

# Introduction

## Living Your Faith

Have you ever had a restless night of really bad sleep? While there are many causes to sleeplessness, one of the most common is racing thoughts. It seems like your mind is able to handle the day fairly well, but as soon as the lights go out, your head hits the pillow, and all is quiet and still, your brain gets fired up and your mind gets to work. Thoughts come as if from nowhere. Despite your best efforts, you can't make them go away. You might try turning over, getting up to use the bathroom, putting on a noise machine or taking some cocktail of herbs and supplements. Yet there they are, as soon as you settle down again, firing up once more and ready to force your attention to keep them company through the midnight hours.

You may have also had the experience of driving to work or school, or riding on a bus or train, to find yourself surprised when you get to your destination. "Oh wow, we're here already," you think. In a moment you realize that you were not paying attention to the trip, and therefore you didn't realize you were about to arrive. Sometimes you might wonder if you really stopped at a certain stop sign, or how you managed to turn right or left where you were supposed to since you were not paying attention. Your confusion only grows as you try to remember and nothing comes to mind.

How many times have you been in church listening to the priest give a homily, only to realize that you can't remember what the Gospel reading was about. It isn't rare for my wife to ask me what I thought about the homily and, to my embarrassment, I tell her I don't remember a single word of it – even if we are just walking out of Mass!

Have you ever prayed a rosary, only to get to the third decade and think to yourself, "Which mysteries are we praying today?" I have.

Whether we are carrying out routine life behaviors, trying to pray, or even in conversation with others, the way our minds work significantly impacts how well we function. This book is all about getting control of your mind so that you can use it to your best advantage, and live up to your best potential. You will discover truths about the way God created your mind, and the ways you have severely held it back. You will also discover ways to bring your mind back to a place of optimal functioning and experience the life changing way that being more fully alive brings peace and joy. Most people are, in many ways, walking around asleep in their lives. You can wake up, and you can be freed from the traps that your mind leads you into.

There is now almost four decades of research that shows significant scientific evidence for the power of what you will learn in this book. What began as a program to treat chronic pain has matured into a robust form of treatment used to help people find relief from anxiety, depression, eating disorders, addictions, insomnia, scrupulosity, anger, marital difficulties, parenting difficulties, spiritual difficulties, and a host of other

problems. You have begun a course to overcome normal stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and even depression.

One of the most common roadblocks I've encountered with people starting off this journey is the sense that there isn't enough time to pay attention to the material or practice the exercises. In the beginning it is very difficult to convey to you just how wrong you are. If you feel that way, you can't afford to not take the material and exercises very seriously. Almost without fail, every person I talk to after completing the course wants to start it over with the learned wisdom of how important each step of the way is. One section of the book will specifically deal with how practicing mindfulness will actually increase the amount of free time you have in your day. It doesn't matter if you are a stay at home mom with 8 kids, or a Wall Street CEO – adding in 20 to 40 minutes of mindfulness a day will have exponentially greater rewards. In business terms, the return on investment is extremely high. Children, teenagers, and adults of all ages will benefit from this time nourishing the brain. When you finish this book you will say that you want to start it over and put more time into it. Even still, I will try to convince you up front to give it the highest priority in your life. You are giving *yourself* highest priority in your life by doing so. That way, you will fulfill all of your goals – spiritual, personal, relational, or vocational – with your greatest ability.

Many people don't feel they are worth it. The role of that belief is covered in another section of this book, but the fact is that God made you with the highest dignity possible. Many people carry around on some level at least some amount of self-hatred or maybe just self-dislike. This sense is at the very root of why our minds turn against us in so many ways. By working through this course, you will encounter those parts of your mind and heart and invite healing into them. I have seen miraculous life transformations because of this alone.

In this book you will learn simple exercises to free your mind to be the best possible version of itself, and free your life so that you can become the best version of yourself. This course does not pretend to offer a way to avoid suffering or make difficulties disappear. In fact, once you progress further, you will realize just how un-mindful that notion is. Most difficulties in life are amplified precisely because we are trying to avoid them. That is not our goal, though it is true that by reducing the tendency to amplify your difficulties, you will experience a reduction in their intensity. For that reason mindfulness was originally used, to great success, to treat chronic pain. So much so that the latest research shows mindfulness having an equal effect – or in some cases a *better* effect – as morphine to treat chronic pain. It has also been shown clinically to cut the rate of depression by 50% for those suffering Major Depressive Disorder. It is quickly becoming a preferred form of treatment, at least to accompany antidepressant medication and in many cases instead of it.

### **About Your Teacher**

It is good to know something about me since we are about to enter a fairly intense journey together. I began to practice the basics of mindfulness as a Franciscan friar. In

between college and graduate school, I took a bit of a detour from my academic path to discern a religious vocation. I joined the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal in New York City and was blessed with almost 4 years in spiritual and psychological formation. I spent many hours learning from Fr. Benedict Groeschel, and he helped me understand the depth of a practice called “Abandonment to Divine Providence.” Besides being a psychologist, Fr. Benedict was a very holy and mindful man. He was almost constantly in the present moment, unscathed by normal disruptions to plans or expectations. I sought to understand his way of praying and spent countless hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament with the writings of St. Francis, Fr. Jean-Pierre de Caussade, Brother Lawrence, St. Therese, Blessed Elizabeth of the Trinity, and Padre Pio. These saints all wrote extensively about the present moment and abandoning one’s trust to God’s providential love. I found great peace in this particular spirituality and it is the way I understand my journey to God.

Once I left the friars, I enrolled at the Institute for the Psychological Sciences, a graduate program in clinical psychology that integrates sound Catholic philosophy and theology. I had been studying the anthropology of John Paul II since college, so this seemed like the only option that made sense for practicing psychology. 5 years later I graduated, moved to NY, got married, and started my practice along with a family.

Early on I discovered that the way I learned how to pray as a friar informed the way I lead my patients in therapy. A mentor and friend tipped me off about mindfulness as an empirically validated protocol for treating many types of disorders, and the more I looked into it, the more it resonated with the way I had been coming to know God. Bringing the two together was a perfect match and proved very effective for helping my patients deal with a multitude of diagnoses. For the last 3 years I have been developing the integration of Catholic spirituality with mindfulness that you will learn about here.

### **What Will We Actually Be Doing Then?**

A definition of mindfulness that we can work with is “paying attention to the present moment without judgment or criticism.” It is a way to be “aware with acceptance.” It can also be understood as, “coming to our senses,” or very simply, “waking up.” Mindfulness helps us to become aware of the workings of our minds in a new way. We learn to see just how much our minds don’t want to be aware of the present moment, and how much our avoidance of discomfort actually hurts us.

You will learn how to be with whatever is happening at the moment, and not let the negative aspects of life overwhelm you. Mindfulness practice has been consistently shown to bring about long-term changes in levels of happiness and well-being. It not only prevents depression, but diffuses the power of stress, anxiety, irritability and impatience by allowing us to stop the cycles that those emotions typically ignite. The underlying brain patterns that are improved with mindfulness also lead to greater creativity, better memory, and faster reaction times. Have you ever known someone that was very quick-witted? Chances are that he or she has a sense of being tuned in to the present moment.

Do you think you are living up to your greatest potential? Are you as happy as you could possibly be? Most people experience a mix of happiness and frustration, anxiety, sadness, or anger. That is certainly the human condition, and we can't imagine or propose a way of eliminating all suffering. The question is, though, how do you *know with certainty* that there isn't more you could do to alleviate some of that suffering? Could you be just a little more of who you are called to be by tweaking something about yourself?

If you are a Christian, hopefully your answer was "yes." Our lives are meant to be a journey of continual renewal, or conversion. Even when we've lived through a lot, we can still grow more. One of the most humbling experiences I've had in my life is teaching mindfulness to others. Every time I present the course, and every time I walk this journey with someone, I am reminded of all the ways that I need to grow in being more present and less avoidant of discomfort in my life. I am reminded how much more I need to grow in my trust in God's love and care for me.

There are daily temptations to fall back away from the reality of God's love and be pulled once again into the frantic race of life. Unless you are a monk spending many hours in recollection each day (and many times even that doesn't help), the obligations of life tear us away from an inner sense of peace. Add to that the physiological reality of hormonal activity and fluctuating moods, and we end up with a very colorful array of human experience.

These fluctuations are a part of being human by God's design. A "bad mood" might be a kind of alarm that our body is in need of something or we need to change something. Later in the book we will look at ways our emotional life communicates to us God's will (the overlap of Catholic Mindfulness with the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius and Discernment of Spirits), but before being able to read those movements of the heart, we need to learn how to stop them from amplifying into something else. A simple bad mood can quickly turn into a bad morning, a bad day, or a bad week! It is our patterns of thinking that turn an anxious moment into an anxiety disorder. Patterns of thinking turn an empty stomach into a bout of depression. These might seem like overly simplistic conceptualizations, but our thinking does lie deeply at the core of many disorders.

Scientific research, especially aided by brain imaging technology, has made significant discoveries regarding these patterns of thinking, their effect on the brain, and the brain's effect on behavior and lived experience. The first principle that research has taught us is that it is not negative emotion itself that leads the brain towards damaging patterns but *the way we react to it*. Second, when we try to think our way out of those negative patterns, either by figuring them out or trying to force them out of our minds, we typically make the negative effect worse. Trying to think your way out of a problem in your mind is like trying to swim your way out of quicksand. The more you move, the more you sink. The more you think, the worse it gets.

These discoveries shine a bright light on just why it is that we end up in such frantic cycles and patterns of thinking. When we are in a bad mood, or unhappy or irritable or anxious for some reason, we usually try to *figure out what the problem is*. As you will

come to see, judging there to be a problem is precisely the problem! The more we try to figure things out, the more our tendencies of thinking sink our mood. We quickly start to think of how our mood is going to hurt us in parts of our life, we call to mind ways we've gone wrong before, ways we've created problems for ourselves, or ways that other people have been the cause of problems. The more we sit with those thoughts, the angrier or sadder or more anxious we can get. Then we notice our mood worsening, and we ramp up the effort, trying even harder to figure our way out of it.

Deep down under all that noise is a quieter voice criticizing you for not being good enough, for not having figured it out yet, and even for not having more hope. Eventually this cycle can end in despair when it's at its worst.

Many of these thought patterns emerge in bed at night or in the morning. We connect our current state of feeling with past states, and try to figure out how to avoid the discomfort we've felt before. It can be very frustrating to lose sleep, so as soon as you realize you haven't fallen asleep quickly, your mind quickly starts trying to figure things out. You think through what you've done in the day, try to figure out where you went wrong, make resolutions about what you need to change tomorrow, or how you are going to handle the tiredness. You then start to remember all the obligations you have the next day and worry even more about what will happen if you mess those up. This pattern can go on and on.

We end up with deep seeded thoughts like, "what's wrong with me?" or "what's wrong with her/him?" or a sense of "this will never end."

### **Memory and Emotion**

Our memory works in very mysterious ways. One thing we've figured out though is that context plays a huge role in the faculty of memory. If you've ever gone back to revisit a place from your past, you would have experienced this. In your normal circumstances, you might have small snapshots of memories that you carry with you. When you travel back to a place from your past though, walking down a street from your childhood, driving through a town you used to live in, or visiting a favorite vacation spot, suddenly floods of memories come back from the times you were there before. It doesn't matter if it was 30 years ago, you will still remember people, names, events, and many other details, as if they happened yesterday.

Emotional states can be like those streets you walk down. When you feel a spark of some emotion, it creates an internal context for a host of memories of thoughts, feelings, and events that have happened to you in the past. Before you know it, a spark of sadness, anger, irritability, anxiety, or any other negative emotion triggers a cascade of memories that increase the negative state. What starts off as a flickering emotion ends up in a whole day gone bad.

It doesn't have to. We can't stop the sparks of emotion. There are many things you will learn in this book that are outside of your control. Thoughts and feelings can come out of nowhere, without any warning and sometimes without any indication of why they

showed up. Our brains think thoughts the way the heart beats. It's always working, even when we aren't paying attention to it, and we certainly don't want to wish for it to stop. What we can control is our response to those thoughts and feelings. We don't have to let the initial spark of some negative thought or feeling become a trigger for a downward spiral.

The mindfulness exercises I will teach you here will open up to you a new world of relating to your own thoughts and feelings. You will learn how to see them for what they are, and not respond to them as if they are something else. The simple fact that you have a thought does not mean that thought is true. The simple fact that you have a feeling does not mean that feeling is accurate. Thoughts and feelings happen, but they don't have the authority to lay claim to truth. Just because they happen doesn't mean we have to obey them, respect them, or let our lives be run by them.

In fact, thoughts and feelings are in many ways determined by laws of physics and physiology. This is what misleads so many relativistic scientists who don't believe in God and see humanity as the random consequence of material evolution. It is actually true that our thoughts and feelings are in many ways determined. We can measure the connections between simple laws of physics, biology, chemistry, and overall physiology to understand how thoughts and feelings work. You can receive an injection of a chemical right now, and your thoughts and feelings will change - predictably. The thing these materialistic atheist scientists don't understand is the relation of the spirit to these material realities. We have a transcendent spirit that has a higher sense of "knowing", not subject entirely to the laws of science. It is this transcendent part of our humanity that can observe the laws playing out in our thoughts and feelings, and make a deeper *choice* about what to do with them. Even if we are stuck in a spiral at some level, there is always a deeper level where some choice could be made to move one step away from the spiral.

In order to get control of this faculty of choice in the midst of thoughts and feelings that are in many ways determined by external factors, we need to re-engage a part of the brain that is mostly being devalued and underdeveloped in western culture. We are very good at using our analytical mind. We are taught from an early age that problem solving, thinking, judging, and planning are capacities to develop and excel at. We are tested at an early age for our ability to think "critically." Critical thinking is an important aspect of the way our brains work, but it is not the only aspect. We have done a tremendous disservice to our own humanity by elevating this aspect of the brain and devaluing the part of our brain that is simply *aware*.

Apart from the ability to think critically about things, reasoning from one point of data to another, we have been given the ability to know things without really thinking about them. When we hear the sound of a stream passing by, or feel the warmth of the sun, or taste our favorite meal, we are much closer to using this part of the brain. A sense of simple, intuitive, grasping of some point of reality is one of our abilities that is largely underused.

Ultimately we want to develop this sense that we have of open awareness. Judging our experience is a faculty that uses the thinking mind- simply being aware without judging does not.

Mindfulness is *non-judgmental* awareness of our present moment. This means that we do not engage the thinking mind when we are practicing mindfulness exercises. Judging can mean being very critical of ourselves or others, frustrated, irritated, or any other negative experience. It can also, however, mean something positive. If we are enjoying a moment simply being aware of it, and then the idea enters our mind, “This is so good, I don’t want it to end,” you have entered into the thinking mind again. Even a positive judgment is a judgment, and something we are learning how to disengage from in mindfulness.

This kind of open awareness enables us to sit with greater clarity and creativity in the midst of any experience- even difficult ones. Even when there is a situation that requires our judgment, approaching it from a place of mindfulness will help us to make better judgments. As we will see moving through this course, the effects of mindfulness are far reaching and make our lives better in every way.

## **Your Program**

You will be given a number of opportunities over the next 8 weeks to challenge the patterns you’ve developed over the course of your life. Some of them you may choose to keep, and some of them you may choose to change, but you will have that choice because you will be more aware of those patterns than you’ve ever been before.

First, you will read these chapters. They are spaced out so that each chapter is read for one week. Even if you read the chapter quickly, it is better to space yourself and not go ahead. It is far better to go back and review the material for the week you are in than to read ahead. This educational aspect of mindfulness will help give you a greater understanding of what you are doing when you practice mindfulness and why you are doing it. You will also be learning many ways that our spiritual lives intersect with our psychological lives, as well as how much our thoughts and feelings affect our spirituality.

Second, you will have exercises to practice every day. These practices range from 3 minutes to 20 minutes. Something important to understand about mindfulness up front is that it is scientifically proven to work in only 8 weeks, **but it is dose dependent**. The more time you spend learning about mindfulness and practicing the exercises, the more you will feel the effect. I can almost guarantee that when you get to the end of this course, because of the time you will have cumulatively spent practicing the exercises, you will feel more of the effect of the practice and want to start over again to devote more time from the beginning. Most people will start reading again once they finish.

In addition to this book, there is an online course available if you wish to go deeper (accessible at [www.catholicmindfulness.com](http://www.catholicmindfulness.com)) During the class, I explain in greater detail the ideas that are covered in the book. I give you real life and personal examples of the way mindfulness improves your life with every new aspect of the mind we cover. You

will also have the opportunity to share with one another your journey, as well as ask me questions to help make more sense of the material. There is an online community to share your journey with others along the way, and in general you will get even more out of this material by joining together with others who are practicing it.

As a general rule, you should attempt to practice the exercise(s) of the week at least 6 days out of 7. You don't want to develop a harsh self-critical attitude towards yourself if you miss a day, but you also want to give yourself the best shot possible at waking up out of unconscious patterns of self-sabotage with your mind. It is better to take your time rather than rush ahead. If you find there are a few days that go by that you couldn't do even one practice, just give yourself a few extra days and bump your week ahead.

These exercises are methods to actually change your brain. If you took a picture of your brain right now, then practice mindfulness for 8 weeks, the pictures of your brain in 8 weeks would look very different. Research study after research study proves just how effective these exercises are at changing the structure and function of your brain.

You will also have opportunities to change patterns of behavior you have developed in other parts of your life besides the way you think. Changing unrelated behaviors will help you to change patterns of thought. Each week I will challenge you to change something simple in your life. Judgmental and self-critical thoughts can sneak around under the surface and arise from patterns of thinking and acting. By disrupting these patterns, you force yourself to take a closer look at what is going on in your mind, and regain control over yourself. Again, the more you engage with this material, the more you will benefit from mindfulness practice.

Overall, mindfulness is a state of awareness of the present moment. It is actually an incredibly simple thing. It is so simple, in fact, that it is actually quite cumbersome to try to describe. That is why it takes eight weeks of written and spoken material to try to communicate the essence of mindfulness in a way that can be understood by everyone. 8 weeks of mental exercise is also the standard protocol for achieving the shifts in brain functioning that can be measured on a brain scan.

The first 4 weeks you will learn how to wake up to the real functioning of your brain. You will learn about how it works at the physiological level as well as the felt experience that correlates with that functioning. These first 4 weeks are usually a time of "ah ha!" moments, as you resonate with the material being presented and start to make sense of annoying or even destructive patterns that you've only until now barely been aware of. You will understand just how harmful our current way of life is, and why mindfulness is so critically important. The patterns of thought that plague you will become clearer and you will understand with greater depth those moments you are overwhelmed with worry, anxiety, sadness, irritability, anger, frustration, or even despair. The role of self-doubt, self-criticism, and even self-hatred will come into full view. These dispositions can underlie the rest of our thoughts, and so we need to uproot them and view them in the light of truth.



Mindfulness is about coming to know ourselves in the light that God sees us. During the second 4 weeks, we move from awareness to action. You will learn what to do with all this material you just learned. At the heart of it all, you will learn how to see the goodness that God created you with out of his own Goodness, and how you can be disposed toward yourself, and then all other people, in a proportionate way to that goodness. This is the heart of Mercy, and ultimately mindfulness helps us to experience a deeper sense of Mercy.

Overall the 8 weeks will present you with different ways to think about mindfulness. It might feel like we are covering a number of random topics, but they are actually all very closely related. They are all, in fact, describing essentially the same thing. I will use different images, analogies, and exercises to try to communicate these deeply personal and subjective experiences to you in a way that you can incorporate for yourself. At some point along the way, mindfulness will click for you. When this happens will depend on the way you think, your personality type, and how you relate to the various ways of explaining it. Some people get it in week 1, and others get it in week 8. The exercises start to benefit your brain as soon as you begin to practice them, but the deeper sense of what it is all about might take you longer to grasp. I have been practicing for over 10 years and my understanding of mindfulness deepens constantly.

### **Getting Started**

Before we begin, it is important to take account of what we are embarking on. This is an 8 week journey of self-discovery, and ultimately a deeper discovery of God in your life. You will need to focus on this course as an important part of your life over the next 8 weeks if you wish to get the most out of it and give yourself the best opportunity to make this discovery. These 8 weeks will help you become the best version of yourself.

Each chapter and each exercise is designed to introduce new elements so that your understanding will continually deepen. It is important to follow along in order to keep up, no matter how repetitive, boring, or unimportant it feels to you along the way. There are so many things in life that we begin because we are excited, but then eventually forget about because of the way our minds discount their importance, become bored, tired, or bothered by. This book is designed to bring you through those periods and actually use those experiences to teach you about your mind and how to get the most out of your life. You will discover roadblocks to becoming the person God made you to be, but only if you dive in deep and engage with the material.

This book is meant to be for you. You are taking the time for yourself, to discover more about yourself, and learn how to be more accepting of yourself. Contrary to some new age practices though, we are seeking that self-awareness because at the heart of that, you can discover more about *who God made you to be*. This is going to help you become a better man or woman, a better spouse, parent, sibling, student, neighbor, co-worker, and ultimately a better Christian. This is who God made you to be.

I encourage you to take some time and consider how you are going to rearrange your schedule for the next 8 weeks to make this time for yourself. If you don't take this step, I can almost guarantee that along the way, other things will become more important. If you let your day be dictated by whatever feels more important moment by moment, this practice will eventually fall to the side and some other fire that needs to be put out will be more important. The goal of this course is to learn how to stop putting out fires and get control of your life, but you need to set aside the time to learn how to do it.

It is very helpful to let other people around you know that you are embarking on this journey. It is even better if you have someone to travel with you along this path. SPECIAL NOTE: If you are taking the course online along with the book, you have my permission to share your access with someone that you wish to take this journey with. I only ask that everyone taking the course registers as a student online at [catholicmindfulness.teachable.com](http://catholicmindfulness.teachable.com). It is free to enroll as a student, and that person can watch the videos and have access to the exercises with you.

Even if someone isn't taking the course with you, you can still let people you live with know what you are doing so they can help you protect your time and space to be free from as many distractions as possible. Distractions are bound to occur, and they can all be folded into your mindfulness exercise. Sometimes you might need to attend to those distractions, but more times than not it is only our thoughts that make us believe we need to attend to them. You will learn how to pause and look more deeply at those distractions when they occur.

Here is one last note of preparation before we get started. This is a very important point that I want you to come back to throughout the book. **Mindfulness is not easy.** It is not academically difficult, but it can be personally difficult. Mindfulness will help you become the man or woman God created you to be. That means conversion, it means change, it means growth. Those things do not happen without some challenges, difficulties, and failures along the way. You are most likely going to feel like a failure at some point in the next 8 weeks, but it is supposed to be that way. Through these exercises, you will encounter your own thought process in a new way, and learn how you treat yourself differently. It is in observing yourself as you feel failure that you will break through those thought patterns and learn how to see yourself the way God does. Sometimes you will be challenged by a sense of boredom, frustration, sleepiness, or simply not having enough time. You will discover that the mind is very resistant to making the changes I am proposing here. It will come up with all kinds of ways to avoid engaging with this material. By learning how to observe these patterns, which are actually present in most of our lives in other areas, you will discover how to deflate them of their power over you. Awareness is like naming something. The tremendous power of awareness is that as soon as you name something, you are in control of it.

I will pray for you as you make your way through this book. May the grace of God fill your heart with the peace that He created you for.