

A person with long hair, wearing a grey jacket and blue jeans, is sitting on a large rock on a grassy bank. They are looking out over a calm lake towards distant mountains under a soft, hazy sky. Bare tree branches frame the top and right sides of the image.

THE GIFT OF MINDFULNESS THROUGH FERTILITY CHALLENGES

by SUE DUMAIS

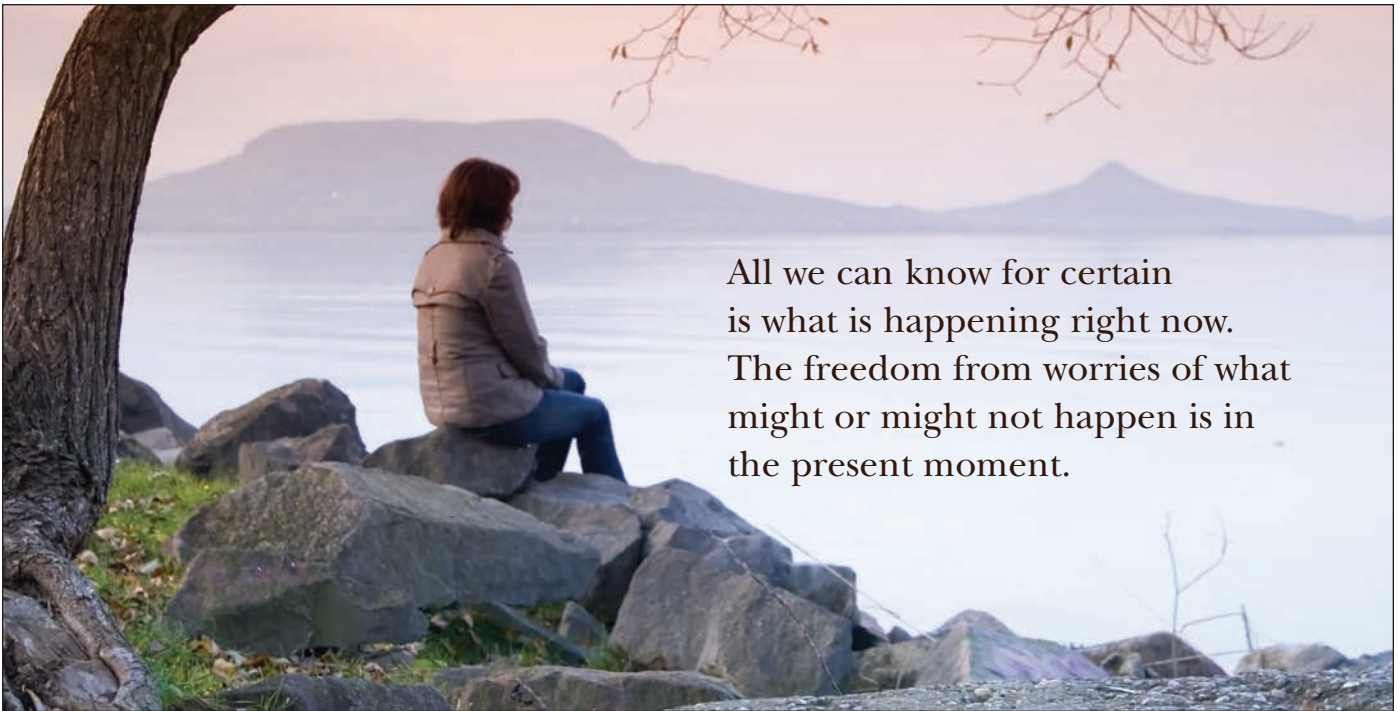
You may be hearing the word mindfulness more and more these days. Many people ask me, "What exactly is mindfulness?" By the time you finish reading this article, you will have had a firsthand experience of mindfulness and you'll better understand how you can use it to ease anxiety or other negative emotions throughout your fertility journey. Before we begin I would like you to ask yourself, within your mind and body, "What's happening now?"

After you read this paragraph, I would like you to stop, close your eyes and bring your awareness to your breath. Without changing anything about your breathing, simply focus on it for at least ten breaths. Then check in with your emotions, and ask yourself, "How do I feel right now?"

Now go ahead and close your eyes.

Now that you've taken the time to be aware of how you are feeling, I would like you to see if you can get a sense of where you are holding those emotions in your physical body. For example, many people will feel tension in their shoulders and neck when they are anxious; others will clench their jaw. Finish reading this paragraph then close your eyes and notice your physical body in relation to how you are feeling emotionally.

Take note of what you discovered. Be curious about whether you already had a sense of this information or whether it is new to you. For now, there is no need to do anything with the information you have gathered. Awareness is the first key!



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is what is happening right now.
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might or might not happen is in
the present moment.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is simply bringing your awareness into the present moment, noticing what is happening right *now*. All we have is this very moment. The past is in the past. The future will always remain in the future, because once it arrives it becomes the present moment. The future becomes the "*now*." All we can know for certain is what is happening right now. The freedom from worries of what might or might not happen is in the present moment. Relief from the regrets of the past is in the present moment. Peace comes from letting go of the past and the future, learning from your experiences, and accepting who you are right now.

Mindfulness is simply bringing your awareness into the present moment. Noticing what is happening right NOW.

Through my own personal life experience and by supporting my clients through the fertility journey, I've come to realize how challenging it is to stay in the present moment when what you desire always seems to be in the next step, the next test or appointment, or when you are waiting for your next menstrual cycle. So many couples become consumed with the next step that they miss out on what is happening right now. It is easy to get caught up in what isn't working and what isn't happening. If you continue to focus on the past or the future, you miss out on life, because life is happening *now*.

For some people, focusing on the past or the future is a way of avoiding the present. By focusing on the future you can avoid any pain, anxiety and loss you are feeling in this moment. But avoiding those feelings won't make them go away; in fact, it will eventually negatively impact your health and could interfere with your ability to conceive.

How can you practice Mindfulness?

I just came back from a trip to Salt Lake City, Utah. It is a beautiful city and everyone was so friendly. I knew I would be writing this article when I returned from my trip, so I made a conscious effort to be mindful as much as I could. I find it so much easier to stay mindful or present when I am travelling. It was a business trip full of activities, lectures and events, so I didn't have much down time; however, it was easy to stay fully present most of the time because every moment was new and fresh. Travelling stimulates all my senses.

When I was travelling, I noticed many young babies in the arms of their mothers. It warmed my heart and I would smile at them. I felt a warmth in my heart, and at the same time I noticed a longing for my own baby to hold. I felt a deep desire and at the same time a sense of peace, which made me smile. When I look back on my fertility journey I remember times when I could barely look at a newborn without feeling a deep sense of sadness and at times even jealousy.

Many women experience feelings of jealousy throughout their fertility journey. It is very common. Once you feel jealous, often feelings of guilt follow. You feel guilty for being jealous, or for not being happy for someone else. Mindfulness can help you deal with challenging situations like these.

Practicing Mindfulness: the 3 As

I teach my clients about the 3 As: Awareness, Acceptance and Action. Let's use the example of feeling jealous when you see a woman who is holding a newborn baby to work through this exercise.

Step 1. Awareness: Notice your thoughts and check in to see how you are feeling. Perhaps you can get a sense of how those feelings show up in your physical body. Thoughts: "Why does she have a baby and I don't?" "What makes her so special?" "Why can't that be me?" Emotions: "I feel angry and jealous." "Now I feel guilty for thinking mean thoughts."

Step 2. Acceptance: Acceptance is such an important step, and it's one that most people skip over. They end up holding negative emotions like anger and guilt in the physical body. Then they turn to self-judgment, and the self-defeating cycle continues.

Create new thoughts: "I am feeling angry and jealous, and it's okay." "I am feeling guilty and it's okay." "I am where I am and it's okay."

Step 3. Action: Sometimes Step 2, Acceptance, is the Action step. There will be times that the process of making peace with your thoughts and feelings is enough to soften the negative emotions. Other times you will need to take action. It is important to choose the action steps that work well for you.

Here are some examples of effective action steps:

- Take 10 deep breaths
- Imagine you can simply exhale guilt and inhale forgiveness
- Repeat an affirmation: "I trust that I will be a mother"
- Inhale "I am," exhale "calm"
- Go for a walk
- Take a bath
- Write in a journal
- Talk to a friend or your partner

Exercise:

The previous exercise might sound too simple, but I assure you it is very effective if you follow all three steps. There is no better time to put this into practice than right now! I want you to reflect on a challenge that you are currently experiencing on your fertility journey. Use the 3 As to help you process and transform it. Stop reading and put mindfulness into practice.

Putting it into Practice

You can begin to practice mindfulness using every day tasks such as eating, reading, walking, listening, working, etc. When you focus on what you are doing, seeing, smelling, hearing, tasting, or feeling, you are being mindful. Ask yourself frequently throughout the day, "what is happening now?" Notice everything around you. Begin to look at the world around you as if you are seeing it for the first time. Look closely, listen intently, and allow all your senses to guide you as you explore the world in every moment. Savour all the details and cherish each moment as it arrives. For each moment is a "present." It is a gift! As you receive the gift of the present moment you will be able to find peace, a deep sense of peace that will help guide you on your journey. You have the ability to transform your experience of life and life is occurring now!

Resources

If you would like more information on Mindfulness I recommend the following resources:

Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society - Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Training: <http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/mbsr>

A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose, by Eckert Tolle (Penguin Group, 2005)

The Mind-Body Fertility Connection, by James Schwartz (Llewellyn Publications, 2008)

Conquering Infertility: Mind Body Guide to Enhancing Fertility and Coping with Infertility. By Dr. Alice Domar, Alice Lesch Kelly (Penguin Group, 2002)

About the author

Sue Dumais' own struggles with fertility combined with her passion for yoga inspired her to co-found Family Passages Mind Body Fertility Studio in Vancouver where women and couples can experience mind body programs, Yoga for Fertility and self-care designed to support them on their fertility journey. Sue has recently published *A Yoga for Fertility Handbook* and *A Strong Core for Life*. She has also developed several online audio classes and self help programs as well as a Fitness Fertility Specialist Certification and Yoga for Fertility instructor training courses. Sue can be reached at **604-266-6470** or visit www.familypassages.ca