

## Staying Present: Understanding Mindfulness

*Written By: Karyna Sitkowski*

It is no secret that life can get stressful. Stress can affect our anxiety, physical health, focus, sleep, mental health, and more. Our brains often get the best of us and we find ourselves in a state of overwhelming anxiety. Many people struggle with focusing on the present and find themselves thinking too far in the future or getting stuck in their past. But how does one stay present within the moment?

The technique of mindfulness is a tool that allows us to focus inward and embrace the present. According to Psychology Today, the definition of mindfulness “is a state of active, open attention to the present. This state is described as observing one’s thoughts and feelings without judging them as good or bad”. Practicing mindfulness can help reduce stress, improve overall performance, maintain focus and will ultimately lead to an understanding of one’s self on a deeper level.

Mindfulness techniques can be practiced by everyone, regardless of age. So how does one practice mindfulness?

The most important thing about mindfulness is focusing our attention to our breath. As your breath goes in and out, try to keep your mind from wandering. Returning to our breath helps build our muscles, establishes mindful thinking and allows us to create a judgment free zone. Be aware that It can take months to master your breathing.

[Mindful.org](http://Mindful.org) explains that the goal of mindfulness as “to wake up to the inner workings of our mental, emotional, and physical processes”. As we train our brain to be mindful, you are reconstructing the physical structure of the brain.

Mindfulness has become a core element to different type of therapies such as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) and more. Scientists have found a connection between mindfulness and improved mental health, pain management, mental clarity, mood, self-confidence, and more.

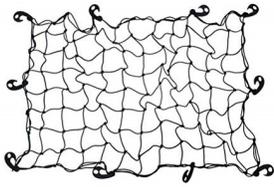
Overall, the use of mindfulness can improve many different parts of our lives. Mindfulness can be used anywhere and is an amazing tool everyone can use. While it takes patience, the end result is beneficial. If you are interested in mindfulness, please check out the links and information below to learn more and find some guided mindfulness meditation for you and your family.

*You can find guided mindfulness meditation videos on YouTube or on the website <https://www.mindful.org/>.  
Mobile apps are also available such as Calm, Mindfulness Coach, and Headspace*



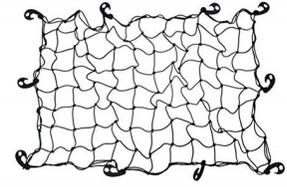
*Working definition from Jon Kabat Zin*

[LivingMoreFully.com](http://LivingMoreFully.com)



# Build Your Safety Net: Mastery & Control

By Jennifer R. Patrick, M.A., CFLE



**Summer is coming!** That means that your family's structured days are about to change. The routines your kids have acclimated to, following the chaos of the past couple of years, and of course, their status in the child welfare system, are about to be shifted again. Like a tightrope walker whose rope is fraying, you...or THEY...might be facing a freefall.

**Do you have a safety net?** Stacy Manning highlights the phrase "safety net" in her book *Adoptive Parent, Intentional Parent* as it relates to building an environment for kids who have experienced trauma. In easy-to-read language, Ms. Manning presents a formula for building your child's safety net by incorporating these four elements:

1. **knowing yourself**
2. **the power of knowledge**
3. **specific tools and techniques that work in everyday life**
4. **and the keys to maintaining the net over time**

By nature of the situation, adoptees have all suffered trauma and/or neglect, simply because they were removed from their family of origin. Many have experienced unbelievable trauma in addition to that. Being an adoptive parent means that you have built your family upon the ambiguous loss of someone else's terminated parental rights. When your child's/youth's **behavior is communicating** (i.e. triggered moments/meltdowns/pushback, etc.), adoptive parents have to consider which of the following factors are contributing: *is this my youth's personality? Natural temperament? Their developmental stage at the time losses and/or trauma occurred? Is this a condition that needs resources and support systems (i.e. medication or therapy...or both)? Is this a sign of their attachment disruption? Epigenetics at play? Something else entirely?*

## **The Rubber Met the Road...But Without Him**

Last December, we were ready to hit the road and get out of Michigan, beautiful as she is. We had been planning, saving and anticipating seeing cousins in Georgia in spite of losing two grandpas in May and September 2021. Two of our three kiddos were excited; one was not. He made it clear from the beginning that he was NOT coming with us. He said, "I just quarantined with you yahoos for pretty much all of 2020 and again this year. I am NOT going to trap myself with you for a week in a car or a hotel room." We tried to explain that we were making several exciting stops to explore...that he loves his cousins and they would love to see him...but our attempts were failing. So we rerouted our strategy and asked if he had a plan. "I want to stay at Nana's. It's her first Christmas without Papa. I can keep her company."

We were surprised to find that we thought he had devised a solid plan. So we listened to that need, put away our own expectations of family holidays and vacations ("one big happy family" vacations...you know...the kind with smiling photos on social media), and we allowed the plan to commence!

What did our son really want? **Mastery and control** of a situation that through his lens, looked like a lot of chaos, noise (no one in our family is quiet), and transitions that would activate his flight and fight response. He wanted quiet, rest, and that translated into staying put.

## **Healthy Ways Adoptees Can Exert Mastery**

According to the article written in 1982, "The Seven Core Issues in Adoption" by Sharon Kaplan Roszia and Deborah Silverstein identify the following challenges adoptees experience:

**Loss, Rejection, Shame and Guilt, Grief, Identity, Intimacy, Mastery and Control**

Adoptees have experienced groups of strangers making enormous life-altering decisions for them. As they grow, they may respond with trauma-based behaviors such as fighting (resisting, i.e. “I’m not going”) taking flight (running away, running to bedroom), or freezing (stonewalling). Forcing a child or youth who is manifesting one or more of the seven core issues will only serve to destroy the child’s/youth’s sense of safety with you, the parent they need to have a safe relationship with the most.

Giving your adoptee an area to have control over should be:

**\*adult-approved   \*safe and positive   \*a task that can help them develop confidence/independence**

Create a list of tasks or privileges the kids can choose to exert control over. Ask if they have any ideas. Find out if it is developmentally safe and appropriate. If not, do they have other ideas? Or do they need your assistance until they can master it? Maybe your child would like to be in charge of a game with the family, has an idea of a place he or she wants to go, manage something around meal times, be the chore-checker-upper...even if it is something as small as they choose when to have their bedroom cleaned and you assist them with the must-haves for that chore. For example, maybe you want their room cleaned once a week. Maybe that’s too much for your kiddo. Could you agree to every other week as long as there is no food in the room? And what constitutes “cleaned”? Are we talking “white-glove-test” clean or “just-nothing-on-the-floor-so-no-one-dies-walking-in” clean? Set a parameter or two, but let them decide on frequency and some of the specifics.

### **How can you celebrate them when they have done well with that change in plans?**

Give them verbal praise, “Hey, Buddy! That really turned out well! What a great idea you had!” And let them do it again. Every once in a while, check in with them and ask how things are going. Should we keep going as things have been, or does your child/youth need to switch things up? Add something else? Listen to them and go with it.

### **What About Your Plans?**

BELIEVE ME. Not having one of my kids on our Christmas trip down south was...difficult for me to get over to say the least. WHO DOES THAT??? I imagined all the things we would miss out on him experiencing and what he would have enjoyed doing. And I had images from the 1980’s movie “Home Alone” going through my mind! This sounded crazy!! But...it went well. He did well. Nana was comforted. They ate food and watched movies, talked and laughed. They went to Christmas service at church. They enjoyed the quiet of Nana’s home. I missed him terribly, but was able to focus on the other two kids. There were a few activities that may have been too much sensory information for him, and my husband and I said often, “He would have been done with this event in 15 minutes.” We enjoyed a cave exploration activity for almost 2 hours. It was awesome. We got what we needed (with frequent calls to tell him we loved him and missed him) and he got what he needed (so did Nana).

It’s important, while we grow healing people, to be flexible. Have space in our calendars for those trauma-triggers. Plan for them.

**People before plans.** Lower (or just change!) those expectations. Remember, meeting your child’s/youth’s expressed need is gifting them with the attachment they missed out on earlier in life. This is your privilege and within your power to do so for their future healing and self-efficacy.

Carry on...being the awesome adoptive parent you are!



### References

Kaplan Roszia, S. & Davis Maxon, A. (2019). Seven Core Issues in Adoption and Permanency. *Adoptalk* 2019, Issue 2.

Welch, A. (date not listed). You’re Not Alone: The Seven Core Issues of Adoption. <https://bethany.org/media/resources/ebook/seven-core-issues-ebook-download.pdf>

# PARC Events

**Build connections with and get support from others who truly understand!**

## Monthly Online Support Groups:

### **Fabulous Foster and Adoptive Parents**

1st Monday of Each Month  
6:30 - 8:30 p.m.

### **Adoptive Family Connections**

1st Thursday of Each Month  
7:30 - 8:30 p.m.

### **Faithful Fathers - Dad's Only**

2nd Wednesday of Each Month  
9 - 10 p.m.

### **Marvelous Moms - Mom's Only**

3rd Thursday of Each Month  
7:30 - 8:30 p.m.

**For a complete list of events, visit the calendar page on our website. Additional activities and resources are listed there as well!**

[www.parc-judson.org/calendar](http://www.parc-judson.org/calendar)

**For questions or to register for support groups or events, contact [parc\\_5@judsoncenter.org](mailto:parc_5@judsoncenter.org) or 734-794-2988.**

## **What are people saying about PARC?**

“It [the Dads group] was a great way for dads to connect and see they are not the only dads out there.”

“Love the people and the help I receive here!”

“These people are my tribe. This [support] group has helped me get through so many things.”

“[PARC Worker] helped to keep me from jumping off the ledge many times. I never felt judged, only supported.”

“My experience was wonderful, [worker] was a huge help to us. We truly appreciate all of the support!”

“[Worker] has been a true blessing to our family. Their kindred spirit helped me through a difficult time.”

### **Mailing Address**

3840 Packard Rd. Suite 170  
Ann Arbor, MI

**Region 5 Phone: 734-794-2988**

**Region 6 Phone: 810-732-8510**

[www.parc-judson.org](http://www.parc-judson.org)



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