

INTRODUCTION



Ease into Freedom is a day-by-day and week-by-week companion for managing stress and increasing contentment. Working hard at freeing ourselves from the suffering of stress will only lead to more stress. Changing our habits takes effort but doesn't need to be effortful. Taking a small step each day eases us gently into a less stressful life, which frees our energies for more productive and fulfilling endeavors.

This book is a collection of 53 tips, one per week for a year, plus a bonus. Of course, you don't have to strictly follow one tip per week—one tip per week is simply a suggestion—but the benefit of the weekly approach is that it gives you seven days to play with the tip before taking on another challenge. As an analogy, if you shop for a new coat, you don't really know if it will fit you well until you actually try it on; the same goes here. Try on one at a time, play with it in the real world for a few days, and if it doesn't work for you, try another one. You don't have to adopt all the tips in this book, especially not all at once, but I do believe they are cumulative. Some of the tips build on each other, and some enhance others.

Ease into Freedom started as Stress Tips, a short monthly blog, in 2002—before I even knew what a blog was—delivered via email from my home computer and posted on my website. It was my way of providing continued value for the participants who completed the mindfulness-based stress-reduction courses. Once a month they received—and continue to receive—a brief,

succinct, and practical tidbit to help manage stress and guide them along the path of fulfillment.

I have studied stress and stress-management approaches since the mid-1970s. My undergraduate studies resulted in a dual degree in psychology and chemistry with a minor in biology, which laid the foundation for a scientific understanding of stress management. Later in life, I studied medical technology, worked for more than two decades in hospitals, became certified as a life coach, and earned a master's degree in education. After my own stress-management discipline integrated a variety of approaches and began to stabilize, I was asked to teach in 1999 and haven't stopped since. My approach is to help people find what actually works for them, favoring practices that are backed by evidence and research.

Each tip in this book is accompanied by a practice guide so you can experience the topic, not just read about it. The practice guide may sound and look like an assignment, but the difference here is that you can make it yours or whatever works for you. The practice guides have blank spaces for writing about your progress and what you've learned, but don't worry if you miss a day. Each day, consider questions such as the ones below, and record comments for your own reflection:

- ❁ What was the activity like for you that day?
- ❁ What questions arose during and after the activity?
- ❁ What discoveries did you have?
- ❁ What difficulties did you notice?
- ❁ If you didn't practice, what came up?

You are welcome to address other questions or comments as you think of them. Notice that these questions don't have right or wrong answers, except in the sense of how accurately your answers reflect your honest experience. You don't have to

answer all the questions every time; let the questions inspire you to write whatever you would like to write, if you find that you need inspiration. Rather than an assignment, think of the practice guide as a journal, another way for you to process your experience by writing about it. If it will help you be more honest with yourself, don't share your practice guide; some people, on the other hand, feel more support when they do share their unvarnished experiences.

Notice the question, "If you didn't practice, what came up?" This is not an attempt to generate guilt; instead, this is an opportunity to be realistic about doing or not doing the tip. As the bonus tip suggests, don't attempt to be perfect. Simply be honest with yourself, which will allow you to learn from your honest experience, whatever it is.

When I was starting out on this path of practice, I noted in my journal each date—practice or not—how long each practice took to complete that day if I did it, and what my experiences were—pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. It wasn't always pretty, but I learned.

These tips are designed so that they are not overwhelming and can be readily done by just about anyone in almost any setting. A tip is part of "something bigger," which could get complex and hard to define. For the moment, until you get to experience some of the tips, let's just say that the bigger picture is freedom from suffering, however suffering shows up for you. After you play with the practices for a while, I'd love to hear what the bigger picture is for you.

Most of the tips are presented in no particular order. For subscribers of Stress Tips who have hung in there since the beginning, I've maintained the chronological order in which the tips were originally released. You are welcome to thumb through