

CHAPTER 1

Movement, Attention, and Health

The more deeply one investigates human movement, the more apparent it becomes that this most mundane of activities constitutes a complex, intriguing area of human experience.

—NICOLÁS SALAZAR SUTIŁ (2015, p. 1)

The capacity for movement is among our greatest attributes as a species, a signature capability that is essential for survival. Movement lies at the heart of our most compelling cultural and artistic achievements, ranging from the most exquisite vase painting to massive architectural monuments. Movement is essential to establishing and sustaining interpersonal relationships through social, courting, and mating behaviors. It also brings us joy: Consider the sheer delight that young children express when engaged in even the simplest of movements, like hopping or jumping, energetically repeating them in the process of learning new motor skills. Easily taken for granted until something goes amiss, movement is intimately tied to all we do, how we feel, what we think, and how our bodies function. Every overt behavior involves movement. Even when sitting still, I'm constantly breathing, adjusting my posture, and shifting my gaze. My body is like a car whose engine remarkably never stops running, whether idling, accelerating, or cruising along at highway speed. Such a marvelous creation deserves care, attention, and appreciation. Everything from the act of breathing to skiing or playing a musical instrument is deserving of such careful attention.

Research supports the value of focused attention. In an ingenious study of mind wandering, researchers used a web-based iPhone application to contact participants at random times (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). They were asked (1) how they were feeling; (2) what they were doing; and (3) whether they were thinking about something other than

what they were doing. The results were compelling: Mind wandering occurred frequently and often into negative cognitive territory and was a better predictor of how people felt than what they were actually doing. This study underscores the therapeutic value, not just in clinical practice but in everyday life, of learning to stabilize attention (Britton et al., 2018; Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008).

Movement, and specifically mindful movement, adds another domain in which to practice. For example, consider clients being treated for anxiety whose physical tension early in therapy interferes with talking and listening. The standard recommendation is to “take a deep breath” before continuing. Ironically, this instruction usually produces even more tension because in response to it, most people raise the chest and shoulders as they inhale, rather than releasing the abdomen and breathing diaphragmatically. Bringing mindful awareness to movement of the breath can remedy this problem. You can do this by inviting clients to *explore* the experience of breathing and, as a result of doing so, determine what method has the most beneficial impact on tension. Learning to detect variations in depth and pace, and the effect of such variations on feelings, is a valuable therapeutic skill. Such awareness encourages curiosity and can eventually lead to an understanding of the relationships between physical tension and anxiety.

Beyond the health benefits (mental and physical) of being physically active, there are other reasons to practice mindful movement. First, it opens a valuable domain of expression that enriches verbal communication by bringing awareness to the body and its many expressive capabilities (Mannion & Andersen, 2015). Second, mindful movement provides a bridge for clients, spanning the gap between being sedentary and engaging in physical activity. The emphasis is on moving slowly and with awareness of what happens when, for example, you take a few steps. Mindful movement has the added benefit of anchoring attention in the present moment, whether you’re walking, climbing stairs, or just focusing on the breath. Simple movements encourage a friendly, kind, and nonjudgmental attitude toward the body because they’re within most everyone’s capabilities. Treating the body with kindness is vital; nothing is gained by placing unrealistic demands on it. Learning to move mindfully is like taking “baby steps,” in that it’s awkward at first because you’re not used to doing it. The more you practice moving with awareness, the more focused you become.

As a therapist, you are more likely to be successful in recommending exercise to clients by emphasizing near-term and immediate benefits and experience, rather than focusing on long-term, often negative goals like losing weight or controlling disease symptoms (Segar, 2015). Most clients already know they should exercise, so repeating this recommendation

doesn't help and may even reinforce resistance. Instead, when bringing up the topic, saying something like, "Have you ever noticed how being physically active can change how you feel?" can open a dialogue in which you propose going for a short walk together, and then collaboratively assess its effect on thoughts, feelings, and sensations.

Here is an example of how mindful movement can be introduced clinically. Laura, a breast cancer survivor, was referred for counseling by an oncologist due to ambivalence about resuming exercise posttreatment. Though she agreed with the recommendation, she reported extreme fatigue, and she worried that the stress of exercise might cause a recurrence of cancer (though this was deemed unlikely by her oncologist). The therapist discussed Laura's concerns in depth and, rather than referring her to an exercise specialist, proposed mindful walking to reintroduce her to physical exertion. Using an adjacent office corridor, the therapist instructed Laura to walk slowly and focus on moment-by-moment sensations of moving, such as contacting the floor with each step, balancing, and breathing. She found that a slow and rhythmic walking pace was not only relaxing but intriguing as well; walking was previously something she only did for a functional purpose, not an end in itself. Her curiosity piqued, she eventually found her way into a gentle yoga class to explore movement patterns more fully.

Origins of Mindful Movement in Psychotherapy

I first had the idea to write about mindful movement in psychotherapy after being exposed to mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), the ground-breaking program for medical patients developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn and colleagues at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Being highly active by nature, I liked how movement (hatha yoga and walking meditation) was taught as an essential element of managing stress by practicing mindful awareness. Not being very familiar with yoga at the time, I was nonetheless aware of how other types of physical activity were both healthy and relaxing. The novelty of mindful yoga and walking for me was the coupling of slow pacing with moment-by-moment attention. Combined with sitting meditation and cognitive strategies for managing stress, the overall effect was quite remarkable.

Given how effective mindful movement has proven to be in helping reduce stress, I wondered if it might help address another pressing issue, that of epidemic-level physical inactivity in Western society, accompanied by escalating rates of chronic diseases linked to being sedentary. Despite the acknowledged effect of exercise in preventing and mitigating the effects of disease and prolonging life, few people are active enough to

experience such basic health-protective benefits. For example, one study that used accelerometers (devices to measure movements like walking) to track daily physical activity found that *fewer than 5%* of adults obtained the amount of physical activity (30 minutes per day) recommended for basic health by organizations like the American Heart Association and American College of Sports Medicine (Troiano et al., 2008). For all too many people exercise is simply unpleasant and, as a result, lacks immediate reinforcement value. Naturally there is value in exercising, but realizing its benefits requires patience and persistence.

A core purpose of mindfulness meditation is to encourage awareness and acceptance of things as they are rather than as how we would like them to be. Such clarity is especially helpful when facing stress, pain, or illness because it tends to cut through thoughts and feelings that can distort or complicate accurate perception. For example, chronic pain or injury may be accompanied by depressive, self-critical thoughts (“It will never go away”; “I should have taken better care of myself”) that complicate the present moment with past and future projections and thereby increase suffering. For some people, just the *thought* of exercising can trigger ambivalence and inhibitory inertia. “I don’t *feel* like exercising” and “What’s the use, why bother? I’m way out of shape” are examples of commonly associated thoughts. How can being mindful help here? For one, you can diminish the impact of these thoughts by labeling them as “just thoughts” that color your experience in the moment. For another, you can tune in to the body: Are you tired? Sleepy? Keyed up? Hungry? Bored, perhaps? Most everyone—exercise enthusiasts included—has fleeting thoughts such as, “I don’t feel like exercising.” The question is, what’s your response to such thoughts? Being mindful can help you determine whether what you’re thinking will dictate your behavior.

New ways of applying mindfulness to everyday behavior are constantly emerging. The development of MBSR offered a fresh perspective on stress management that emphasized cultivating *awareness* of somatic and cognitive processes as a prelude to behavior change. A unique element of MBSR has been the incorporation of yoga as a key component, bringing movement into the realm of clinical practice. The primary purpose was straightforward: to counter disuse atrophy in medical patients whose treatments frequently involved prolonged bed rest. But there was more to the practice than simply encouraging physical activity. Had that been the only intention, it would have been just as feasible to use stretching and strengthening exercises drawn from a typical exercise class. Yoga was selected to fulfill this role largely because of Jon Kabat-Zinn’s conviction that bridging Eastern wisdom traditions with Western biomedical science offered a new pathway to health and healing. In conjunction with

other core MBSR components—sitting meditation and the body scan—yoga offered practitioners a set of investigative tools helpful for familiarizing them with the workings of mind and body in an intimate, highly personal manner. Sequences of gentle movements, carried out slowly and with sustained attention, provided a means of exploring the body's physical capabilities in a manner that was both safe and feasible for a remarkably diverse range of medical conditions. Patients were—and are—instructed to use the practice to become familiar with the body's capabilities and limitations by directing focused attention inwardly during a series of movements that engage the major muscle groups. For many practitioners, getting in touch with the body in this fashion comes as a revelation, an awakening to the inherent possibilities for movement that may have progressively diminished over time as a function of disease, disuse, or neglect.

The emphasis on *awareness* is what sets mindful yoga apart from many other forms of physical activity. In reality, one can bring mindful awareness to any movement, but the philosophical roots of yoga are strongly intertwined with those of mindfulness and other traditions that encourage coming to know the self through sustained contemplative practices. Cultivating some understanding of the body and how it operates is an important aspect of this process.

The contrast between mindful yoga and Western ideas about the role of physical activity and exercise could not be more divergent. The upsurge of interest in physical culture during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries focused primarily on physical prowess as the end goal. Physical conditioning—in the form of building strength, speed, or endurance—became the object of intense scientific investigation leading to groundbreaking discoveries in human physiology, setting the stage for remarkable athletic accomplishments. In contrast, yoga, which also enjoyed an upsurge of interest in the late nineteenth century, placed far greater emphasis on integrating body and mind through practices intended to foster greater self-understanding. Physical attainments were a means of moving along a path toward enlightenment, rather than an end goal. Both traditions have continued to evolve, largely independently of one another, as a result of which there has been relatively little cross-fertilization over the years. Drop into virtually any wellness facility and it's quickly apparent that while there are advocates of both, the degree of interaction may be limited because of diverging views concerning the purpose of each approach.

Bringing mindful awareness to movement offers a way to help bridge this divide. According to this perspective, learning to focus attention on cognitive and interoceptive aspects of physical activity facilitates making

contact with our natural affinity for movement, which can take many different forms. Although yoga may be especially well suited to the practice of mindful movement, yoga is not the only context in which to experience it. All that is required is bringing focused, moment-by-moment attention to whatever the activity at hand, whether it be a mindful walk in the company of a therapist, lifting weights under the watchful eye of a personal trainer, or high-level athletic skills that require expert coaching. Each of these settings offers an opportunity to cultivate mindful awareness. The sensitivity to inner states one learns to cultivate via the simplest movement patterns can be applied with equal benefit to more complex activities. Rather than simply recommending exercise for clients facing challenging health conditions, therapists can become more involved in helping facilitate the transition from sedentary to active behavior. More than anyone perhaps, skilled therapists can empathize with the reluctance of clients to initiate radical behavior change. For many, exercise poses a significant challenge because it evokes sensations of physical exertion that are often alien and potentially anxiety-provoking, even at intensity levels well below those associated with current recommended guidelines. Clients who are depressed, anxious, or dealing with chronic illness may find the prospect of becoming active especially trying, despite compelling evidence that doing so may have beneficial effects in the long run.

Recent research and theorizing about motivational aspects of exercise is creating new opportunities for clinicians to teach mindfulness as a fundamental element of healthy lifestyle practices. In part this is driven by recognition of a need for alternatives to prescriptive exercise programming, which is strongly aligned with a medical view of health and disease. Years of epidemiological and laboratory research documenting the value of physical activity for health have been only partially successful at the level of public awareness in changing behavior. As a society, we are contending with high rates of chronic disease and spiraling medical costs to treat conditions that are in fact responsive to behavioral interventions. Part of the problem with this approach, described in the Introduction and emphasized throughout this book, is that many people experience a disconnection between the prospect of improving health via exercise and related practices, and the subjective experience of engaging in these behaviors *in the present moment*.

The problem is further compounded by the fact that prescriptive recommendations for moderate intensity physical activity require levels of physical exertion well beyond the capabilities of many (perhaps most?) people who might benefit the most from their impact. Data from epidemiological and laboratory research on health benefits of exercise have tended to overlook the complex nature of physical activity from the standpoint of subjective experience, and instead have focused more on

documenting long-term benefits. Physicians and health care providers who recommend that patients and clients become physically active to obtain these benefits may not fully be aware of the significant gap that exists between current health status and potential health benefits, however desirable those benefits may be. The prospect of becoming physically active at a level necessary to meet even minimum exercise benchmarks can be daunting and highly discouraging.

The potential for mindful movement to bridge this gap stems from its emphasis on exploration of inner states in a manner that is somewhat akin to a process of desensitization, whereby one learns to become accepting of sensations associated with physical exertion, beginning at a subjectively low level of intensity that nonetheless differs from how it feels to be inactive. Connecting with the body in this manner lays the groundwork for subsequent exposure to higher intensity, more sustained activity. The intention of doing this extends beyond adapting to physical and cognitive correlates of activity, although this is certainly an important outcome. More broadly, mindful movement can foster conscious awareness of, and appreciation for, the remarkable capabilities of the body in motion. It offers a viable alternative to the often mindless, repetitive, and even compulsive approach to exercise that seems so prevalent in our culture (Calogero & Pedrotty, 2007).

Awareness as an Answer

As mentioned in the Introduction, we are designed for action and speed, with a sophisticated musculoskeletal system, robust cardiovascular capacity, and biomechanical attributes enabling an astonishing array of physical skills. Yet sadly these capabilities often go undeveloped or unappreciated. Even everyday movements like walking are marvels of coordination, balance, strength, and agility, but we tend to take them for granted. We also tend to ignore how physical activity contributes to mental and physical health. When we do pay attention to our bodies, we tend to do so with more of an emphasis on *getting* in shape than on savoring the physical and emotional pleasures of *being* healthy.

The loss of intimate awareness of our bodies is both a cause and an effect of living increasingly sedentary lives. But there is a way to reconnect with ourselves by bringing mindful awareness to movement, in a process of gradual self-discovery and conscious focus on sensations that mark even the simplest activity. Doing this leads to a deeper understanding of how the body operates, similar to how sitting meditation enables us to become more sensitively tuned in to the nature of the mind. By moving gently and slowly, well below the intensity level of recommended physical

activity, we can become more highly attuned to movement patterns and the accompanying sensations of physical exertion. Even though years of physical inactivity and the inevitable effects of aging may have diminished our capacity for youthful movement, bringing mindful awareness to what we are currently doing can be an intensely satisfying experience, especially when we are able to do so in a nonjudgmental manner.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

How well can you focus attention? It probably depends on what you are doing, for one thing. What about physical activity? If you exercise, do you pay attention to what you are doing, or do you prefer to listen to music, daydream, or think about other things? If the latter, you're not alone. For many people, exercise is a burden, rather than a source of enjoyment. Reading this book, you may develop a new attitude toward being physically active, based on discovering that there can be great pleasure in being active when your attention is focused in the moment, rather than on long-term goals like losing weight or getting in shape.

Three Fundamental Themes

Three fundamental themes flow through this book. First, physical activity and exercise are vital to healthy mental, emotional, and physical functioning. The issue for clinicians is *how* to help clients experience these benefits. The effort is well worthwhile, especially considering the many practical advantages of physical activity for mental health, including proven effectiveness, low cost, absence of adverse side effects, and widespread societal endorsement (Buckworth, Dishman, O'Connor, & Tomporowski, 2013).

Second, it's hard to transition from being sedentary to moving enough to gain the benefits of physical activity, especially when you're depressed, anxious, or facing a health crisis. Constitutional or genetic factors, low levels of sustained compliance, and poorly designed exercise programming are additional factors that potentially complicate the process (Tanaka, 2018).

Third, practicing mindfulness—open-hearted, nonjudgmental awareness—of the body in motion can not only help clients make the transition but also support the intention to incorporate activity into everyday life. Helping clients become comfortable with the subjective experience of everyday movements like sitting, standing, walking, and lying down can encourage making movement an everyday part of life, and in addition serve as preparation for structured exercise. For those not used to

exercise, practicing mindful awareness of movement is a first step in becoming active, a conduit to the physical and mental health benefits we have discussed (Febbraio, 2017; Lam & Riba, 2016).

Simple, Mindful Movement

The process leading from slow, mindful movement to more intense activity involves progressive adaptation. Physical exertion requires effort, which often feels unpleasant—it's the body's way of urging caution because strain is involved, a natural protective reaction. Once you understand this, you're less likely to feel that something is wrong, and are more likely to "befriend" and even invite the response because it means you're working in harmony with the body. The "wisdom of the body" is at work here, if only one has the presence of mind to attend to it. For example, slow walking is the first of several steps leading to faster walking or even running. Making the transition gradual rather than abrupt helps ensure that the body has time to adapt to changes in posture, balance, strength, and speed of movement. Slowly raising the arms overhead with mindful awareness prepares the way to building strength using hand weights or exercise machines. Many exercise programs overlook the value of teaching slow, deliberate movement, and fewer still emphasize moment-by-moment attention.

Take walking, for example, among our most remarkable and versatile capabilities. Our attention when walking is almost always directed toward where we are going, and how to get there, rather than on the experience of walking itself. Yet walking can be the focus of attention, just like anything else, and walking meditation is widely practiced in contemplative settings.¹ It is also one of the most natural movement-based experiences clients and therapists can share.

Before moving on, I invite you to pause here to try an exercise in mindful walking. (See Box 1.1, on the next page.) A key to this and every other mindfulness practice used in clinical work is to begin by doing it yourself, with openness and curiosity about the experience, before teaching others. Notice thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations you have during the exercise. Taking this step will help you increasingly appreciate the fluid and novel nature of everyday experiences, an important perspective to share with clients that is easier to explain once you have explored it personally.

As with any of the exercises offered in this book, let yourself become absorbed in the experience, rather than analyzing or judging what you

¹In his book, *The Meditative Path: A Gentle Way to Awareness, Concentration, and Serenity*, John Cianciosi (2001) describes in thoughtful detail the practice of walking meditation, in which the physical act of walking becomes the object of focused attention.

BOX 1.1. Mindful Walking

Set aside a few minutes (5 or 10 to begin with) when you won't be disturbed and are free to focus your attention. Select a space for walking, such as a hallway, a large room, or path (either indoors or out), where you can move with a minimum of distraction or obstacles. (Meditation centers often have circular pathways, just for this purpose.) Begin by standing, taking in the experience of being upright and balanced, and perhaps noticing the many subtle physical adjustments your body makes to maintain this position. Allow awareness gradually to settle on whatever physical sensations of standing and breathing arise. Now, begin walking very slowly, fully aware of each step as you take it. You may find it helpful to clasp your hands together either in front of or behind the body, because walking at this pace does not require their use to counterbalance movement of the legs. As you walk, be aware of the physical contact each foot makes with the ground, noticing perhaps which region of the foot makes the initial connection. Let your attention settle on the various sensations that arise as you slowly shift the weight of the body from one leg to the other with each step. If you are walking on a straight path and come to the end, mindfully turn and reverse the direction of movement, continuing back and forth in this manner while maintaining focused awareness. From time to time, experiment with varying the pace of walking, moving more slowly or rapidly with awareness of the effect of doing so. And as with any meditation practice, develop the capacity to notice when your attention wanders away from simply walking, and use that awareness to refocus and return to noticing physical sensations on a moment-by-moment basis.

Check-In: What was your experience of walking mindfully like? Were you able to focus on just walking without *thinking* about what you were doing?

are doing, or becoming overly goal-oriented. *Just be present.* Treat each form of movement as an opportunity to be open to whatever arises on a moment-by-moment basis. As you contemplate weaving mindful movement practices into your therapeutic toolkit, keep in mind you don't have to *teach* clients to move—they already know how. Rather, your role is simply to encourage them to take a fresh look at everyday movements with the intention of fostering curiosity about the remarkable capabilities we possess but seldom truly appreciate. Doing so fosters present-moment awareness, the essence of mindfulness. You can help clients bring mindful awareness to any movement by teaching three things:

1. Focusing and sustaining *attention* on present-moment experience
2. Setting an *intention* to simply attend to what occurs, letting go of goals or future expectations
3. Adopting an *attitude* marked by patience, nonstriving, curiosity, and openness

Elements of Mindfulness

The word “movement” used throughout this book is deliberate, to differentiate it from the terms “physical activity” and “exercise,” both of which have specific meaning in health and fitness fields. Both “physical activity” and “exercise” refer to purposeful behavior in everyday work and leisure-based contexts. In contrast, “movement” is more inclusive, encompassing functional, routine behaviors such as sitting, standing, and walking that we normally don’t pay attention to because they serve functional purposes. “Movement” also encompasses activity that is not outcome-oriented, such as simply observing movement accompanying breathing during sitting meditation, or even the act of sitting itself, which requires strength to maintain an upright posture.

The connection between movement and mindfulness becomes clear by referring to the widely referenced definition proposed by Jon Kabat-Zinn: “awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). The first element, “paying attention,” involves focusing awareness on “objects of consciousness” including the thoughts, emotions, memories, and physical sensations that constitute the flow of moment-by-moment experience. Physical structures involved in movement, such as muscle and joints, generate perceptible sensations that can be the object of focused awareness.

Purposeful, moment-by-moment attention is an essential element of mindful movement, especially when learning something new. For example, raising your arms to shoulder level involves moment-by-moment awareness of the position of the arms as they approach the desired height. Athletes and musicians hone skillful movement patterns by slowly repeating them with sustained attention in order to embed them in memory.

Underlying both awareness and moment-by-moment attention is developing a nonjudgmental attitude. This means keeping an open mind about what you’re doing, whether it’s yoga or running. It’s an alternative to the popular “no pain, no gain” approach to physical training. When your mind isn’t cluttered by self-critical thoughts or expectation of results, it frees up attention to focus on the task at hand.

Attention can be directed toward any aspect of conscious experience, including movement. The ability to step back and observe what we are thinking, feeling, or sensing—referred to as decentering—is used in clinical practice as a means of reducing the impact of distressing thoughts and feelings (Hayes-Skelton & Graham, 2013). It involves adopting an observational, nonjudgmental stance toward the mind’s contents. Being able to shift from thinking about something distressing or being fully immersed in a strong emotion to simply noticing that these events are occurring can reduce negative reactivity. The process of decentering is analogous to swimming in a turbulent river versus observing the flow of water from its banks. Developing this capacity for observation entails establishing a mental “observing self” (Deikman, 1982) that is independent of and capable of monitoring the moment-by-moment flow of conscious experience.

Just as thoughts and emotions can be the focus of moment-by-moment attention, the same holds true for physical movements. Breathing, sitting, standing, walking, stretching, and any other behavior can become the focus of nonjudgmental attention. Moreover, observing movement and physical activity anchors attention in the present because all physical processes are immersed in the moment-by-moment flow of time.²

The prominence of the body in mindfulness is evident in the range of programs that incorporate movement, several of which are described in Chapter 3. Without exception, they consist of simple movements based in hatha yoga, following Kabat-Zinn (1990), who developed them for medical patients enrolled in MBSR (Salmon, Lush, Jablonski, & Sephton, 2009). There are two sequences in MBSR (each about 45 minutes in length) consisting of standing, seated, and lying down poses (asanas), done slowly, gently, and mindfully with an emphasis on moment-by-moment attention. They embody the spirit of “mindful movement” emphasized throughout this book.

The Promise of Mindful Movement

Mindful movement can serve as a metaphor, a means of teaching us healthy ways of moving through life more generally. The deeply engrained “fight or flight” reaction, marked by intense physiological reactivity, is easily

²The body is the first foundation of mindfulness, according to an early Buddhist teaching, the Satipatthana Sutta. Described in detail in the book *The Four Foundations of Mindfulness in Plain English* (Gunaratana, 2012), awareness of the body and conscious (deliberate) actions form the bedrock of mindfulness practice. Three additional objects of awareness—feelings, mind, and mental phenomena—complete the foundation.

triggered when we encounter resistance or stress—suddenly encountering a stairway or steep hill when on a run, for example. Movement can evoke discomfort, which we can learn to respond to by staying present and focused, neither pushing forward nor backing away. For example, the faster you walk, the more effortful it becomes. Focusing on the effort is normal in exercise training, which involves becoming accustomed to physical resistance, which doesn't necessarily feel good but is different from pain.

The flexibility one can acquire through mindful movement, staying present and focused even in the face of difficulty, is good preparation for dealing with everyday stressors that involve resistance and discomfort. A client whose efforts to change are met with psychological resistance can create an analog experience through a simple physical gesture, like holding an arm up long enough to feel a bit of strain, and briefly responding with focused attention and breathing. Distress tolerance is an adaptive aspect of self-regulation (Bardeen, Tull, Dixon-Gordon, Stevens, & Gratz, 2015), equally applicable in therapy and physical activity. For example, many yoga sequences involve stretching and holding poses at a point of resistance (even slight discomfort), at which point settling in to the breath is practiced to encourage adaptation. The intention is to dwell in a state of initial resistance or discomfort and stay with it until it recedes, as it almost always does.

Mindful movement also offers direct experience with physical limits or boundaries. For example, extending my arm up over my head, eventually I reach a point where it feels as though I cannot extend any farther. Approaching such limits (I refer to them as “edges”) gently and with awareness increasingly challenges and improves strength, balance, flexibility, or range of motion. Learning to approach and explore these boundaries is an effective way to foster awareness of how, in the face of stressful life circumstances, we may benefit from moving in close with open awareness (as disconcerting as this may be at first), rather than backing away or doing something that creates further, unnecessary stress. You can experience this in a practice I call “working the edges” (see Box 1.2).

Awareness sets mindful movement apart from other forms of physical activity. Whether you're doing yoga, running, or lifting weights, focused attention has a positive effect on the process. Not only are you more engaged in what you are doing, you're also less likely to get injured or become bored. It's remarkable how many people hurry through their workouts, seemingly impatient to get from one exercise to the next.

Although yoga may be especially well suited to the practice of mindful movement, yoga is not the only way to practice it. Rather, it is only necessary to bring focused, moment-by-moment attention to whatever is at hand, whether it be awareness of the movement of the breath, mindful

BOX 1.2. Working the Edges

This practice involves the basic movement of turning the upper body from side to side while you are either standing or sitting in a chair without arms. Whether you are standing or sitting, have the head balanced on the neck, and gaze in a forward direction. Be upright in such a way that your spine is straight, the chest is open, and the shoulders are aligned with the hips and ankles. Place your hands on the hips so your thumbs are resting on the bony ridge along the top of the pelvis and the other fingers of each hand are resting more toward the front side of the body. If you are standing, keep the knees and ankles very slightly flexed. Take a breath in, expanding the belly to bring air into the lungs, and on the out-breath turn the upper body to the right until, without straining, you come to the natural limit of your range of motion. This point is your edge, where the energy you are expending is balanced by resistance to further movement. In effect, your body is telling you to stop here.

As you move in this direction, notice how resistance to the movement increases gradually, rather than all at once. Sensing this gradual resistance is important because it allows you to gauge how much physical force you are applying and enables you to stop well in advance of a point that creates pain or risk of injury. The more you practice, the more sensitive you will become to approaching physical limits in this or any other deliberate movement. It's important to emphasize that *edges* occur well below pain thresholds, and so are associated with limited injury risk. "Working the edges" is comparable to what in physical therapy or fitness programming involves exploring the range of motion of a joint or posture. The important thing is to develop sensitivity to subtle cues in the form of feedback from muscles and joints, so you can detect edges as they approach.

At this point, turning your upper body to the right and experiencing this boundary or edge, you can choose to do one of three things: either back away, push forward, or simply pause and breathe. By backing away, you relinquish the opportunity to learn more about this particular edge and what accounts for it. If you simply push through, with the intention of somehow getting beyond your current limit or edge, your body will likely respond with increasingly urgent signals that you eventually interpret as "pain," and perhaps trigger protective muscle contractions to counteract potentially harmful movements.

The third option—the "middle way," neither backing away nor pushing further—is to simply remain where you are, breathe with the associated sensations, and notice the effect of doing so. One important effect of

(continued)

pausing and breathing is that it promotes an overall state of relaxation, of softening, counteracting to some extent muscle tension that may contribute to the current edge. So simply pausing and breathing may lessen physical tension and, in doing so, affect range of motion here or anywhere else in the body.

After remaining at this edge for a few breath cycles, slowly return to your starting point by reversing the direction of movement until you are once again facing forward. And now, repeat the movement, this time slowly turning to your left and eventually, returning to the center. The value of this practice lies in encouraging awareness of physical and psychological edges—places that generate sensations of some intensity—that offer an opportunity for sustained exploration. Getting close in to areas of discomfort, rather than backing away or pushing through them, is an important step in the process of developing mindful awareness, whether in the context of mindful movement or stressful life events.

Check-In: Reflect briefly on “edges” in your life, either physical or psychological, where exploring them up close—rather than backing away or pushing through—may be helpful.

walking in the company of a therapist, lifting weights with focused attention, or perfecting high-level athletic skills. The sensitivity to inner states one learns to cultivate via the simplest movement patterns can then be applied with equal benefit to more physically demanding activities.

Summary

Look for opportunities to practice movement in new and interesting settings. You don't have to find a walking path at a meditation center to practice mindful walking, nor do you have to practice yoga. It's the attitude and quality of attention you bring to what you are doing that counts. For inspiration, read Franklin Chen's blog post, “How to Enjoy Treadmill Running: Treat It as a Meditative Practice” (Chen, 2012).

My personal mindful movement practice begins early most mornings on a rowing machine at a gym and ends with mindful walking or running. In between are various mindful practices for strength, range of motion, flexibility, and balance. I deliberately chose the setting because it is quiet and peaceful, allowing me to focus without feeling rushed. I find repetitive movements—rowing, lifting weights, running, and walking—to

be soothing and energizing, and any resistance, which mostly involves anticipatory “mind chatter,” subsides as I begin. As yoga teachers like to say, “The most difficult pose in yoga is . . . the first one.”

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Many fitness centers, like fast-food restaurants, are designed to get people in and out in a hurry. Noisy machines, loud music, and large, open spaces crowded with equipment and bustling with activity make it challenging to exercise mindfully. The next time you exercise give close attention to your posture, facial expression, and overall level of tension. Notice the pace of movement when you lift weights, use a treadmill, or stretch. Do you feel impatient to “get through” a workout so you can get on to something else? Can you allow yourself to settle into the experience without rushing, to feel what you are feeling, and notice what you are actually doing?