

# Loosening the Grip of Addiction: A Mindful Recovery

By Julie Murphy

## Introduction

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Each of us longs for wholeness and love. When we lose touch with our basic goodness, our inherent well being, we experience some form of pain—loneliness, anxiety, boredom, frustration, anger, aggression, neediness, emptiness, etc. Sometimes we can face these feeling states and find our way back. Sometimes we only cope as best we can. Other times, we simply seek to escape. We turn to work, exercise, entertainment, Internet activities, gambling, thrill seeking behaviors, food, caffeine, alcohol, and other substances. When we avoid what is actually happening to us for long enough, coping becomes a habit. Habits, when driven by deep unfulfilled needs, can become addictions. We grow mindless about our responses to life. Our physiology and brain activity can become entrapped in a vicious cycle that deepens drug and other dependencies<sup>1</sup>. When we experience craving and/or withdraw symptoms, suddenly it seems, we no longer feel the freedom of choice. Even when we know we are harming ourselves, we cannot stop<sup>2</sup>. Even if we do stop, changes in our brain activity can persist for a long time<sup>3</sup>, increasing the likelihood we will revert to our addiction. We suffer; we escape; and our suffering deepens. How can we break this cycle?

Whether we are addressing culturally sanctioned addictions such as work or exercise, or life threatening addictions such as alcohol and drug dependencies, mindfulness, both in the formal practice of meditation and in its informal “post meditation” practice, helps develop the recourses and skills needed to break the addiction cycle. Mindfulness provides tools useful in all stages of recovery: from the dawning of

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<sup>1</sup> Leshner, Alan. “Addiction Is a Brain Disease, and It Matters.” *Science*. October 3, 1997 278:46.

<sup>2</sup> Hanson, Dirk. *The Chemical Carousel: What Science tells Us About Beating Addiction*. Booksurge Llc. 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Urschel, Harold C. *Healing the Addicted Brain: The Revolutionary, Science-Based Alcoholism and Addiction Recovery Program*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Inc, 2009.

awareness an addiction problem exists, through the early stages of abstinence or harm reduction, to relapse prevention, advanced recovery and maintenance. We can use mindfulness to cultivate the capacity to calmly bear witness to our emotions, habits, reactions and responses. Mindfulness helps us recognize when we are vulnerable to yielding to our addiction. We can become aware of our somatic cues, including yearning, tension, compression, deadening and dissociation. We learn to recognize relapse cues so we can make other choices. We develop the resources to tolerate what we have not been able to tolerate. This helps us to get to what actually drives our unconscious urges. We can employ mindfulness to heal from our childhood wounds and make friends with our physiological predispositions and our defenses. When we have developed more resources and greater self-awareness, we can make more wholesome choices and stick to them. We create a positive feedback loop that eases the destructive process, fostering loving self-care and self-discovery. Mindfulness cultivates the qualities of nonjudgmental awareness and fierce compassion that help us to free ourselves from the powerful grip of addictions.

### ***Vignette: Introducing Stephen***

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Stephen was referred to me when he completed a thirty-day residential treatment program for alcohol in which he received a firm foundation and education about the brain disease of addiction and cognitive behavior relapse prevention strategies. Stephen began using drugs and alcohol in junior high. His father died of alcohol related disease; his two sisters drink heavily and frequently take party drugs on weekends. Stephen tried to “get it more under control” when his twins were born. Yet, he spent little time at home, working long hours in his start up business and meeting clients at the bar after hours. When the twins turned three, Stephen finally realized he needed help. We began our work together about five years later. At age forty, Stephen was highly motivated to give his sons a better childhood than he had.

## **Vignette: Using Mindfulness to Manage Feelings of Loss Associated with Recovery**

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*I used Stephen's present moment experience as a window to uncover a level of anger and defensiveness that colored his life and compromised his relationships:*

Early in our work, we focused on Stephen's anger. He blew up over small things and railed against the unfairness that other people got to have fun (and drink) and he did not. The loss of certain activities and the places he had to avoid because they triggered his desire to drink, caused him much aggravation. He also felt impatient with the lack of his wife Lucille's understanding. He was angry that his family would not talk about the real nature of his father's disease.

The anger was festering inside him yet he was unaware of it. Comments that I made, such as "You're really mad about that, huh?" and "There's a lot of energy as you tell me about this" and "your fists curl up as you're talking, huh?" helped to pave the way for mindfulness. Mindfulness involves paying careful attention to the present moment without trying to change it or avoid it. I made contact with the actual emotions and energies in his body that lay just outside of his awareness to help him place his attention there. He said, "Yes! I am mad," with surprise in his voice. Then I slowed the process down and invited him to study the quality of the anger asking, "How about we study this feeling?" "Okay," he said. Because his whole chest and arms and fists had tightened up, I invited him to notice those parts of his body, guide him into mindfulness. "It seems like something's happening in your chest and arms," I noted, "maybe you'd like to begin by just feeling into those areas in you body." "Yes. There's so much energy and tension there," he reported.

As we slowly explored the sensations that accompanied the feelings, Stephen became less identified with the content of his story and more curious about his inner experience. His mindfulness deepened as he felt into the impulse to tighten his fists and raise his arms. I encouraged him to let the movement happen, but to slow the action down so he could study any thoughts, sensations, feelings, images, or memories that might be evoked as he did so. Stephen closed his eyes and very slowly began to tighten his fists and raise his arms over his head. His whole ribcage expanded as he did so. "I'm like a grizzly bear," he told me. "I want to growl...I'm ready for a fight." "Would it be

okay just to stay with all of that, the tension, the urge to growl, the readiness?” I asked. “Without trying to think about it, just let yourself steep in these impulses and sensations; let’s just see where this image of a bear ready to fight takes you.” Stephen quietly studied his experience for a moment and then a look of sadness crossed his face. His body relaxed as he said, “There’s just so much loss... I don’t know how to deal with it... It scares me... And now I’m scaring everyone around me.” This insight allowed us to further process his underlying feelings of loss and fear and his emotional strategy to protect himself by becoming this grizzly bear.

Stephen was able to use the somatic cues of tension in his arms and fists to alert him to underlying feelings he avoided. When he paid attention to these feelings, his blow-ups at home and work began to diminish. When he could share his genuine feelings with his wife, she became less defensive and more understanding. Her understanding helped Stephen feel safer. His growing calmness allowed her to be more receptive to him. Through processing his emotions in mindfulness and extending that awareness in his daily life, Stephen was already creating positive feedback loops within himself and with his wife.

### **Vignette: Working with Relapse Cues**

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*Mindfulness can be used as a tool to enhance and imbed natural resources:*

Winter was coming, and with it, ski season. “Ever since I was 13,” Stephen remembered, “we’d go up to the slopes with a flask and a few joints. I can’t imagine not doing it that way. I don’t know what to do. Luce and the boys have their hearts set on it.” “It’s pretty confusing, huh?” I commented. He nodded and said, “I just want to go and cut loose and have the fun I used to, but I know that’s not what I really want. It’s just going to be really hard not to at least grab a beer at the lodge.” “How about we try a little experiment in mindfulness to study all of this?” I asked. “Sure, I’m game,” he said.

I guided Stephen into his inner experience, just noticing without judgment whatever thoughts, images, feelings, mood, sensations, or impulses were already happening. When he was ready, he gave me a nod. Using all his senses, I asked him to

imagine getting on his boots and skis and standing in the snow. “The first thing I notice,” he reported, “is the smell of the forest. The air is so fresh...” “Great,” I said. “How about you just let yourself breathe in and smell the air?” “Wow,” Stephen commented, “I never knew how much I love just this. The trees and the air and the blue sky.” His whole body relaxed as he remembered and imagined. “You relax, huh?” I contacted this present experience. “Yes, I feel so alive even thinking about it. It’s like I’m really there. The pine trees are so tall and straight. I feel myself straighten up as I look at them.” I encouraged Stephen to deepen into the feeling of aliveness, connecting with this somatic experience of straightening as he did so. A big smile appeared on his face. “It feels really good,” I said. “Yes!” he responded and his smile grew even bigger. “I feel really good in myself...Like I’m ok (he relaxes more)...And I’m looking at the slopes and feel really excited. I can’t wait to get up there.” I encouraged Stephen to stay with his positive feelings and sensations, to feel deeply into the smile on his face. After a few moments he told me “I can’t believe I feel this good and I’m not on some kind of drug.” I helped Stephen to fully experience the goodness and aliveness he had accessed. “I don’t think I’ve felt this way since I was really little, before I ever started drinking...If I can let myself feel this,” he said, “I won’t need to have a beer to have fun. And I won’t have to fight with myself.”

Over time, Stephen developed his ability to take in his pleasure of nature in an ongoing way. It became a resource for him whenever he felt the urge to have a drink or get high. The fact that he could access the good feelings in his body and be mindful of the impulses made this a natural process for him. It connected him with a very innocent, youthful part of himself.

When Stephen developed internal resources as described above and increased his capacity for mindfulness, he was able to tolerate exploring some of the underlying issues and unmet needs connected with his substance abuse. Gradually, he could experience and study a deep anxiety that was almost constantly activated. In one session, he began speaking very fast. In order to explore the associated unconscious material, we tried a little experiment in mindfulness.

## **Vignette: Using Mindfulness to Uncover Underlying Feelings that Drive Addictions**

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*Staying with the present moment can yield deep, visceral information as well as feelings that underlie compulsive habits:*

Stephen turned his attention to his inner experience. When he could notice and stay with his moment by moment experience, he repeated his speech pattern, but used nonsense syllables while doing so. Immediately he sensed a tremendous amount of anxiety. “It’s like a huge knot in my gut and I’m talking fast to get away from it,” Stephen reported. “Would it be okay if we just felt into the knot a little bit?” I asked. “A little bit,” he told me. So staying mindful, we began to explore the sensate experience of the knot. Stephen reported that it sat under his ribcage, was very hard and had been there for a very long time. He could feel his heart rate accelerate as he paid attention to it. We worked slowly, making sure that he could tolerate the sensations and emotions that were emerging.

At one point when he was very connected with the experience I asked, “If that hard ball of fiery tension could speak in words, what is it here saying to you now?” He felt further in to the sensations and reported, “It’s saying: *It’s not safe. It’s not ok.*” “You’re frightened, huh?” I said. Stephen nodded his head up and down. “Would it be okay to keep listening in to this tension and these words so we can learn about what’s not safe?” I asked. As soon as I asked, Stephen remembered a time just before his dad died when his parents were fighting. “They yelled at each other at the top of their lungs, saying really mean things. I hid in my room. I could hear things breaking; I was scared.”

As Stephen told me these things, his face got younger; he looked like a young boy, maybe 8 or 10 years old. I asked him if it was okay if I spoke directly to the younger part of him. He nodded yes. “Hi buddy,” I said. “It sounds like something has gone terribly wrong and you’re really frightened.” He nodded yes again. “It’s terrible when grown ups fight,” I confirmed, “It sounds like you just don’t know what’s going to happen next.” “No,” he said quietly. “I don’t know what’s going to happen. I’m afraid. I want them to stop.” “Of course you do,” I told him. “It’s so scary when parents fight and yell and break things, and you have to hide all by yourself. Parents are supposed to help you feel safe in the world, not scare you.” Stephens’s eyes filled with tears. I continued,

“Children need to feel safe at home. When a child doesn’t feel safe at home, he can’t feel safe in his body.” Stephen visibly relaxed as I spoke to him, providing the young part of him with the safety, connection and understanding that had been missing.

We continued to process this memory in the specific state in which it was formed. When the missing experience had been adequately provided, Stephen naturally began integrating it. “I can see how I have just been carrying that fear inside me all this time, drinking and doing anything else to make me feel okay,” he stated. “Now I can see that I *am* okay. I can feel my diaphragm soften. I can look at you and know there are different people in the world.” Stephen smiled. “Like my wife,” he added.

## **Conclusion**

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Every moment offers infinite possibilities. Mindfulness opens the gateways to what is happening in the present moment. With such awareness, we can notice when our thoughts and feelings are clouded by the past or are anticipating the future. We can access our inner resources and come into real time in our relationships. We can use the signals our bodies are constantly giving us to be more connected. The procedure I used included: 1) exploration of current experience and characterological strategies; 2) relapse prevention; 3) exploration of underlying emotional injuries that drive addictions; and 4) developing resources. The primary tool I used with Stephen was mindfulness, which enabled us to delve underneath the surface by paying attention to the fine weave of his psyche. No matter what habits or addictions we have developed, they are inherently workable. When we become mindful, when we learn to truly love ourselves and our one precious life, we open to the goodness life has to offer.

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