



find your  
light

*Practicing Mindfulness  
to Recover from Anything*

BEVERLY CONYERS

A trusted voice on emotional health and wellness

## Praise for Beverly Conyers

“When my eldest son became addicted to crystal meth and heroin, I could barely function. I would not have survived without Beverly Conyers’s *Addict in the Family*, which provided guidance and hope. I realized I wasn’t alone on my hellish journey. The book helped me get through interminable nights when I was terrified that his addiction would take his life. It offered a path to healing.”

—David Sheff, best-selling author of *Beautiful Boy*





*find  
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# *find your light*

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to Recover from Anything

BEVERLY CONYERS



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*For Jessica, Cullen, Sonya, and Marjorie*  
*—you light up my life*

\*





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## What Now?

Whether this book has come to you as a gift or whether you purposely sought it out, you are likely trying to heal or regain an important aspect of your life. In other words, you are a person in *recovery* from an activity, behavior, or substance that has had a damaging impact on your personal well-being. You are not alone. Nowadays, it can seem like almost everyone is in recovery from something. Maybe that's because there's a lot to recover from in this world.

Changing social norms, fast-paced lifestyles, and constant information and access to anything and everything have all contributed to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Many of us grapple with social isolation or fragile support networks while also trying to come to terms with past traumas or difficult family dynamics. Easily developed and triggered compulsions—which at first may seem to offer relief—can quickly devolve into self-sabotaging behaviors like substance use or disordered eating, codependency or workaholism, gambling or compulsive internet use, porn or sex addiction, or other habitual patterns of escape.

As people in recovery, we take justifiable pride in the progress we've made. We've established our hard-earned abstinence from alcohol or other drugs. Or we've found healthy replacements for the reflexive behaviors that once consumed our life. Maybe we've worked on our personal growth and found new, productive ways to cope with life's challenges. *And yet . . .*

And yet, the questions start to nag at us: *What now?* Is this *all there is?*

Somehow, we'd imagined that recovery would make us happier. More satisfied. More *content*. We'd hoped it would transform us into a new and improved version of ourselves, vanquishing the doubts and unhappiness that helped fuel our compulsions in the first place. Instead, what we often find as our recovery unfolds is that we still have a lot of work to do. Many of the old demons are still there.

In a way, that's not surprising. After all, addiction—which in this book refers to *any* unhealthy personal compulsion from which we're recovering—not only *masked* our problems. It *intensified* them. It stunted our social skills and prevented us from dealing with trauma and other emotional sticking points. It kept us from nurturing our strengths and developing our talents.

Most damaging of all, our compulsions diverted us from the fundamental task of learning about our *self*—that unique and precious being who is like no other on the planet. Having a secure sense of self is essential to personal happiness. Yet the search for identity is almost always a complicated process. Any pattern of avoidance, addiction, or compulsion makes it even harder.

None of us comes into the world knowing who we are. Instead, we build our personal identity through a long process of trial and error—discovering our likes and dislikes, testing our strengths and weaknesses, exploring our dreams and fears in a changing world. Because compulsive behaviors numb the thoughts, feelings, and insights that lead us to who we are, they shut the door on self-discovery.

Opening that door is the very heart of recovery. In its deepest sense, recovery involves much more than freeing ourselves from the damaging grip of addictive substances and behaviors. It means reconnecting with—or discovering for the first time—what gives meaning and purpose to our life. And that becomes clear only when we know, accept, and value who we really are.

Mindfulness can light the way on this complex journey of self-discovery.

### **Why Mindfulness?**

Introduced by the Buddha as a path to spiritual enlightenment more than twenty-five hundred years ago, mindfulness is the art of being fully present, moment to moment, in our lives. Because addiction is in many respects a disease of avoidance, of *not* being present, mindfulness is especially helpful for those of us who are in recovery from any kind of compulsive problematic behavior.

Among its many benefits, mindfulness teaches us how to live *intentionally*—to consciously direct our choices and actions in ways that bring a greater sense of contentment. It also teaches us

- to quiet racing thoughts and manage difficult emotions
- to weather life's ups and downs with equanimity
- to replace the darkness of shame with the healing light of self-compassion
- to let go of painful feelings of separateness and connect meaningfully with others
- to awaken our innate capacity to experience joy.

And—by freeing our mind from the constant noise and distractions of daily life—mindfulness clears a quiet space in which to discover our own inner truths.

For me, mini-mindfulness practices throughout the day have helped me control my codependent tendencies and improved my relationships with the people I love. A relative who meditates daily said that “taking just ten minutes every morning to focus my mind keeps me from getting stuck in those negative thoughts that could make me pick up a drink.” And a friend’s son told me that the mindfulness training he received while in treatment for opioid addiction has “helped me overcome the shame I felt about my addiction. It’s easier to stay clean when you don’t feel bad about yourself.”

Think about those statements for a moment. What patterns are keeping you feeling stuck? What limitations are you applying to your everyday journey? Are there ways you have continued to sabotage yourself? Do lifestyle patterns, self-doubt, or roles you play with people you encounter regularly keep you feeling as though you are less than everything around you? If your answer to any of these questions is *yes*, then you are likely still hoping to find or reclaim something of your *self*. You are hoping not just to journey in recovery, but to *thrive* in recovery.

This book invites you to explore how mindfulness can help you to do just that. Although compatible with the Twelve Step programs that are so helpful to many people in recovery, it can illuminate any recovery path. After all, everyone’s journey is different. There is no “one size fits all” when it comes to personal growth.

## INTRODUCTION

In each chapter, you'll find suggestions for practice and reflection, but keep in mind they are merely that: suggestions. You are your own best teacher. Use what works for you and set aside the rest. You may wish to experiment with mindfulness only in brief, informal moments. You may choose to explore it through journaling or other creative practices. Or you may decide to deepen a mindfulness practice through formal meditation. This book offers you all those options.

Whatever path you choose, the ancient art of mindfulness can illuminate your path to a richer, more meaningful recovery and a happier way of life.









## Present Light

Look to this day!  
For it is life, the very life of life.  
In its brief course  
Lie all the verities and realities of your existence:  
The bliss of growth,  
The glory of action,  
The splendor of beauty.  
For yesterday is but a dream  
And tomorrow is only a vision.  
But today, well-lived,  
Makes every yesterday a dream of happiness  
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.  
Look well, therefore, to this day.  
Such is the salutation of the dawn.

—Kalidasa, translated from Sanskrit

**IN A WAY**, mindfulness and addiction are like day and night.

Mindfulness teaches us to wake up to the present moment. It promotes a state of compassionate awareness in which we know and value our inner self and become conscious participants in our own life. With the practice of mindfulness, we open our eyes to the true nature of reality and learn how to live in harmony with the world around us.

Any kind of addiction, on the other hand, clouds awareness. It distorts reality and prevents us from connecting with others in any meaningful way. When we numb ourselves with compulsive behaviors or addictive substances, we enter a twilight realm in which reality is temporarily suspended. We lose touch not only with the outer world, but with our innermost thoughts and feelings. We come to exist as if in a trance, distracted by fleeting sensations and disconnected from our own inner being.

This is hardly earth-shattering news. After all, oblivion is exactly what many of us were looking for. We wanted to silence the frightening thoughts and feelings, to hide from the overwhelming problems, and to run from the emptiness inside. When our compulsions were active, the last thing we wanted was to “get in touch with” our inner self. Who knew what dreadful things we might find there? How could we handle a reality that seemed too awful to face?

### **Finding the Light**

Recovery shines a light of clarity through the fog of fear and confusion. But even in recovery, our long love affair with escapism can make it hard to embrace the notion of being mindful. We're

not alone. As Merle in the hit TV drama *The Walking Dead* illustrates, it's easy to go through life in a quasi-conscious fog:

Rick: "Do you even know why you do the things you do, the choices you make?"

Merle: "I don't know why I do the things I do. Never did. I'm a damn mystery to me."

—*The Walking Dead*, season 3

Like Merle, many of us are a mystery to ourselves. We don't understand what makes us tick or why we do what we do. Instead, we go about our days doing the same things and thinking the same thoughts, carried along on a tide of seeming inevitability as if we have no choice in the matter. We develop fixed ideas about who we are, fixed notions about what we can and can't do, fixed patterns of reacting to people and situations—all without ever stopping to ask ourselves if we're happy or if what we believe is even true.

It's almost like we've been put on autopilot, seemingly awake but seldom fully aware of who we are and what we're doing. We become passive observers of our own lives.

Technology has only worsened this tendency toward quasi-consciousness. Look around and you'll see an entire society caught up in perpetual distractions. Our screens instantly transport us to places other than where we actually *are*. We check social media, start a game, or switch on the TV, and before we know it, hours have flown by—hours in which we've had no conscious contact with ourselves or our surroundings.

So accustomed are we to the mesmerizing distractions at our fingertips that the notion of simply *being in the present moment*

can seem burdensome. A study published in the July 2014 online journal *Science* bore this out: when given a choice between sitting alone quietly for fifteen minutes or giving themselves an electric shock, 25 percent of the female and 67 percent of the male participants chose to shock themselves.

Think about it. Left alone with no devices to occupy their minds, a wide swath of ordinary adults chose an electric shock over stillness. But as startling as this might seem, it's not entirely surprising.

The truth is, it's hard for most of us to pay attention to the present moment. Unless we're engaged in something that's personally meaningful—a challenging problem, useful work, stimulating conversation, a captivating novel or piece of music—our mind tends to go on autopilot. (Think of all the times you've driven from point A to point B, only to arrive with little recollection of how you got there.) Or we look for diversions. This is completely normal. The human brain naturally fluctuates between varying states of attentiveness. It would be exhausting, and likely impossible, for most of us to be fully aware and engaged all the time. We *need* a mental break!

The problem occurs when we spend *most* of our waking hours in a quasi-conscious fog, tuned out and distanced from the reality of our own lives. Days, weeks, months, and even years can fly by in a blur, until one day we stop and ask ourselves where it all went. As people in recovery, we're not immune to the lure of a quasi-conscious existence. Our desire to live a sober, more thoughtful life doesn't protect us from slipping into a life of diminished awareness—from taking the path of least resistance.

Mindfulness offers a different path.

When we choose to be awake and present in the actual moments of our daily lives, we begin to grow in unexpected ways. We learn to let go of harmful, often deep-rooted misperceptions about our self and others. We gain a deeper appreciation of our strengths and values. We expand our capacity for love and connection. And we lay the foundation for a more contented, more meaningful life. Becoming more mindful, like the pursuit of any worthwhile goal, requires intention, self-discipline, and practice. Most of all, it requires the willingness to open our hearts and minds to a new way of experiencing the world.

**REFLECTION:** "Look to this day! For it is life, the very life of life."

More than fifteen hundred years ago, the Indian poet Kalidasa urged us to live each day to the best of our ability. *How can you live to the best of your ability today?*

### What Do You Intend?

What kind of day do you intend to have when you wake up tomorrow? What do you intend to happen as a result of an upcoming conversation with a relative or coworker? How do you intend your next meal to affect your health and well-being?

Questions like these don't come naturally for most of us as we go about our daily routine. Yet the simple act of pausing to think about a desired outcome *before we act* can have a powerful impact on the quality of our life.

Consider the role of intent in an ordinary day. Most of us start with some kind of agenda in mind: I'll drop off the kids at school, plug away at that project at work, pick up some groceries on the

way home, and catch up on my favorite TV show later on. If we haven't paused to consider our deeper, more heartfelt intent before each of these actions, we're likely to proceed in an automated way. We'll get things done, but our attention will seldom be fully engaged. By the time we fall into bed at night, the day will have sped by, leaving scarcely a trace. It will soon blend in with all the others that have faded over the years.

If, on the other hand, we've taken a moment to think about our intent beforehand, we might give our children an extra hug before dropping them off, to let them know how much we love them. We might risk suggesting a new approach to that work project. We might try adding a nutritious vegetable to our family meal. And we might decide to thoroughly enjoy our favorite TV show with no distractions. Or we might choose to take a walk instead.

The point is, intention can awaken us to the often-overlooked truth that in all the moments of our daily life, we have the power of choice: we can choose to pay attention to what really matters to us.

In his essay "Papa the Educator," author Leo Buscaglia recalls a nightly ritual at the family dinner table:

Papa, at the head of the table, would push his chair back slightly, a gesture that signified the end of the eating and suggested that there would be a new activity. He would pour a small glass of red wine, light up a thin, potent Italian cigar, inhale deeply, exhale, then take stock of his family.

For some reason this always had a slightly unsettling effect on us as we stared back at Papa, waiting for him to say something. Every so often he would explain why he did this. He told us that if he didn't take time to look at us, we would soon be grown and he would have missed us.

What a wise man! Buscaglia's father wanted the family meal to be more than simply a time to eat. He intended it to be a time to fully see and appreciate his children. In these moments of mindful engagement, his children were nurtured and family bonds were strengthened.

For most of us, intention is the springboard to mindfulness. When we *intend* to live with greater awareness and purpose, we begin to wake up to the thoughts and behaviors that shape our life.

If you've ever spent time with small children, you've witnessed their instinctive fascination with the simplest of things. A fallen leaf, a rock, a set of keys—all are worthy of close scrutiny. Their curiosity is boundless, and while their attention span may be short, they are nevertheless eager to learn about everything they see. But on the journey to adulthood, we lose much of that ability to be fully engaged in the moment. Our mind fills with responsibilities and obligations. We obsess about the past and worry about the future. Our curiosity is dulled by our daily routine, and our fixation with technology and other distractions leaves little room for attending to what might help or nurture us.

True, we may occasionally be captivated by a sunset or a work of art. We may truly cherish our time with loved ones. But for the



most part, many of us live as if we have blinders on. We barely notice what's right in front of us, and our inborn sense of wonder seems to fade with the passing years.

All of this has consequences for the way we live our life. When we view the world through the narrow lens of unawareness, we don't see opportunities for growth or notice small gifts of beauty in everyday things. Resigned to an unsatisfying job, we automatically dismiss an entrepreneurial idea that might have real potential. Stuck in yet another traffic jam, we ignore the wild beauty of a flock of geese overhead.

Instead of exploring possibilities or appreciating the world around us, we slog along in our habitual way—and run up against the same old roadblocks. Unable to see a different path, we end up making the same decisions, no matter how unrewarding or self-defeating they may be. Changing that pattern begins with the conscious intent to see our self and the world through a more open lens.

The American philosopher Henry David Thoreau famously wrote about the path of mindfulness in his 1854 book, *Walden*. For two years, two months, and two days, he lived in a cabin in the woods of Massachusetts with the stated intent of becoming fully awake to his own life:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

His words remind us of the importance of intention. When we intend to “live deliberately”—that is, to live with awareness—we expand our understanding of who we are and strengthen our connection to the world around us.

**PRACTICE: Notice where you are.** Try stepping out of your normal routine to really notice your home or neighborhood—almost as if you were seeing it for the first time. Don’t judge or label what you discover. Simply observe with the sole intent of seeing, hearing, smelling, or touching what is actually there. *What surprises you about your environment as you pay closer attention?*

### **Less Impulse, More Intention**

“The last time I made an impulse purchase, I maxed out my one remaining credit card,” a friend once told me. “I was way over my head in debt, and I’d kept this one card only for emergencies. I didn’t even carry it around with me because I didn’t want to use it. Then one day I was bored and started browsing online. I saw this gorgeous pair of boots and a fantastic coat, and before I knew it, I’d blown fifteen hundred bucks.”

Another friend described being taken to court by an ex-girlfriend after he posted some revealing photos of her online. “She’d been saying some nasty things about me, and I wanted to get back at her,” he explained. “If I’d taken the time to think about it, I wouldn’t have done it. The whole episode turned into a major headache and cost me a lot of money.”

As people in recovery, most of us have experienced the negative fallout of an impulsive act. Impulse can lead us to pick a fight, walk out on a job, squander our paycheck, eat a half gallon of ice

cream, or buy one drink that becomes the first of many. When we act impulsively, we don't take the time to think about potential consequences. We just do it, as the saying goes, and face the music (and regrets) later. But when we act with intention, we pause to consider the costs of an impulse *before* we act.

Impulsive actions are often triggered by distressing emotions such as anger, boredom, sorrow, or loneliness. Although our actions can feel instantaneous, there's almost always a moment—sometimes a mere split second—between the trigger and our response.

If we act impulsively, we can end up doing things that get us into trouble. If, on the other hand, we try to be more mindful of our intention, we can act in ways that produce a better outcome. Finding that space between the trigger and the action allows us to ask ourselves what kind of result we intend to achieve, giving us a precious chance to choose a wiser course.

**REFLECTION:** "Intention is one of the most powerful forces there is. What you mean when you do a thing will always determine the outcome," wrote author Brenna Yovanoff. *Can you remember a time when acting on impulse got you into trouble? How could thinking about your intention beforehand have helped you make a different choice?*

### The Power of Non-doing

It takes a lot of effort to do nothing.

I'm not talking about the sitting-around-the-house, don't-get-off-the-couch kind of days in which we while away the hours by watching TV, scrolling through social media, or playing video games. I'm talking about consciously devoting a certain amount

of time—say, five or ten minutes—to simply *being* instead of doing.

Our whole way of thinking goes against it. From childhood we're taught the importance of being productive. And if we can't be productive, we can at least be busy. The need to occupy our time with *something*—even mindless diversions—is deeply ingrained. Yet most of the world's great philosophers have noted the value of stepping away from the busyness of the world and devoting some time each day to simply being still.

Many years ago on a trip to England I entered one of the small, ancient churches that dot the countryside. The narrow stone building had a high vaulted ceiling and thick walls set with small leaded windows. On the altar were two stone coffins topped with carved effigies of a medieval lord and lady. Alone in the dim chapel, I sat for a long time on one of the plain wooden pews. The silence was profound, at once calm and deeply moving. I found myself transported through the centuries, at one with countless generations of worshipers who had come and gone before me. When I rose to leave, I passed a large rectangular table made of heavy, dark wood. It held a stack of white cards bearing the following inscription:

Let thy soul walk softly in thee as a saint in heaven  
unshod,

For to be alone with silence is to be alone with god.

I purchased one of the cards and framed it when I got home. To this day, when I take the time to read it, I feel again the calming stillness of that ancient church.

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Early in our recovery journey, we focused on healing. Further along in our recovery, we dare to believe it's possible to embark on a new chapter, but often feel stuck. At times, we wonder...how do we create the breakthroughs we want?

With a mindfulness practice--meditation and other habits of awareness--we develop the courage to look within and around ourselves. As we hold space for ourselves, we find the light within that can spark change, personal growth, and self-compassion. Mindfulness is an irreplaceable part of the health and healing toolkit because it illuminates our true selves; as a result, it illuminates our recovery.

Discover why Beverly Conyers' books have been a mainstay for support groups the world over, and why so many have turned to her insights and guidance. With this book, Conyers gives us an approachable mindfulness book with carefully designed reflections and practices that set us on a path forward. Her insight guides our way whether recovering from compulsive habits, substance use, unhealthy relationships, behavioral addictions, anxiety and stress, workaholism, disordered eating, process addictions, or mental health and emotional challenges--and whether we follow the Twelve Steps or not.

Beverly Conyers, MA, is an editor and freelance writer who lives in New England. She is the critically acclaimed author of *Everything Changes*, *The Recovering Heart*, and the recovery classic *Addict in the Family*, which has sold more than 75,000 copies and inspired hope and healing for families around the world.



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