What Is Mind Fitness Training?

Excerpted from Widen the Window *by Elizabeth A. Stanley, PhD. Originally published on MindBodyGreen in 2019.*

In *Widen the Window*, I describe the approach I created to help people widen their windows of tolerance for stress: Mindfulness-based Mind Fitness Training (MMFT)®. In this excerpt, I explain what it is, how it's taught, and the two core skills it builds.

I designed MMFT® with two overarching goals in mind: to help individuals widen their windows and to do so in a stress- and trauma-sensitive manner. To achieve these tailored goals, MMFT draws from two lineages: mindfulness training and body-based trauma therapies for reregulating the nervous system and survival brain after trauma, such as sensorimotor psychotherapy, Somatic Experiencing, and the Trauma Resilience Model.

MMFT has three components: (1) mindfulness skills training; (2) an understanding of our neurobiology and body-based self-regulation skills training to regulate the nervous system; and (3) concrete applications of both types of skills to participants' personal and professional lives. This blend of mindfulness skills training with body-based self-regulation skills training is crucial for widening the window, increasing resilience, and enhancing performance in high-stress situations.

A major focus of MMFT is improving self-regulation, at both the micro and macro levels. When we're regulated, we're more likely to find agency and access choice in every situation, no matter how challenging, stressful, or traumatic it might be.

When MMFT is taught over eight weeks, the first four two-hour sessions occur in the first two weeks, to front-load the neurobiology context for the skills taught in the course. These sessions focus on the scientific foundations of the neurobiology of stress and resilience. They also introduce the basic exercises for self-regulation. The other four two-hour sessions are taught in the fourth, fifth, seventh, and eighth weeks. These sessions teach content about habitual reactions, decision making, emotions, interpersonal interactions, and conflict. They also introduce more advanced exercises for self-regulation interpersonally. During the third week, participants have an individual practice interview, and during the sixth week, they complete a four-hour practicum to refine mindfulness and self-regulation skills.

In addition to the eight-week format, MMFT has also been taught as a weeklong intensive course or as introductory workshops. In these formats, participants learn some of the intellectual context intensively and then complete the eight-week exercise sequence afterward, on their own.

MMFT participants are asked to complete at least thirty minutes of mindfulness and self-regulation skills exercises daily, outside class sessions. Daily practice can be divided into several practice periods throughout the day. MMFT's exercises range from five to thirty minutes—which is notably, and deliberately, shorter than the forty-five-minute exercises included in many other MBIs. Participants initially use audio tracks to guide the exercises, but over time they can practice without audio support. Some exercises are conducted while sitting quietly or lying down, some while stretching, and some are designed to be integrated into daily-life tasks.

Through these exercises, MMFT aims to cultivate two core domain-general skills: attentional control and tolerance for challenging experience. Because these skills undergird other competencies needed for effective decision making and interpersonal interactions—such as situational awareness, emotional intelligence, and mental agility—cultivating these skills can provide a big return on training investment. Attentional control is mostly cultivated through focused attention (FA) techniques, while tolerance for challenging experience is cultivated through both FA and open monitoring (OM) techniques.

Attentional control is the ability to direct and sustain attention deliberately on a chosen target over time. Attentional control leads to improved concentration, more capacity to inhibit distractions, and more capacity to remember and update relevant information.

Tolerance for challenging experience is the ability to pay attention to, track, and stay present with such experience without needing it to be different. Such challenging experiences can be external (e.g., harsh environmental conditions or difficult people) or internal (e.g., physical pain, stress activation, intense emotions, distressing thoughts, nightmares, or flashbacks). Without training our capacity to tolerate challenging experience, many of us default to checking out, distracting ourselves, or trying to "fix" the discomfort with stress reaction cycle habits and other impulsive or reactive behavior. Importantly, tolerance for challenging experience is not the same thing as "sucking it up." That's because sucking it up is actually an aversive form of thinking brain override—which, by definition, means we're not fully present to all of the information available in the challenging experience.

This book is not the MMFT course—it covers additional topics not directly addressed in MMFT, but by necessity it also can't replicate all of MMFT's experiential practices.

To help you safely begin a mind fitness training regimen, in this book I'm including only the two MMFT exercises that best facilitate our survival brains to neurocept safety and recover from stress activation—the Contact Points Exercise and the Ground and Release Exercise (G&R). These two exercises also allow us to cultivate attentional control and tolerance for challenging experience, the two domain-general skills that support wisdom and courage. In this book, I've deliberately chosen not to include any MMFT exercises that sometimes lead to increased stress activation among participants with narrow(ed) windows.

To be clear, if you're confronting profound dysregulation, I believe working with a therapist trained in body-based trauma techniques (such as sensorimotor psychotherapy or Somatic Experiencing) is essential. They can help you pace your survival brain's bottom-up processing, so that it happens gradually and safely. I strongly recommend you seek out a trained professional to help you navigate your way through the process, so that you don't inadvertently flood your system, retraumatize your survival brain, and exacerbate your dysregulation.

If you'd like to go deeper, *Widen the Window* explores the science of stress and trauma and walks you through the practices step by step. You can also receive the guided audio for the Contact Points Exercise by joining my mailing list.