

September 22, 2022 5 MINUTES TO READ · 1100 WORDS

Mindfulness 101: The Story, the Storm, and the Sting

By Scott L. Rogers

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In this month's column we'll explore a mindfulness technique you may find helpful amid moments when your thoughts or feelings seem to get the better of you. At such times, we can become so consumed by them that we lose track of the bigger picture. Mindfulness offers us greater access to the bigger picture so we can become more skilled at remaining focused, less likely to get lost in mind wandering, and experience greater resilience in the face of unpleasant emotions.

An advertisement for BridgeBank. On the left, a white box contains the text "OUR TEAM MAKES SOPHISTICATED M&A DEALS DOWNRIGHT SIMPLE." in red, the BridgeBank logo (a stylized bridge icon), and the text "BridgeBank®" and "A division of Western Alliance Bank. Member FDIC." Below this is a red button with the text "SCHEDULE A DEMO". On the right, a photograph shows a person's hands typing on a laptop keyboard, with the laptop screen displaying a dashboard with various charts and data.

[Mindfulness practices](#) train inner capacities to prepare us for such moments. For example, the Focused Attention practice anchors attention on a particular object, such as the breath, so that we are more likely to notice mind wandering and can better manage distraction. The Open Monitoring practice establishes a receptive state to notice the coming and going of thoughts and feelings and thereby develop greater equanimity.

All day long, we experience a shifting landscape of thoughts and feelings. Rather than spending a few moments *observing these internal phenomena* as they arise, and in doing so, coming to appreciate their ephemeral nature, often our attention turns to what is taking place *around us*. As a result, we can overestimate the impact of these external factors and underestimate the impact that our inner experience has on how we view events and people, along with the quality of our decision-making and overall well-being.

In such moments of overwhelm, it can be helpful to strategically shift the balance from external to internal, thereby allowing us to gather more of the internal data that is informing our perspective and decision-making. One of the difficulties of doing so is that our thoughts and feelings can be so agitating that turning attention to them is very difficult. As we explore below, turning attention instead to an often-overlooked internal experience can prove to be more manageable, helping us to become better equipped to steady our focus, regulate our emotions, and see things more clearly.

You might be wondering what this internal experience is. Let's begin by parsing our internal experience, especially when we are feeling agitated, into three constituent parts that we'll refer to as the Story, the Storm, and the Sting.

The Story

The Story refers to our thoughts. While thoughts can be useful, often they are unhelpful. We inevitably operate from a place of limited information. Moreover, given the uncertainty over future events and the importance we place on outcomes, thoughts can involve catastrophizing about the future and forecasting worst-case scenarios. At other times, the mind's monkey nature has us jumping from thought to thought, and we can feel scattered, or we can become fixated on a regretted past event or a single thought that gets in the way of getting other things done. Whatever the thought-stream is, moment by moment, we can refer to it as the Story. Mindfulness teacher Sharon Salzberg writes that mindfulness is telling the difference between what is happening and the story we are telling ourselves about what is happening.

The Storm

The Storm refers to the emotional tumult we can experience when things are not going according to plan. These can include feelings such as frustration, anger, fear, disappointment, sadness, and dread. Events happening “out there” in the world often affect how we feel “in here,” and these feelings can vary from mild to intense and can, in turn, influence our thoughts. This bi-directional relationship can be seen in the first sentence of this section: The mere thought that “things are not going according to plan” can be enough to set in motion a series of unpleasant feelings that, in turn, can lead to further storytelling.

This brings us to our third internal experience, one we often overlook but which, when attended to strategically, can be a source of relief and insight.

The Sting

The Sting refers to sensations arising in the body, especially when the Story and Storm are going strong. These might include an accelerated heart rate, shallow breathing, temperature fluctuations of hot and cold, a headache, butterflies in the stomach, and tension in various areas of the body ranging, such as the eyes, jaw, shoulders, chest, and hands.

The Mindfulness Technique

There is something settling and grounding about body sensations. They have an undeniable physical presence. They take place in the present moment. When you turn your attention to these tangible signals, you become more fully present to what is arising in the moment—be it pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. Stories and Storms often distract us from our present experience, leading us to become lost in the past or future. At such times, we can find our way back to the present by turning attention to the sensations arising in the body. Doing so can tone down the intensity of Story and Storm. If this piques your interest, give it a try. You don't need to wait long to observe the shift. You can also practice in short doses—even now—by taking a few slower breaths and observing the sensations of the body. You can settle on a specific area, such as the belly or shoulders, or the body overall.

Of course, it can take practice to rest attention on sensations in the body—and stay present with them—when the Story and Storm are brewing. This is where the Body Scan practice can come into play. Practicing on a regular basis can help develop the staying power to drop in on the body for a few moments in the midst of Story and Storm, to achieve a little relief, and perhaps even to see things more clearly. Of course,

you know yourself best, and in the event these sensations prove very uncomfortable, it is a good idea to stop and take care.

Here are links to three guided Body Scan practices that you can do on a regular basis, lasting [six minutes](#), [12 minutes](#), and [18 minutes](#). If you practice regularly, you will be better prepared to do a short Body Scan practice and find a little relief when you notice the Story or Storm. One short practice—taught by mindfulness teacher Pema Chodron and shared by Federal Judge Chris McAiley—is known as “Drop the Story, Feel the Energy”; we could also name it “Subdue the Storm, Feel the Energy.” You can listen to Judge McAiley describe the practice by [clicking here](#). In this practice, we turn our attention to the energy in the body—the body sensations—and in so doing, the Story and Storm begin to subside. I hope you find this exercise helpful. There are many sources to learn more about the Body Scan practice, including [Mindful Magazine](#) and [The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley](#), and you can find additional guided practices on many apps and websites.

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