

BEING PRESENT IN AN AGE OF DISTRACTION

[1-2 HOURS]

OVERVIEW

This session gives everyone the chance to take stock of how our individual and collective struggles to be present impact us, and how we might be more mindful to presence. *Where are we present? With whom?*

Prepare for and facilitate this session with a trauma-informed approach; recognize that being present and embodied can be deeply uncomfortable or even painful for people who have large amounts of unprocessed trauma, and that lack of presence and distractibility are also symptoms of PTSD. If you need to flag this for participants, shift the activities, or help individuals gauge how to participate, please do so.

GOALS

- To explore the impacts on all of us, individually and collectively, when we struggle to be present
- To share practices and reflections on being present
- To make commitments for moving forward

TIME NEEDED

1-2 hours

MATERIALS NEEDED

- Flip chart, tape, markers, audio speaker, large drawing tools like crayons, Cray-Pas, or pastels
- Handouts: **Stillness Worksheet** (p. 91), **'Mindful'** by Mary Oliver (optional)

PRESENCING ACTIVITY

Begin with a solo presencing activity. Invite everyone to close or lower their eyes and to try to find a place of quiet, present stillness for three minutes. Then, invite people to open their eyes and spend several minutes in individual written reflection on the worksheet page opposite.

Coming back together as a big group, take a few deep breaths together, then pose these questions. You can offer them as a seated spectrogram, framed as "I" statements, with hands raised high, medium, or not at all to indicate agree/disagree/don't know/mix of both responses. Then follow up with different locations in the spectrum for depth.

- **I struggle with staying present.** (*Did that come up during the activity? How did you struggle? What does it feel like when you're not present?*)
- **If I could only concentrate, I know I would be a better organizer/partner/parent/person.** (*How is difficulty concentrating interfering with your ability to show up in your own life? Why is it so difficult? Where is*

STILLNESS *Worksheet*

WHAT DID IT FEEL LIKE TO BE PRESENT AND STILL? WHAT DID YOU NOTICE? WAS ANYTHING EASY, OR ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT?

REMEMBERING HOW THIS FELT IN YOUR BODY, REFLECT ON OTHER TIMES IN YOUR LIFE WHEN YOU ARE MOST ABLE TO BE PRESENT. WHEN IS THAT? WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE?

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE THAT ARE MOST PRESENT WITH YOU?



WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS THAT MOST SUPPORT OR UNDERMINE PRESENCE? CONSIDER SPECIFICALLY: DO PHYSICAL LOCATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS PLAY A BIG ROLE? WHAT ABOUT SPECIFIC PEOPLE? WHAT ELSE?

NOW CONSIDER THE OPPOSITE: ARE THERE TIMES IN YOUR LIFE WHEN IT IS ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT TO BE PRESENT AND STILL?

MINDFUL

MARY OLIVER

Everyday
I see or hear
something
that more or less

kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle

in the haystack
of light.
It was what I was born for –
to look, to listen,

to lose myself
inside this soft world –
to instruct myself
over and over

in joy,
and acclamation.
Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,

the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant –
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,

the daily presentations.
Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help

but grow wise
with such teachings
as these –
the untrimmable light

of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

all the distraction coming from, and how are we managing it?)

- **I have an erratic, tortured, or addictive relationship to my phone and/or social media, or to someone who does.** (*Say more; what pulls you in, and when do you push it away?*)

Distractibility is a hallmark of our times, and it serves the interests of elites and power systems who use it as a control mechanism. The fights calling our names require our best attentiveness: spiritual presence, wise analysis, and deep feeling. As with the hegemonic value of **forced / high speed chaos**, distractibility keeps our brains fried and our nervous systems misfiring. **This is both an individual struggle and a systemic condition of our times.** We are not alone, and we are responsible for finding our own return pathway to presence.

DISTRACTIBILITY BREAK OUTS

In small groups, discuss how distractibility shows up for each of us in group settings:

- *What usually makes you reach for your phone or check out in a group situation?*
- *Does it happen in reaction to a feeling, something happening in the group, a habit, or something else?*
- *Do you notice yourself doing it?*

Try to be as specific as possible.

Now think about it from the other perspective: *How does our presence, lack of presence, or distractibility as individuals impact the groups and collective spaces we're part of?*

- *What does it feel like when you're speaking or facilitating and folks are scrolling their phones, checking their emails, or seem disengaged?*
- *How else does distractibility show up negatively in our work together?*

Still in small groups, next brainstorm some ways for you to:

- **Maintain presence when you find yourself drifting off or reaching for your phone** (for example: ask for a break; feel your feet on the ground; take three deep breaths; without disrupting, step outside the room and do jumping jacks; place your phone somewhere you can't reach it, etc.).
- **Respectfully share with others what it feels like when they're checked out**

Have the groups write or draw their answers on a big sheet of paper; when groups finish, post them on the wall. You may want to have an extra blank piece of paper up and available where people can keep adding ideas and practices that occur to them while gallery-walking.

GALLERY WALK

As a big group, do a gallery walk of the room in silence. Take your time to really look at and absorb the different ideas and offerings that people have shared. Consider playing music in the background to open up different sensory experiences.

Close out the session with folks writing down some of the ideas, offerings, and practices they commit to trying. After a few minutes, read Mary Oliver's poem 'Mindful'. You may choose to read it a few times. Hold the silence in the room for a few extra minutes once everyone has finished reading.