

CULTURALLY INFORMED TRAUMA AND GRIEF RECOVERY TOOLKIT



AMERICAN
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Buddhism & Trauma: Healing Within This Present Moment

“Having compassion starts and ends with having compassion for all those unwanted parts of ourselves. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen: room for grief, for relief, for misery, for joy.” PEMA CHÖDRÖN

Buddhism is a major world religion and philosophy originally founded by Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha or “awakened one”, around 2,500 years ago in India. Buddhism is a spiritual and philosophical way of understanding the world, suffering, and the path to liberation with a particular emphasis on the cultivation of mindfulness, compassion, and wisdom. Since being founded in India, Buddhism has spread throughout Asia and the rest of the world, becoming one of the fastest growing religions. Whether you were raised in a Buddhist culture, adopted Buddhism later in life, or are simply interested in Buddhism, there are two concepts that can prove to be especially beneficial when healing from traumatic experiences: mindfulness and self-compassion.

Mindfulness: anchoring ourselves

Mindfulness is a pillar of Buddhist practice and is defined as a non-judgmental, ongoing awareness of the present moment. When dealing with trauma, it can be easy to get stuck in the past or be consumed with worries about the future. Mindfulness helps us to be with what is happening in the here and now. Practicing mindfulness helps us accept our emotions, become less reactive, and move into a state of awareness that can be relaxing at times. Over time, mindfulness can help us understand ourselves better and increase our ability to feel safe and at peace. Mindfulness is usually performed using an anchor for the mind’s attention, most commonly the breath, while sitting or lying down in a comfortable and safe environment. We simply notice the breath moving in and out of our body, while becoming aware of physical sensations, emotions, and thoughts. As these arise, rather than attaching to a part of our experience or trying to make our sensations, emotions, or thoughts different than what they are, we simply observe them and allow them to come and go like waves on a beach or clouds in the sky. At times it may feel like we are being swept away by the waves or clouds of our minds – in these moments we gently return to the anchor of our breath. While mindfulness can be done more formally, moments of mindfulness can occur throughout the day. Whether we are washing the dishes or going for a walk, taking a moment to pay attention to what is happening in the present moment can help settle the mind and relax the body.

Self-compassion: kindness directed towards the self

Another pillar of Buddhism is avoiding harm and wishing happiness for all beings, including ourselves. Mindfulness can also help us act more warm, kind, and caring toward ourselves when we have painful thoughts or emotions. This is known as self-compassion. We may blame ourselves for what happened and expect ourselves to heal quickly. We

then are surprised by unexpected triggers, unsettling physical sensations, and other confusing but natural responses to trauma. Developing a sense of acceptance and compassion for where we are on the healing journey, rather than where we want to be, can be transformative. This practice is not about fixing ourselves or punishment, instead it is about accepting all parts of ourselves. By practicing mindfulness, many people find that they are more accepting of their natural responses to trauma and the thoughts that arise in the mind, allowing them to cultivate a sense of self-compassion. Mindfulness and self-compassion can be powerful sources of healing that can be done alone or with community. For more information on interpersonal trauma, violence, and abuse, see [here](#). To learn about collective trauma, see [this](#). To learn more about how to heal and thrive, go to [here](#).