Meditation and Mindfulness for Parents

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INTRODUCTION

- About me
- Housekeeping
- Around the circle introductions (name, kids, meditation experience)

SPOT MEDITATION

- Movement
- One word to describe how they feel

WHAT IS MEDITATION?

EXERCISE ONE: WORD ASSOCIATION

- Group brainstorm of words associated with meditation and types of meditation people have heard of
- Discuss ‘image’ of meditation

LET’S SIMPLIFY THINGS

Some working definitions:

1. **Mindfulness** is paying attention to your present moment experience on purpose and with mindful attitudes - openness, curiosity and compassion
2. **Meditation** is the deliberate practice of mindfulness and creates the conditions to relax the body and calm the mind

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

- As a sit-down practice, meditation and mindfulness are identical
- Mindfulness is bigger than meditation and is something we can incorporate into daily life
- The term ‘meditation’ has spiritual connotations and implies withdrawal from the world
- Rebranding as ‘mindfulness’ implies a science-based, secular practice more about coping better in the world than escaping it
- Mindfulness is an innate human ability: to be fully present, aware of what we are doing, and not overly reactive or overwhelmed

WHAT MEDITATION IS NOT

Meditation is NOT:

- stopping thoughts – it is the mind’s job to think and by meditating we learn to interact with the mind more effectively not empty it
- religious – you do not need to buy into any spiritual package to meditate
- sitting still – you can also meditate standing, moving or laying down
- about blissing out – we practice meditation to get better at life
- one size fits all – meditation is a versatile and adaptable skill. Be suspicious of anyone who tells you there is only one right way to meditate
WHY DO PEOPLE MEDITATE

1. **Therapeutic applications** to change behaviour and source help with specific concerns e.g. stress, anxiety, sleeping disorders, pain etc.).

2. **Personal development** (to know ourselves better, become curious about our weaker areas, develop our strengths. e.g. Improve focus, performance and creativity).

3. **Spiritual growth** (go beyond our sense of self, realise its limitations and dissolve them to have a deep understanding of the universe).

Our focus will be on learning practical techniques to:

1. improve the way we manage our relationship with stress
2. relax the body and calm the mind
3. develop a healthy relationship with our thoughts and emotions
4. practise mindful attitudes (openness, curiosity and compassion)

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**EXERCISE TWO: MEDITATION MOTIVATION**

- Write down why you want to meditate.
- What changes would you need to see in your life to know it is working for you?
WHY IS MEDITATION SO IMPORTANT FOR PARENTS?

Over half of pregnant women experience increased anxiety
One in seven new mothers and one in ten new fathers are diagnosed with postnatal depression
Around half of women say they feel overwhelmed most of the time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘SIDE EFFECTS’ OF PARENTHOOD</th>
<th>BENEFITS OF MEDITATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Increased stress and anxiety</td>
<td>• Lowers stress and anxiety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased distractions</td>
<td>• Improved focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased overwhelm</td>
<td>• Improved emotional regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased exposure to illness</td>
<td>• Improved immunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Interrupted sleep</td>
<td>• Better sleep</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strain on relationships / isolation</td>
<td>• Increased connection</td>
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THE STRESS RESPONSE

Many of us are drawn to meditation in the hope of learning how to manage our stress.

*Stress is the feeling that you don’t have the inner or outer resources to cope with your situation.*

Stress occurs in a cycle; when we get stressed we tend to overthink which then in turn makes us experience more stress. When we get caught in the stress cycle we trigger the stress response.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BODY</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• A rush of energy into the body</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increased heartrate</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• A flood of stress hormones (adrenaline, cortisol)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Secondary systems take a back seat (digestion, libido)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BRAIN</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Activates activity in parts of the brain associated with fear (amygdala)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Supresses activity at the front of the brain (CEO brain) associated with rational thought, decision-making and focus so we can act quickly</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Hippocampus stores emotional experience in long term memory</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEHAVIOUR</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Unclear thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Emotional response</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• We often react to situations and conversations in ways we regret</td>
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</table>
THE IMPACT OF TOO MUCH STRESS

- In the short term, we feel crappy (irritable, low energy, poor recall, scrappy performance)
- In the long term, we put our body under allostatic load (wear and tear)
- A low level of stress keeps us motivated but too much leads to illness and breakdown
- The stress response is an automatic and necessary function of the body but it is only meant to be triggered every now and then
- Our body reacts the same way to a real stressor or a perceived stressor

HOW DOES MINDFULNESS AND MEDITATION HELP US STRESS LESS?

1. Switches us from ‘doing’ to ‘being’ mode
2. Initiates the relaxation response
3. Short-circuits the feedback loop in our minds
4. Allows us to step back, notice and choose again

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOING</th>
<th>BEING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active</td>
<td>Passive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinking</td>
<td>Sensing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future or past focused</td>
<td>Now focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal directed</td>
<td>Nothing to do, nowhere to go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of craving</td>
<td>Sense of peace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-orientated perspective</td>
<td>Wider perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluative</td>
<td>Non-judgemental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost in thought</td>
<td>Mindful presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sympathetic nervous system (red zone)</td>
<td>Parasympathetic nervous system (green zone)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beta brain waves</td>
<td>Alpha brainwaves</td>
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THE RELAXATION RESPONSE

We have the capacity within ourselves that is the opposite of the stress response. It’s called the relaxation response.

The relaxation response leads to a self-induced quieting of brain activity. It leads to a body-wide slowdown and a feeling of well-being. We can do this by:

1. Repetition / concentration (e.g. focusing on breath)
2. Activating sensory experience (getting out of our head)

Meditation allows us to take conscious control of the relaxation process whenever and wherever we need it.
YOUR BRAIN ON MEDITATION

We used to think our brain matter couldn’t change but we know now that our repeated experiences are constantly changing our brain. This is great news!

NEUROPLASTICITY

*The change of brain structures as a result of experience.*

Meditation is a way to train our brain.

Brain scans show that when we meditate we:

- thicken regions of the brain that control executive function such as attention and decision making (prefrontal cortex, CEO brain)
- thickens regions of brain associated with interoception, self-awareness (insula)
- experience less cortical thinning with aging in PFC and insula
- increase grey matter density in hippocampus (emotional regulation, creating context for memory and inhibiting amygdala)
- shrink parts of brain associated with the stress response and our levels of fear and anxiety (amygdala)
- thicken temporo parietal junction (perspective, empathy, compassion)

The impact of these changes of brain structure allow us to:

- train ourselves to be more skilful in noticing when we fall into unhelpful patterns of thought
- step back and choose again
- access mindful attitudes when we need them most
- become more present and available in our interactions with others

*‘The carry-over of the practice is more important than the formal practice itself. The time you use the petrol is not at the petrol pump.’*
HOW TO MEDITATE

GUIDED MEDITATION
- Guided sound meditation (10 mins)
- One word to describe how they feel

Generally, we can sort meditations into two categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FORMAL MEDITATIONS</th>
<th>SPOT MEDITATIONS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Seated or moving meditation</td>
<td>- Informal, ‘on the spot’</td>
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<tr>
<td>- 10 minutes or more</td>
<td>- 10 seconds – 10 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Deep relaxation and clarity</td>
<td>- Manages stress during the day</td>
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THE STANDARD MEDITATION PRACTICE

There are many ways to meditate. We can, however describe a standard meditation practice that describes what most people do when they meditate:

- Assume a comfortable position
- Close eyes
- Pick an object of focus (breath, mantra, body sensation)
- Observe object of focus with gentle awareness
- Lose focus / refocus / lose focus / refocus.... (over and over)

DISCUSSION POINTS

1. It is normal to get distracted – this is in fact part of the process of meditation
2. It doesn’t matter how many times the mind wanders or where it goes, when we notice this is a mindful moment
3. Our ability to focus will improve with practice
4. We try on taking note of different objects (sounds, sensations, feelings, thoughts) as they appear without processing them and come into a just watching state
5. We find calm by becoming aware of distractions and being able to let them go rather than attempting to block them out
6. Meditation can also be a time to deeply connect, observe and get to know your thoughts and develop a healthier relationship with them
7. Thought labelling technique can help us zoom out and take emotional charge out of our thoughts
SPOT MEDITATIONS

There’s a common belief that to meditate effectively you need to sit in a quiet place with your eyes closed for at least 20 minutes. While formal meditations are certainly useful it’s equally important to be able to meditate in short bursts throughout the day.

During a full day with children, we might not get a big chunk of free time but we often get a ‘one-minute grab.’ It is important to be able to take advantage of this time confetti.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SPOT MEDITATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Seven deep breaths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• One word to describe how they feel</td>
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Discuss other examples of spot meditations and how these can be integrated into day with or without children:

Seven deep breaths

1. Take a long, deep inhale through the nose filling the low belly
2. Pause gently at the top of the inhale
3. Allow the breath to escape from the nostrils, again long and smooth
4. Pause gently at the bottom of the exhale
5. Repeat

Look, listen and feel

1. Notice 5 shapes, colours or textures you can see
2. Now close your eyes and listen out for 5 distinct sounds
3. Finally, identify 5 distinct sensations in your body

Positive recollection

1. Recall something positive from a recent time
2. Whatever the quality or memory, bring it to mind and notice how it makes you feel
3. Bask in the sensations as though you were soaking them up

Mindful Shower

1. Use your time in the shower to engage with the senses
2. Notice the sensation of water on your skin (play around with hot and cold water)
3. Have good things to smell
4. Enjoy some conscious breaths while the water massages your neck and shoulders

Shake it off

1. Standing still, take a deep breath in through the nose and out through the mouth
2. Begin to shake your hands, moving to the wrists, forearms, upper arms and shoulders
3. Start to move your legs, from bottom to top
4. Stand still with your arms by your sides and feel the sensations in your body
MINDFULNESS IN DAILY LIFE

Practicing mindfulness can be done at any time, whatever we are doing and involves:

- being present to whatever the current situation is
- cultivating mindful attitudes (openness, curiosity, compassion)

MINDLESSNESS

If we spend the day in automatic pilot and trapped in our thinking mind we may have failed to:

- focus on our tasks
- listened to attentively to our loved ones
- noticed our surroundings
- feel any build-up of tension in our bodies
- acknowledge our emotions and what triggered them

MINDFUL ATTITUDES

More important than any style or technique you choose to practice are the attitudes you bring to your meditation. These are mindful attitudes we practice and then access in our day to day interactions.

Whatever mindset we practise, strengthens: when you meditate are you practising mindful attitudes? Or are you practising frustration and self-judgement? This will have a huge impact on your enjoyment level of meditation. Every now and then do an ‘attitude check.’

| OPENNESS             | • Dropping expectations  
                      | • ‘No big deal’ approach – we are flexible to the situation as it is |
|----------------------|--------------------------|
| CURIOSITY            | • Maintaining a light-hearted and open attitude to whatever shows up  
                      | • Be interested in how things are even if they don’t go how we planned |
| COMPASSION           | • Being kind to ourselves and others  
                      | • Not beating ourselves up if things don’t go the way we hoped  
                      | • Loving-kindness |

‘We may have next to no time for meditation but we have every waking second available to cultivate mindfulness. The challenge is to remember to remember.’
THE MINDFUL PAUSE

‘Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response’.

- During the day, we have many choice points – a small window where we decide whether to react automatically or respond mindfully
- This moment feels miniscule but if we practice we can expand it

| P = Pause for a moment and interrupt your ‘automatic pilot’ |
| A = Attend to the breath. Where can you feel it in the body? |
| U = Use the outbreath to let go of tension in the body |
| S = Sense what is happening. Notice your thoughts, sensations in the body, what you can see and hear |
| E = Engage again with your activities |

The mindful pause is a simple mindfulness technique. The purpose of the mindful pause is:

- Switch off automatic responses
- Become more aware of our thoughts and emotions
- Become aware of body sensations
- Become more aware of our stress
- Take a step back and choose again

GUIDED MEDITATION

- Mindful Pause
- Every second person to share
## HOW TO START (AND STICK WITH) A MEDITATION PRACTICE

| Get clear on your why | • Get clear on your motivation. Do you need help winding down before bed or perhaps you want to yell less at your kids? Once you’ve nailed your ‘why’ you’ll find it easier to stay focused  
• When you feel like skipping meditation for something else, remind yourself of the reasons you want to meditate  
• Track the impact meditation is having on your desired outcome over time - try journaling or noting your behaviour over time. |
|-----------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Set yourself a realistic goal | • It takes time to build any habit so commit to a set period to lay your foundations  
• If meditation is new for you, you’ll need this time to familiarise yourself with the basics  
• Sticking to the same meditation technique during this initial period is a great way to settle in  
• Start small. You wouldn’t run a marathon if you’ve only trained for a 5km  
• Meditating less than you want to might be the thing that maintains longevity |
| Build a routine | • Where possible, creating a clear routine is a great idea i.e. meditating at the same time  
• If this isn’t possible create some cues for yourself that trigger the brain to be ready for meditation e.g. calming music, essential oil, props  
• Piggyback your habit to something you already do e.g. after dropping your kids at school or changing a nappy, take ten deep breaths or while waiting for the kettle to boil, do a quick body scan  
• Substitute an existing habit - every time you reach for your phone, do a spot meditation instead |
| Stop making excuses | • I’m too busy, I don’t have time. I don’t feel like it: these aren’t reasons not to meditate they’re excuses. Calling yourself on your excuses is a crucial first step  
• If you have a social media account you have time to meditate  
• Have contingency plans for when the excuses rear their ugly heads; if you are tired, meditate in bed before you fall asleep, if you feel pressured, meditate for just one minute  
• Me time guilt. We all have this. We all need to get over it. Self-care is important full stop. For you and for your family |
| Break the rules | • There are no fixed rules and you can’t do it wrong  
• You don’t need to sit still, you don’t have to stop thinking and you don’t need to do it every day for a fixed amount of time  
• Take a mindful walk in nature, enjoy a mindful hot shower or listen to your favourite song and call it meditation |
| --- | --- |
| Treat yo’ self | • Adding an incentive can help - often the simple act of ticking off a calendar can do the trick  
• After a month or two, go all out and do something nice for yourself |
| Be prepared | • When you finish a meditation session, set the scene for the next day  
• Decide exactly what meditation you’re going to do and have it ready on your phone or computer so there’s less chance of ‘accidently’ opening Instagram and losing twenty minutes before you’ve even begun |
| Cut yourself some slack | • There’s going to be days that get away from you. Instead of beating yourself up just jump back in and keep moving (mindful attitudes)  
• Use the accordion principle - on bad days just do a one minute grab – you’re still in the game and stops the story of you as a ‘failed meditator’ |
| Get support | • Use an app – there’s great options out there if you require a guided meditation to stay on track (refer resource list)  
• Get a meditation buddy – even if it’s just a friend to text and chat about how you’re going  
• Goal-setting apps like StickK or Chains can be useful and Insight Timer allows you to journal and tracks statistics and milestones |

| Exercise Three: Plan Your Practice | • Map out your meditation plan  
• Map out some opportunities or triggers in your day for spot meditations  
• List the apps you need to download etc. |
RESOURCES

Smiling Mind smilingmind.com.au

A not-for-profit organisation working to make mindfulness meditation accessible for all (including kids). There’s a free app with guided meditations in addition to school and workplace programs.

Mind the Bump mindthebump.org.au

A collaboration between Smiling Mind and Beyond Blue, this is a free app to support couples and individuals during pregnancy and first two years of parenthood.

Headspace headspace.com

A comprehensive meditation app covering relationships, performance, health, pregnancy and kids. Available for a subscription with a free ten-day trial. ($12 monthly or $95 annual). Lots of interactive features and heaps of meditations to choose from.

1 Giant Mind 1giantmind.org

Free app using a consistent mantra style meditation technique. Includes a great video tutorial library.

Insight Timer insighttimer.org

Most popular free meditation app. Can be used simply to time your meditations or choose from a huge library of guided meditations. You can join a discussion group or keep a log / journal of your practice.

Kinderling kinderling.com.au

Family radio station and app. Includes meditations for parents.

Mindful mindful.org

Magazine and website with fantastic articles – subscribe to the mailing list for great free content.

Mindful in May mindfulinmay.org

An online program promoting a monthlong mindfulness challenge. The registration fee ($49) gives you access to guided meditations, interviews and an online community. There is also a mindful month program that can be accessed throughout the year.

10% Happier 10percenthappier.com

Website, book, app and podcast for ‘fidgety skeptics’. Pragmatic, funny and original.
SUGGESTED READING

There’s a stack of great books out there – here are a few of my favourites. Be careful of falling into the trap of reading lots about meditation but never actually getting around to doing it yourself!

MEDITATION AND MINDFULNESS

How to Meditate – A practical guide to making friends with your mind – Pema Chodron
The Foundations of Mindfulness – Eric Harrison
Be Mindful and Simplify your Life – Kate James
10% Happier – Dan Harris

MINDFULNESS FOR MOTHERS

Mindfulness for Mothers – Staying calm and present while caring for your child – Rebecca Ryan
Spilt Milk Yoga – Cathryn Monro

STRESS AND THE BRAIN

Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers – Robert Sapolsky
The Brain that Changes Itself - Norman Doidge
Rushing Women’s Syndrome – Dr Libby Weaver
WRAP UP

- Offer time for questions
- Provide contact details for follow up
- Provide details of SoundCloud account for guided meditations

| GUIDED MEDITATION | • Yoga nidra  
|                   | • Loving kindness  
|                   | • Choose based on mood of group |