

UNIT 3. Welcome and introductions

In this unit, you will learn how mindfulness practices can be adapted to be safe and supportive for people who have experienced trauma.

Mindfulness can be a powerful tool for well-being - but for trauma survivors, certain practices may sometimes trigger distress rather than calm.

Thus, this section introduces the principles of trauma-sensitive mindfulness so that you can practice in ways that are gentle, safe and respectful of your needs and help others do the same. The aim is not to push through discomfort, but to find approaches that help you stay grounded, connected and in control of your experience.



UNIT 3. What is trauma-sensitive mindfulness?

“Think of trauma as an injury and meditation as an exercise. Sometimes, we need modifications to an exercise to build strength and heal. That’s trauma-sensitive mindfulness.”

- David Treleaven

Trauma-sensitive mindfulness is an approach that adapts mindfulness practices to avoid re-traumatisation and to support emotional safety. It is based on the understanding that traumatic experiences, such as war, violence, forced displacement or loss, can leave lasting effects on the nervous system and emotional responses.

For example, in some cases, closing the eyes, focusing deeply on bodily sensations, or recalling certain memories during mindfulness can trigger strong stress reactions. A trauma-sensitive approach prioritises choice, grounding and safety over rigid techniques or “pushing through” discomfort.

UNIT 3. Key principles of trauma-sensitive mindfulness

Trauma-sensitive mindfulness principles are simple guidelines that make mindfulness safer and more comfortable for people who have been through difficult or painful experiences. They recognise that some mindfulness activities can feel overwhelming if not adjusted. These principles focus on safety, giving people choices and making sure practices are respectful of different backgrounds and needs. The ideas here are inspired by the work of David Treleaven and supported by recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) on safe self-care.

1. CHOICE AND CONTROL

- Always let participants know they can stop, change or skip any activity without explanation.
- Offer different options for how to take part (e.g., sitting or standing, eyes open or closed).
- Allow freedom to decide the pace, posture and focus level.

2. GROUNDING IN THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT

- Offer the option to focus on things around them, not only on their inner sensations, e.g., *notice feet on the floor, touch an object with texture or name three things they can see.*
- External grounding can help people feel safer if focusing inside their body feels overwhelming.

UNIT 3. Key principles of trauma-sensitive mindfulness

3. SHORT, MANAGEABLE PRACTICES

- Start with brief activities (30 seconds to 2 minutes) before moving to longer ones.
- Gradually extend the practice only if participants feel ready.
- Short practices reduce the risk of emotional overwhelm and help build trust.

4. AWARENESS OF TRIGGERS

- Remind participants they may notice sensations, memories, or thoughts that are distressing.
- Be alert to signs that a participant may feel distressed (e.g., changes in breathing, facial tension, fidgeting).
- Encourage them to shift focus, open their eyes or stop the activity if it feels uncomfortable.
- Normalise this choice by reassuring them that stopping is part of safe mindfulness.

5. NON-JUDGMENT AND SELF-COMPASSION

- Emphasise that there is no “failure” in mindfulness.
- Discomfort is a signal to pause, adjust, or stop - and that choice is always valid.
- Remind participants to treat themselves with the same kindness they would offer a close friend.

UNIT 3. Why it matters?

Many people who have migrated or fled their homes have experienced trauma before, during or after displacement. These experiences can make traditional mindfulness techniques - such as sitting still with eyes closed - uncomfortable or even bring out feeling of unsafety and other insecurities.

Trauma-sensitive mindfulness ensures that mindfulness is a supportive resource rather than a source of further distress.

When practiced safely, it can help rebuild trust in the body, create a sense of stability and support emotional recovery.



UNIT 3. EXERCISE: Adapting a mindfulness practice

Before guiding mindfulness with others, it's important to practise adjusting activities so they feel safe and accessible for everyone. This short exercise will help you think like a facilitator, using trauma-sensitive principles as your guide.

1. Choose a simple mindfulness activity you already know (e.g., focusing on your breath, body scan or mindful listening).
2. Imagine you are leading this activity for a small group of migrants or refugees, some of whom may have experienced trauma.
3. Adapt the activity using the five principles:
 - **CHOICE AND CONTROL:** How will you give participants permission to stop or change the practice?
 - **GROUNDING IN THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT:** Can you add an external focus option (e.g., looking around the room, feeling an object)?
 - **SHORT PRACTICES:** How can you make the activity shorter and more manageable?
 - **AWARENESS OF TRIGGERS:** How will you respond if someone looks uncomfortable?
 - **NON-JUDGMENT AND SELF-COMPASSION:** How will you reassure participants there's no wrong way to take part?
4. Write 2–3 sentences describing your adapted version.

Quick Guide – Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness Principles



Choice and Control

Let participants choose if, how, at how long they join. Stopping is always okay.



Grounding Externally

Use sights, sounds, and touch around them if inner focus feels unsafe.



Short Practices First

Start small (30 sec–2 min) and build only if they're ready.



Watch for Triggers

Notice distress signs; invite pausing or shifting focus if needed.



Kindness over Judgment

No "right" way to be mindful; self-care comes before the exercise.

Source: Developed by AI