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## SIX THOUGHTS ON INTEGRATING MINDFULNESS INTO VIRTUAL PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SPACES

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Times of uncertainty are to deepen our practice. After all, mindfulness isn't about getting comfortable but rather is about cultivating the capacity to hold our discomfort, fear, and suffering with love and compassion, right? Here are some suggestions for how to hold space virtually to support each other and contribute to sustainability during this unprecedented time of upheaval and uncertainty.

- 1. Ground yourself first.** If you are the one holding space or leading the group it's essential that you yourself are doing what's vital to support your wellbeing. Ask yourself: What's one essential thing I need to do daily to support my wellbeing? Then DO THAT one thing consistently and make sure it's part of your daily routine. Make a plan for how to hold yourself in loving accountability.
- 2. Check your tech and prepare participants.** Get to know the meeting platform you are using. Be sure to connect and test your audio and video well ahead of time. Provide a practice opportunity for users to connect and test their audio and video too. During guided meditation practices be sure to mute audio for all participants. Encourage participants to remain on camera, being able to "see faces" is so important for building connection, creating intimacy and a sense of community. Ask participants to turn other devices to airplane mode and minimize other windows on your computer to avoid distractions. [Here are 10 general tips on conducting virtual meetings.](#)
- 3. Agreements are foundational.** My go-to agreements right now are either [Agreements for Multicultural Interactions](#) or the [Circle of Trust Touchstones for Safe & Trustworthy Spaces](#). Offer either set of agreements. Ask if anyone would like clarification or has something to add. An effective initial practice is to go through each agreement and have participants speak to what they think it means, then invite participants to hold one agreement as their focus for the session. Be sure to periodically invite participants to check in on how they are doing with their agreement of focus.
- 4. Only share practices you have experience with.** If you plan to offer a guided meditation only share what you have experience with. If you don't yet feel comfortable offering a guided practice yet, wait! [Play a recording](#). Invest time in strengthening your own skillfulness and your comfort level



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will increase. Know there are other contemplative practices out there! Mindfulness and meditation aren't the only ways we can cultivate loving awareness and nourish ourselves during this time. Check out the [Tree of Contemplative Practices](#) from The Center for Contemplative Mind & Society. For me music and poetry are the most powerful ways of opening my heart. Parker Palmer's principle of 'third things' can be very healing right now. Seek out the poetry that touches your soul. "Poetry may make us a little more aware of the deeper, unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate; for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves." (T.S. Eliot)

5. **Create a plan and then be open to the unfolding.** Plans are essential but then we have to be willing to let them go. Be responsive in the moment and really tap into what the group needs. To do this skillfully we need to be able to read the emotional current of the room which can be more challenging virtually. Trust your instincts and when in doubt and, when in doubt, ask the group what they need. Plan ahead for how you'll take input from the group, using the visual, auditory and written options that your technology provides.

## TWO AGENDA TEMPLATES

The more your personal practice deepens, the more seamless your integration of contemplative practices will be in your facilitation of meetings or professional learning. We can bring mindfulness to any and every moment.

1. Integrating mindfulness into a meeting or professional learning.
2. Facilitating a [mindful practice group](#).

## INTEGRATING MINDFULNESS INTO A MEETING/PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

If your meeting lasts more than one hour be sure to build in a [mindful movement](#) break!

### **Arriving & Centering (5 min)**

Example: Meditation or Weaving Contemplative Practice with Poetry ([Lectio Divina](#))



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### Sharing Outcomes (5 min)

When developing your outcomes ask yourself:

- ♥ If you could only accomplish one or two things at the meeting, what would be the most important outcomes to achieve, and why?
- ♥ How will you know you have achieved your outcome? What will you see, hear, feel or experience that let's you know you have been successful?

### Welcoming/Inclusion Activities (10-15 min)

Tip: Depending on group size and the length of your engagement utilize break out rooms.

Welcoming rituals establish safety and predictability, support contribution by all voices, set norms for respectful listening, and allow people to connect with one another creating a sense of belonging. To be successful they must be: carefully chosen, connected to the work of the day, engagingly facilitated, and thoughtfully debriefed. [Welcoming/Inclusion Activities are one of the SEL 3 Signature Practices](#). (Ann McKay Bryson)

Welcoming rituals are great opportunities to engage in reflection that nourishes us. Some prompts that would be appropriate especially now are:

- ♥ What's one thing that's bringing you joy?
- ♥ How are you caring for yourself?
- ♥ What's a commitment you need to make for your self-care?
- ♥ How can you be of service now?

What's an agreement you plan to hold for our time together and why?

### Nourishing Content & The Power of Protocols

These are design tools for the content of the meeting. If you want to really create a supportive space for colleagues you may want to check out the [Greater Good in Action](#), a collection of science-based practices that support a meaningful life.

In the Mindfulness module of the [SEL Every Day online courses](#), ten formal and ten informal mindfulness practices are introduced. Each practice is broken down into what the practice is, why it's important and then instructions and guidelines are offered on how to engage in each practice.

Whatever you focus on here, don't forget the [power of using protocols](#) to support engagement, reflection, integration, application and EQUITY OF VOICE!



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This is also a great time to have participants reconnect with their focus agreement. You can have participants do a quick internal check in on how they are doing with their agreement.

Craft this section as you normally would for an in-person meeting/professional learning and then reflect on how each component of this section needs to shift in a virtual space. You can utilize a chart like this:

In person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Use a talking piece</li></ul>
Why it's important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Supports equity of voice</li><li>• Elevates the group's attention toward the speaker</li></ul>
What it could look like virtually	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Invite participants who speak to call on the next person, verbally 'passing the talking piece.'</li><li>• Everyone brings their own talking piece. Before speaking for the first time they share what their talking piece is and why they brought it and everyone holds their talking piece up to the screen when they speak.</li></ul>

### Reflecting on how the meeting went (5 min)

Invite participants to close their eyes as you walk them through the various components of the meeting/professional learning. This is offered like a visualization. Then open it up for feedback on how the meeting went. When appropriate, also email a feedback form to participants for more formal responses. Be sure to offer a “feedback on feedback” reflection in person or via email, especially if the group meets regularly or is a PLC, demonstrating to participants that their input had value and influence on your facilitation and leadership.

### Closing Reflection

The closing reflection is very important. This is a great opportunity for engaging in a contemplative practice or utilizing any of the Optimistic Closings in the [SEL 3 Signature Practices](#) that fits your current context.



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### MINDFUL PRACTICE GROUP

Excerpted from *Teach, Breathe, Learn: Mindfulness In and Out of the Classroom* (Srinivasan, 2014)

Inspired by Adele Caemmerer & the American Embassy School (AES) Educators Sangha, New Delhi, India

#### **Opening (5 minutes)**

When everyone has settled in and connected to their breathing, we transition to formally opening the group with three or more sounds of the bell and some brief words that help call the group together and set the intention for the gathering. These words could be a [gatha \(short verses that bring us into the present moment\)](#), a poem, or even a song.

#### **Bodywork/Breathing (15 minutes)**

##### *Breathing*

For this section I would encourage you to adapt from a collection of breathing meditations in “The Blooming of a Lotus” or “Present Moment, Wonderful Moment” by Thich Nhat Hanh, or create your own.<sup>3</sup> The use of the bell deepens the experience and gently reminds us to come back to ourselves when our minds wander. Two of my favorites: “In, out, deep, slow; calm, ease, smile, release” and “Breathing in, I see myself as a flower. Breathing out, I feel fresh.”

##### *Mindful Movements/Stretching*

Have everyone share one stretch or you can choose ten ahead of time to share with the group. [Mindful Movements: Ten Exercises for Well-Being](#) is a great resource for this.

#### **Readings and Practice (20 minutes)**

##### *Readings*

Invite members to volunteer taking a turn to bring a reading that has inspired them to share with the group. You can also share excerpts from a book or blog that has inspired your own practice. The key when looking for reading is to identify something that will touch, move, and inspire members of your group. Short readings provide focus and a theme for reflection.

##### *Mindful Breathing*

Have the group sit for twenty minutes of mindful breathing.

##### *Tea, Eating, Object Meditation*

Mindfully drinking tea, eating an orange, looking deeply at nature, or engaging in artwork can be wonderfully nourishing activities. Savoring a cup of tea or an orange together can be nourishing even if it's done virtually. Have everyone hold their cup of tea and take the time to really savor it!



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Invite participants to walk outside for 20 minutes without their phone and when they return share reflections about their experiences. Taking time to draw or paint places us directly in the moment.

### Circle Sharing (15 minutes)

This is time for group members to share what's happening for them in their practice or in their lives. It would be a good idea to come up with guidelines with the group for how you would like to conduct circle sharing. In my experience it can be guided with a suggested theme or can be completely open. Each person who shares speaks from their own experience and process. It's not a discussion and there is no "cross talk" so whoever is speaking can share without interruption. Most importantly, everything shared in the circle is confidential.

### Closing (5 minutes)

The closing provides closure and transition to everyday life. It helps members absorb the experience and reflect on their intention. It can take any form that works for your group, whether it be a song, reciting a poem, silence, or reciting a traditional loving-kindness prayer first to yourself and then to all beings. One that my husband and I say at the end of our daily sitting practice is:

*May I be happy  
May I be healthy  
May I live with ease and well-being*

*May I be safe from inner and outer harm May I be free from suffering  
May I always feel embraced by love*

*May all beings be well  
May all beings be happy  
May all beings be healthy  
May all beings live with ease and well-being May all beings be safe from  
inner and outer harm May all beings be free from suffering*

*May all beings always feel embraced by love*

*—Adapted from Insight Meditation Society*

If you'd like to deepen your capacity for facilitating mindfulness consider enrolling in the [SEL Every Day for the Leader](#) online course.

**6. Mindfulness is not a panacea.** While the practice can be incredibly supportive and transformative for some, it's not a substitute for psychotherapy. Some of your colleagues may need professional mental health support.

Finally, I know that mirror neurons can be felt through the screen and it's possible to have deeply moving and meaningful connections virtually. The most important thing to remember is that the same skills and best practices for in-person meeting facilitation apply virtually. The more we practice, the better we get at holding space online.



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**Meena Srinivasan, MA, National Board Certified Teacher**, is a South Asian-American edupreneur with deep expertise in the fields of Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) and Mindfulness in Education. She is the Executive Director of [Transformative Educational Leadership \(TEL\)](#), an empowering, racially and culturally diverse, compassion-centered, innovative program for educational leaders who are called to integrate mindfulness-based, social, emotional, academic and ethical learning into schools and school systems. Prior to this role she spent five and a half years working in partnership with the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to implement SEL system-wide in the Oakland Unified School District. Meena has taught and led in a variety of school settings (public, private, urban, international) and holds a Clear Administrative Services Credential in the state of California. She is the creator of the [SEL Every Day online courses](#), author of *Teach, Breathe, Learn: Mindfulness In and Out of the Classroom* and *SEL Every Day: Integrating SEL with Instruction in Secondary Classrooms* which was chosen as one of 2019's Favorite Books for Educators by the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley. Meena's article, "[Social and Emotional Learning Starts with Adults](#)" was one of ASCD's 10 Best Express Articles of 2018. Learn more at [meenasrinivasan.com](http://meenasrinivasan.com).