

Mindful Movement with a Beanbag

Accessible & engaging; sitting or standing

Mindful Movement Overview

The forms of mindful movement most frequently employed in mindfulness teaching, other than mindful walking, tend to be derived from yoga or qi-gong, and the movements involved may be quite unfamiliar or seem strange to someone who has not experienced yoga or qi-gong before. For people with a history of distress or shame associated with their body, the combination of being asked to participate in an unfamiliar movement and to be mindful of their experience while doing this, may be very unsettling or challenging. This may be a particular risk for people with a history of trauma. For people with a tendency to dissociate, slow movement, especially with eyes closed, may lead to dissociation.

Most people in groups experience a pressure conform and this may make it very difficult for someone to have the confidence to choose **not** to take part in a group movement activity. This pressure may lead to people pushing themselves however much the teacher may encourage participants to choose not to take part if that is what is kindest for themselves at that time. People with experiences of failure, shame, humiliation and/or embarrassment associated with participating in group movement may feel competing pressures. These pressures include: to be seen to engage, to be fearful of being seen to fail, to prove themselves, to be invisible and/or to disengage.

Walking at the individual's normal pace and in their usual way is less likely to be distressing as a mindful movement practice. However, there are some styles of mindful walking (e.g. slow walking in a circle as a group aka 'zombie walking') that are far away from the individual's normal experience and so may also risk being quite uncomfortable or distressing.

It is therefore worth considering ways of introducing mindful movement that are based on more familiar forms of movement. Being familiar, such movements are less likely to trigger emotional reactions with the result that the person has more available attention to mindfully engage in their experience of moving. In contrast, when there is more churning of unpleasant emotions the person may be needing to devote considerable internal effort in keeping themselves together; especially in the context of a group of other people.

It is worth noting that there is nothing intrinsically 'wrong' with intense reactivity arising during mindfulness practice. In fact it is necessary for cultivating the capacity for emotional resilience that reactivity is triggered. The issue is the level of intensity of that reactivity and whether the person has the capacity to stay mindfully engaged with the level of intensity being experienced. If the experience is too intense, the person will start regulating their experience through internal or external behaviours so as to control the level of intensity with the aim of reducing it. Exposure to overwhelming intensity risks reinforcing control behaviours rather than enabling new learning associated with being mindfully open to experience. Given that people at the start of a mindfulness course are more likely to rely on established control behaviours and be less likely to have the capacity to mindfully engage in distressing experience, it is safe practice, when beginning to explore mindful movement with an individual or group, to offer forms of mindful movement that minimise triggers for intense emotional reactions.

Most people have experiences of playing with an object such as a ball or beanbag in a group context. While such experiences may themselves be negative for some people, the advantage of a group activity with an object is that the attention is going to be drawn out to the object rather than dwelling inwardly on internal experience. The very movements associated with playing with an object are often experienced as being grounded in relatively neutral present moment experience, especially if there is a continually changing stream of physical experience and a need to engage the attention in the task of manipulating the object.

While a whole range of objects could be used, the advantage of beanbags is that if dropped they don't roll away, they are light enough not to cause harm if thrown, and they potentially offer vivid tactile, auditory and visual sensory anchors for the attention (especially if the bag is made from brightly coloured fabric and is part filled so the 'beans' can noisily move). Having said this, a whole range of objects could be used instead of beanbags in the practices outlined below. Alternative include: balls, pieces of fabric, water filled balloons or gloves, balled up paper, paper towels or pieces of fabric. Some alternatives may not be so suitable for some of the practices that work with beanbags.

Another important feature of using beanbags for mindful movement is the fun-factor. We find most participants enjoy doing mindful movement with beanbags - there is often a lighter atmosphere in the session when they are used, helping to create an effective learning environment.

Using beanbags as a focus for mindful movement can lead to a rich inquiry process after the practice due to the diversity of experiences associated with their use. A good example is the contrasting experiences associated with deliberately dropping a beanbag compared to accidentally dropping a beanbag: the contrast can offer rich experience to explore with mindful awareness and self-compassion. Accidental dropping can be likened to how our attention continually 'accidentally' wanders off and how, in mindfulness practice, we 'pick our attention up again' with friendly interest in whatever is present and then return our attention to the chosen focus for the practice.

Many people find more static, sitting or lying, practices at or beyond their capacity to continue to stay engaged in their experience. The result can be intense mind-wandering, irritation, boredom, or self-blame; or the less obvious reactions of progressive disengagement leading to dissociative experiences. Approaching the experience of moving with mindfulness may allow much greater engagement in what is being experienced, moment by moment and reduce the intense reactivity experienced with more static practices.

When offering a mindful movement practice, it is essential to consider the physical safety of participants. Moving while sitting is often safest. Movement while standing needs particular attention on preventing falls, so making sure anyone uncertain about their balance or unable to stand for longer periods has a chair or wall nearby to hold onto for stability is important. Inviting someone to lie down carries the risk that they cannot get up again without assistance, and, without professional training, there is the associated risk that the assistance offered to help someone get up may cause harm.

Any movement may cause someone pain if they have restriction or injury associated with the body areas necessary for that movement. While the teacher needs to clearly and repeatedly remind participants to stay within their own limits, unfamiliarity with the movement, inattentiveness, group conformity, competitiveness, unexpectedly high levels of stiffness or restriction, or disconnection from their body may lead someone to still push past what is safe and cause themselves harm. It is therefore important to start with small movements that are likely to be well within everyone's capacity to be physically safe and only move towards more potentially challenging movements in incremental steps. It is good to offer repeated guidance and reminders to pause, slow down, linger, stop, back away etc. with each new element of a movement practice and whenever anyone approaches the limits of what is comfortable.

Repetition is helpful for safety. The first time a movement is taught, a slow, small movement version can be explored. This then offers a baseline to do less or more than this in subsequent repetitions, depending on how each person's body responds to that initial smaller movement.

Emphasising that with mindful movement 'less is more' can be helpful.

If you are co-teaching it can be helpful for the co-teacher to model doing minimal mindful movements and to stop any particular practice sooner than the teacher because this reinforces the verbal permissions to practice within your limits. It is also helpful for the teacher to demonstrate what is easy for most people to do rather than demonstrate 'advanced' versions of a particular movement. Clarity about the aim of mindful movement is important here: it can confuse learning about mindfulness in the beginning if we are teaching hybrids of mindful movement and yoga or mindful movement and strength training. Bringing mindfulness into other activities is best done when the principles of mindful movement are established. Therefore, it may be wise to frame any type of mindful movement as just that – mindful movement – and not call it yoga or qi gong etc. Naming mindful movement 'yoga' may flip someone with experience of yoga into their habitual way of practicing yoga; interfering with their openness to movement with present-moment mindful awareness. Even using the word 'stretch' can be an invitation to undertake the movement so as to produce 'stretch' at the limit of what is comfortable rather than be mindful of the unfolding sensations as the body moves well away from such limits.

Consider normalising mindful movement practice as being just like any other type of mindfulness practice. This can be done by referring back to the principles of practicing mindfulness already explored with that group. Typically, this would mean intending to be attentive to whatever is being physically experienced, and noticing when the attention has wandered off or been caught by something else. What caught the attention is acknowledged in a friendly way, allowed to be 'alongside', and then the attention is gently returned to the physical experiences associated with the movement.

In describing the practices as you teach them, it is good to use 'associative' language. Using '**your** body', '**your** attention', '**your** thoughts and feelings' helps people with a tendency to mentally distance from experience come into more experiential contact with physical sensation. This contradicts some authorities who suggest using language that objectifies the relationship with the body and mind: so using '**the** body' or '**the** mind'. The issue here is that we need to have associated fully with our experience before we can then meaningfully explore how it is to bring more of an objective relationship to what is being experienced. There is a particular risk with people who easily dissociate: they may find such objective language reinforces their tendency to disassociate.

Where possible, avoid any evaluative language that assumes a given experience is pleasant or unpleasant, enjoyable or not enjoyable. Allow participants to make their own evaluations and invite mindful noticing of such evaluations. This neutrality and openness is then reflected in the inquiry process: we can encourage an equally kind and curious inquiry into pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent aspects of the mindful movement practice experience.

Mindful Movements with a Beanbag

The following sequence is only a suggestion and should be adapted to the needs each group. This includes excluding some movements or spending more or less time with certain movements. It is helpful to establish a 'baseline' practice of passing or circling that can be returned to between other movements. This makes it easy for someone to return to this if they want to disengage from a specific movement.

- **Holding:** Notice the sensations associated with you holding the beanbag, including what you are seeing, hearing and feeling. Notice any sensations as you take it from one hand with your other hand and take it back again. If the bag is quite empty, the movement of the 'beans' creates a lot of sounds and tactile sensations, so there can be vivid sensations to notice. Notice if the beanbag evokes any memories or mental reactions in your mind and, having noticed any such reactions, bring your attention back to what you are physically sensing: contact, movement, sounds, sights etc. *[It can be good to give out the beanbags while sitting to focus on holding.]*
- **Deliberate Dropping:** Drop the beanbag onto the floor (or your lap if sitting) and, taking it easy, slowly move your body, bending your knees, to then pick the beanbag up with your opposite hand. Come back upright and drop again, then once again picking it up with opposite hand to the one that dropped it. Notice any inner reactions to dropping, acknowledging these, letting them 'be alongside', and returning your attention to the physical sensations present at this moment. *[Doing Deliberate Dropping may be easier in a chair for those with movement restriction.]*
- **Small Gap Catching:** Starting with a small gap, hold the beanbag in one hand just above your other hand. Then letting go, so as to drop the beanbag so you can easily catch it with your other hand. Repeat with your hand that just caught the bag, dropping and catching again.
- **Large Gap Catching:** Return to catching, but now experiment with a wider gap between your hands. Notice what it is like when you release the beanbag, have a moment of losing contact; then feel it again as you catch it. After a few of these, perhaps explore catching with your eyes closed. If you accidentally drop the beanbag, notice how this is compared to deliberately dropping. Acknowledge any inner reactions you have, allowing these to be alongside as your attention is returned to your physical experience of picking the beanbag up and returning to catching once more. *[If you started with sitting movements, at the end of Large Gap Catching can be a good point to invite those who wish to stand to do so. Guidance around mindfully noticing the change to standing is useful to offer.]*
- **Passing:** Start passing the beanbag between your hands in front of your body. Start slowly with a small gap. Slowly increase the distance your hands and arms move to the side before they return to pass to your other hand in the midline. Make sure you stay with what is easy and comfortable, reducing any movements that get near what is painful or uncomfortable. Find a comfortable rhythm, slower or faster, and a comfortable distance to swing your arm to the side before that arm returns to pass the beanbag your other hand that then swings to the side and back in turn. You can vary the level in front of your body for passing: higher up or lower down your torso. Experiment with passing where one hand takes it from the other or with passing where you are almost or actually throwing the beanbag from one hand and catching with the other. Remember, dropping and picking up is all part of the mindful movement practice.
- **Circling:** This involves making a circle with the beanbag around your body. Starting with very slow movements, extend the distance your arms swing when holding the beanbag to go behind your back and, only if this is comfortable, pass the beanbag to your other hand behind your back. Then continue holding the beanbag with that hand to pass again in front, so you are making a circle around your body with the beanbag. Experiment with a slower or faster rhythm, the direction of the circle and/or the height of the circle around your torso.
- **Baseline Practice:** Having experimented with Passing and Circling, one of these can become the baseline practice between the next set of practices (you can switch from one to the other at any time). Experiment with finding a way of doing your chosen baseline practice that seems right for you at this time. Return to this baseline practice if any of the following practices aren't right for you.
- **Spirals:** Essentially the same as Circling but now moving up and down your body. Beginning with Circling, slowly start circling the beanbag around your hips then down to your thighs, only going as low as is comfortable for you. If it is within what is easy, continuing to circle down to the knees or even down to the lower legs, bending your knees. You are not twisting your spine, only your arms are moving around your body. Come back up and continue to pass higher round your belly, then your chest, and then your head. Notice, as you go along, where movements are easier or more awkward, coming back to what you are physically sensing. Repeat going in the other direction. *Return to your baseline practice.*
- **Figure 8s:** Starting very slowly, pass the beanbag to your other hand behind the opposite leg to your hand that's holding the beanbag. The repeat on the other side, making a figure of 8 around your legs. If it is comfortable, raise the leg you are passing behind, making sure you have something to hold on to nearby if you wobble while on one leg (a wall or back of a chair are good options). *Return to your baseline practice.*

- **Vertical Circles:** [*This practice has some of the most potentially challenging movements. Consider only making small circles or leaving the practice out completely.*] This practice initially makes a vertical circle in front of your torso. Starting slowly, make a small circle with one hand from low on your torso's midline to upper chest level where you pass to the other hand that then makes an arc down to over your lower belly to pass the beanbag again. If it is comfortable, slowly widen the circle so you are passing at head level and, possibly, above your head. The wider and higher you go, the more your shoulders get involved so that if there is any restriction or pain in your shoulders just do small circles over the front of your torso: this will minimise challenging shoulder movements. Shoulders permitting, you can extend this to making a circle where your arms are fully extended so that you are passing above your knees and at full reach above your head, with both your arms rising and lowering; passing the beanbag at the bottom and top of the circle. You can continue experiment with changing the size of the circle and/or the pace. *Return to your baseline practice.*
- **Back Catching:** [*This practice has some of the most potentially challenging movements. If anyone has struggled with Vertical Circles it may be wise to leave this practice out as moving the arms behind the neck involves potentially very challenging shoulder movements*] Going very slowly, see if it is comfortable to take one hand with the beanbag behind your neck, head or shoulders. Then see if it comfortable to move the other hand so it is somewhere behind your lower back. If both of these movements are comfortable, you can then experiment with dropping the beanbag from your upper hand and catching it with your lower hand. Then, going slowly to check out whether it is comfortable, reverse your hand positions to pass again. You could explore rolling the beanbag down your back or dropping it clear of your back. This movement usually gives lots of opportunities to notice reactions to accidental dropping and how it is to come back to noticing physical sensations while picking the beanbag up. *Return to your baseline practice.*

Cleaning & Infection Control

While bags filled with actual beans may seem authentic, choosing ones filled with plastic pellets that are washable is often more practical. If you are using beanbags in an infection control environment each bag can be enclosed in a fresh plastic bag for use in a session. At the end of that session the bag can be disposed of and, next time you use the beanbag, a fresh bag can then be used. Food recycling bags, flimsy food bags as found in supermarket fruit and vegetable sections, or even disposable gloves (but be careful with latex allergies) are some options. Using bag clips to seal the bag can save time knotting and removing the bags between sessions.

Making Your Own Beanbags

Commercially available beanbags can be found quite cheaply: Amazon and eBay sell them in sets for around a £0.75 to £1 for each beanbag. Search for 'throwing beanbags' to avoid the search only returning bean-bag chairs. However, commercial bags tend to be packed quite full and we have found that having under-filled bags makes the tactile experience more vivid. We also find longer, narrower bags than the norm are better for passing between hands without dropping. So we have made our own – and making your own can work out significantly cheaper commercial ones.

The filling could be whole lentils, wheat berries or some sort of bean; but these can't be washed. So we use plastic pellets. These are often called '*poly pellets*' for ease, but they may have more technical sounding names like '*polypropylene granules*' or '*high density polyethylene plastic pellets*'. Be careful not to get expanded polystyrene beanbag chair filling – these are too light. You want solid plastic pellets, ideally with a smooth, lentil-like shape rather than chopped sections with rough ends. Fabric and craft shops often sell packs of around 1 kg for door-stop filling. Mail order, via eBay, 2 kg of pellets will often cost around £8-£10. 2kg will fill about 20 – 22 beanbags. The expensive item is the filling – the cheaper you can get this, the cheaper the overall cost.

Whatever fabric you obtain, it is worth washing it first in case of any shrinkage. We like synthetic fibre taffeta-type fabric as it is washable, comes in bright colours, is quite silky, and is also quite thin so the pellets can be easily felt through the fabric. It is also quite noisy, maximising the sounds made when passing the bag from hand to hand. Following the dimensions below, each 1m² of fabric will make about 25 beanbags. Typically you will pay £2-£5 per square metre (though many fabric shops have bargain-bins of short lengths of a metre or so that can be very cheap).

The sizes shown below are not crucial – if the fabric you obtain can be folded a number of times into roughly similar dimensions as the length or width below then go with those sizes, even if you end up with oblongs not squares.

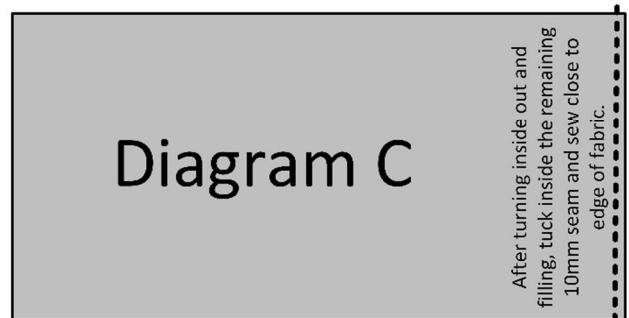
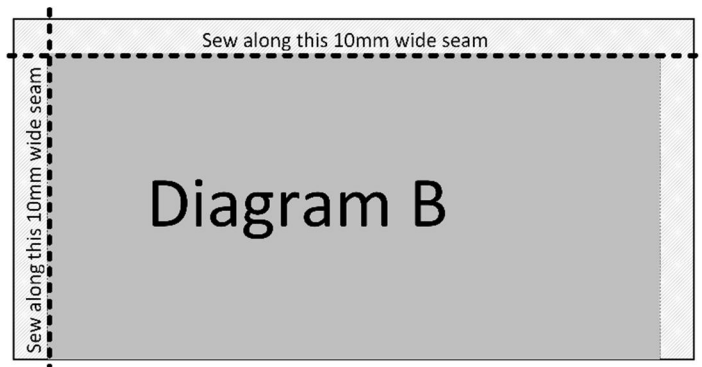
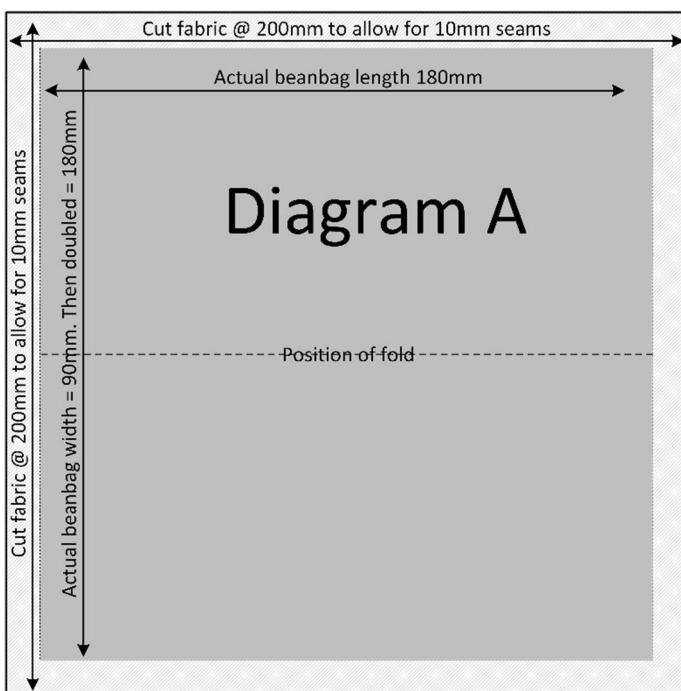
Step 1: Mark out the fabric – a pencil works well with light colours. Cut out each 200mm x 200mm square (see Diagram A below). This includes a 10mm seam on each side of the square. You could mark on the seams if you want to have very even looking beanbags. One way of doing the marking out is to cut a card template for the 200mm x 200mm size. Then cut another 180mm x 180mm and use this to mark the seams – as long as the fabric is roughly even all the way round you will be left with roughly 10mm seams and that is good enough.

Step 2: As shown in Diagram B, then fold in half. Depending on your preference, either pin the seams first and then sew or, if you don't mind some slightly wonky seams, just sew without pinning. Sew along one short open side and the open long side opposite the fold. Make sure you sew forward and back for 10mm or so at the start and end of the seams, overlapping the stitching, so as to prevent the stitching coming undone at the seam ends.

Step 3: Then turn inside out and fill with 150 to 200ml of plastic pellets – using a measuring jug is easier than weighing them out. The pellets can go everywhere so filling them over a large bowl or the sink with the plug in saves them scattering on the floor. Once filled we find using a bag clip is convenient to keep the beans inside if you are filling them all first before sewing. As in Diagram C, once filled, tuck the remaining seams inside the bag and sew across the top to seal the pellets inside. You might find pinning this final seam with a couple of pins makes sewing across the top easier. Make sure you sew forward and back for 10mm or so at the start and end of the seam, overlapping the stitching, so as to prevent the stitching coming undone at the seam ends. Trim off the thread ends.

If you don't want to sew the seams you could use cotton fabric and then use permanent fabric glue for the seams: there are a number of types of glue that are sold as being as good as sewing.

Do a test run first with one bag to get a feel for the overall process. Then you can start a production line, completing each step for all the bags you are making before going on to the next step. Making beanbags is a mindful movement practice in its own right!



These diagrams are not to scale

Electronic copies of this document are available at www.attentioncycle.com as are a series of videos that demonstrate using beanbags for mindful movement.