

## PTSD Bytes – Audio Transcription

Episode #:	12
Guest:	Timothy J. Avery, PsyD
Title:	#12: Mindfulness for Self-Care

Pearl:

Welcome and thank you for tuning in to PTSD Bytes. The podcast where we invite experts to talk about PTSD and mental health, and how technology like mobile mental health apps can help. We'll cover a new topic every other week in bite-sized episodes. I'm your host, Pearl McGee-Vincent, and I'm a clinical psychologist at the Veteran's Affairs National Center for PTSD.

Pearl:

In today's episode, we will be talking about mindfulness. Joining us today is Dr. Tim Avery, who's a clinical psychologist and readjustment counselor at the Peninsula Vet Center in Menlo Park, California. Welcome Tim.

Tim:

Thank you, Pearl. Glad to be here

Pearl:

Now, not only are you a seasoned mental health professional, you are also a Veteran yourself. Can you tell us a little bit about your background and how you got into mindfulness?

Tim:

Gladly. I am fifth generation enlisted US military, and first to go officer. Navy Veteran and deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom. I came to mindfulness through yoga. It was in my transition of careers from the military management consulting into psychology. I became a certified yoga teacher and that was my initial introduction to mindfulness.

Pearl:

Can you just start by telling us what mindfulness is?

Tim:

Mindfulness is awareness. Now I'll elaborate on that here in a moment, but I'd like to first point out to our listeners that mindfulness is not one thing, there's not one definition. I'll offer my perspective. And a definition of awareness, is the awareness that emerges from nonjudgmental self-observation in the present moment. And I take that definition from John Kabat-Zinn, uh, whose research and interventions popularized mindfulness from the psychological and scientific perspective.

Pearl:

I'm wondering if you can break down a little bit more, what you mean by non-judgmental self-awareness and paying attention to the present moment in terms of the practice of mindfulness and what that actually looks like.

Tim:

Yes, great question. The non-judgmentalness is-, we're often making various evaluations throughout a day: this is good or bad; I want this, I don't want this. So practicing non-judgment helps us be with things as they are. It doesn't mean that we're not going to take action to resolve the situation. So right now I have this bill that's due and I might say, "I'm a failure because I can't pay this bill." Well, that's an evaluation, that's a judgment. The fact is there's a bill to be paid and I don't have the money. That is true. So now I can operate from that. I don't need to add burden to myself of this judgment, this evaluation that is probably not going to help me solve the problem more effectively.

Self-observation is noticing what emotions are present in me right now. What thoughts are running through my head? What sensations are in my body? This news on the TV's really putting me in this past experience. Or I really don't want to go to the grocery store right now because I'm scared something is bad is going to happen. This is an observation of the thoughts that are going through my head, doesn't mean they're true or they're facts. But by knowing these thoughts are coming up for me, I can choose how to respond.

The only point in life in which we can make a decision is the present moment. That's the only time where we have the freedom to make a choice. I can't make a choice about what's happened in the past. I don't know exactly what's going to play out on any future scenario I can imagine. So by being in the present moment, I have the most freedom to operate from what's happening right now, instead of my fears about the future or my regrets or sadness or other things about the past. It doesn't mean those things don't exist, but I can't make a decision about those things right now, I can only make a decision in this moment.

Pearl:

It sounds really valuable to be able to do that. And also how difficult it is to be in the present moment. Can you say a little bit more about how mindfulness might be relevant to individuals with PTSD?

Tim:

So re-experiencing, having thoughts and memories from the past. Those things might pop in up into my head and I could judge myself for them, like, "what's wrong with me? Why does this keep happening?" Or I can say, "yes, look at that. This thought came up again. It's happened before. It was a terrible thing that happened. And what's happening right now? What am I doing in this moment?" By decreasing my self-judgment, I could potentially have those thoughts impact me less in this moment so that I can do what I need to do. By being in the present moment and aware of these thoughts and feelings, I can choose how to respond instead of automatically. Instead of reaching for that beer because I want to change how I'm feeling, I can say, "oh, look, I'm feeling pretty sad and kind of angry. And those thoughts and feelings are valid and I don't need to change them. I sure I wouldn't choose to have them right now, but that's what's here. I don't need to judge it or push it away."

Pearl:

That makes sense. And it sounds like what you're saying is that mindfulness can be helpful for folks with PTSD and that mindfulness isn't treatment in and of itself but that mindfulness can be one component of their recovery.

Tim:

Well, there is one particular mindfulness intervention called mindfulness-based stress reduction. As an intervention, it is very promising. And mindfulness can help us know when to use the different tools

we're getting from an evidence-based psychotherapy for PTSD. "Oh, this reminds me of this situation that we talked about in therapy. I'm aware of that now, what tool am I going to use?"

Pearl:

It sounds like it can help us go from being on autopilot, to making informed choices about what we can do in our lives.

Tim:

That's a great summary.

Pearl:

What are some of the challenges that people come up against when trying mindfulness?

Tim:

I often hear people say I can't practice mindfulness because my mind is too busy. Our mind does not have to be quiet to practice mindfulness. That might be a side effect of practicing mindfulness. It's not a requirement. Knowing that my mind is busy, that is being mindful. My mind is very busy right now. I'm thinking about all these things that have to be done. All these appointments I have to get to, these bills I have to pay, I can be aware of all those things in this moment. And in allowing ourselves to be as we are, practicing nonjudgmental self-observation in the present moment, the impact of these things on our lives often soften and often symptoms decrease. When we have more mindfulness, symptoms of depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress tend to be less. And we don't have to have those things gone before we can practice mindfulness.

Pearl:

Thank you. If someone listening thinks, 'okay, I want to give this mindfulness thing a try,' what's your advice on getting started?

Tim:

There's not one path up the mountain. There are many different ways to practice mindfulness. And you might belong to a faith tradition, a religion, many faith traditions have mindfulness practice. And maybe you want to blend the two somehow and seek out a spiritual counsel that includes mindfulness practice. Many providers make mindfulness available to their clients. So you might ask your primary care provider or your mental health counselor, for group or individual counseling, that involves mindfulness.

Pearl:

So for our listeners that are receiving care in VA or at a Veteran Center, are mindfulness classes or resources available?

Tim:

Yes, VA and Vet Centers offer these types of practices in many forms. Mental health and physical health outcomes are better in general, with those who have increased mindfulness and apply these skills to daily life. So this might include yoga groups or Tai Chi or mindfulness-based stress reduction. And they might have some other creative names like breathing, stretching, relaxation. You might not even realize

what some of the offerings that your VA include and not realize that it's mindfulness or large parts of it are mindfulness.

Pearl:

Tell us about VA's Mindfulness Coach mobile app, and why you recommend it to those who are interested in mindfulness.

Tim:

What I like about Mindfulness Coach is on the home screen, halfway down to the left, if you just go there under "Training," click on that, it'll guide you through level by level. So that all you have to do is click each item down and then it'll offer you some information. You read that and then go back and read the next thing, and it'll check that off. And after you've completed each item on that level, it'll automatically send you to the next level. So it's nice, it takes off the mental burden of trying to remember where all these parts of the app are. How do I click and get around? All you have to do is go to the training part and it'll guide you through. Very user friendly.

Pearl:

Well hopefully our listeners will download it and check it out. Thank you, Tim, for joining us today and sharing about mindfulness in such a understandable way, we really appreciate your expertise and your passion for the work.

Tim:

Thank you, Pearl. And thank you for this podcast and other efforts, to get information out there. So thank for what you do.

Pearl:

Dr. Avery mentioned the Mindfulness Coach app. You can download it on your smartphone or tablet. Search for "VA Mindfulness Coach" to learn more.

This has been an episode of PTSD Bytes, the podcast that delivers bite-sized expertise on issues related to PTSD, mental health and technology. Catch new episodes every other week by following or subscribing to PTSD Bytes on your preferred podcast app. Thank you for joining us.