of self, and find friendship, even find their passions. And yet there's this other side to it that just adds to the daily life of, how do I look on social media? How do I interact on social media? Who's looking at me? How do I look at myself? There's just so much more there than that I experienced when I was young.

**Thanks so much for joining us on the podcast. And now we're going to go into your exercises. Thanks, Whitney.**

Great, thanks.

**The first exercise is on posture.**

Experienced meditators have found that posture matters. Proper posture can help you feel awake and alert as well as relaxed. It also helps calm your busy mind. Most people meditate in a sitting position with an

elongated spine, a spine straight up. If that's your approach, follow these guidelines. You can try sitting in a chair with your feet planted on the floor, or sit on a cushion or folded blanket on the floor with your legs crossed. Put a sticky mat under your blanket, or place your blanket on a rug or carpet so that it doesn't shift. If you're meditating on the floor, sit on the forward edge of a firm cushion or folded blanket. This will help lift your buttocks slightly higher than your knees and will naturally tilt your pelvic bones forward and down. This helps your alignment and eases tension in your back and knees. Rest your hands palms down on your thighs or place your hands in your lap with your right hand palm up, resting in your open left hand. Thumbs touching. Elongate your spine. Stretch it up, up, up toward the sky. Avoid slumping, remain relaxed and not stiff. Let your shoulders drop and stay level. Tuck your chin in slightly and relax your jaw. Touch the tip of your tongue to the back of your teeth to prevent excessive salivation and to help you relax your jaw. Keep your eyes slightly open, and gaze down with unfocused eyes a few inches below your nose. If keeping your eyes open is distracting, start with your eyes closed and open them after you feel more settled. Raise your gaze if you feel sleepy and lower it if you feel distracted.

#### Simple breath meditation.

Sit in a meditation posture and start by taking three mindful breaths. You take three soft, slow breaths and feel them in your body. Notice the air coming into your nose as you breathe in. Notice it filling your lungs and expanding your chest and abdomen. Notice your breath again as you breathe out through your nose or mouth. Notice the contraction in your chest and abdomen with each exhalation. The point of these three mindful breaths is to stay aware of and focused on your breathing.

Now let's begin the simple breath meditation. Start by taking these three mindful breaths on your own time. Notice the expansion and contraction of your chest and belly as you breathe, and relax more and more with each breath. Imagine sinking deeply into your seat. After taking three mindful breaths, allow your attention to stay lightly on your breathing. If it helps you to focus, count each out breath like this. Breathe in and then exhale and count one. Breathe in again. Exhale and count two. Continue breathing and counting each exhalation up to 10. Then count each exhalation starting again at one. When your mind can stay focused on your breathing, let go of the counting. Now notice the slight natural gap or pause at the end of each out breath before you breathe in again. Relax your muscles with each pause in your breathing. This can be called finding the gap. If you start to think of something, bring your mind back to the pause or the gap between your out breath and your next in breath. Relax and breathe. Relax and breathe. If you lose focus, return to counting your exhalations. Continue this pattern until you feel ready to stop, or when your alarm chimes.

#### Who are you meditation?

Sit in a meditation posture and start by taking three mindful breaths. Notice the expansion and contraction of your chest and belly as you breathe. Relax more and more with each breath. Imagine sinking deeply into your seat. Now turn your attention onto yourself. See an image of who you are in your mind. Imagine yourself as a jigsaw puzzle with many pieces. Each piece represents a label that you give yourself or a judgment you make about yourself. Think about how you came by those labels and judgments. Did someone call you a name? And it stuck? Did you define yourself a certain way to fit into a group? Did someone call out a strength that you are proud of? What does it feel like to be a jigsaw puzzle of so many pieces? So many labels and judgments. Imagine this jigsaw puzzle of you now breaking apart and the pieces scattering. Breathe in. Breathe out. Where are you now? Who are you now? Breathe into the empty space where your pieces used to be. Connect to it. Connect to that empty space. Rest there awhile, breathing quietly. Now you have the choice to put your puzzle pieces back together or to remain in that openness. Do you want to keep some of the pieces and let others go? You can choose now. Give yourself

time. Breathe into the space. When you are ready, shift your attention back to the physical sensations in your body. Notice the way your buttocks contact the surface below you. Notice how you were holding your hands. Are they tense or relaxed? Are they open or closed? Notice your jaw muscles. What do they feel like? Take in another deep breath and relax all of your muscles. End your meditation when you are ready, or when your timer goes off.

**For more mindfulness exercises from Whitney, visit [lernerbooks.com/go/mindfulness](https://lernerbooks.com/go/mindfulness).**

**Thank you for joining us here on The Lerner Podcast. Tune in again next time for more author interviews and the stories behind the books.**