An Introduction to Mindfulness Through Photography

A Six Week Guide to Reduce Stress and Anxiety

Roxanna Angles La Belle

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"As human beings, our job in life is to help people realize how rare and valuable each one of us really is, that each of us has something that no one else has- or ever will have- something inside that is unique to all time. It's our job to encourage each other to discover that uniqueness and to provide ways of developing its expression." -Mister Rogers

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Author's Note

Mindfulness. It sounds so simple. Be in the moment. Here and now. Honestly, this is what I thought before going headfirst into research about mindfulness. I discovered it was so much more! I am practicing mindfulness daily, and will always practice it. It is truly "practice" as we are constantly inundated with noise and distractions. I was simultaneously teaching myself film photography. During this period of time I was reading material, watching videos and immersing myself in knowledge. It was through this I found a constant commonality between mindfulness and photography. I read interviews of other people saying that when they picked up their camera, they were able to see the world with a different lens. It would melt away their anxiety, or help them slow down, notice the world around them. As I read these words over and over, in different ways, I related. I thought in my mind...me too.



Mindfulness

Developing mindfulness starts in the smallest of ways. Having interest, is the very first step. We often ruminate on the past, or worry about the future. Mindful living is about accepting the present situation, regardless of how comfortable or uncomfortable it is. Noticing your surroundings and breathing in the moment.

Sometimes our emotions can make it difficult to objectively look and accept a situation. We can have difficulty seeing clearly when strong emotions overwhelm our thoughts. Anger, frustration, anxiety, grief can send our thoughts swirling into a whirlwind of 'should, would and could of' thinking. We have noisy chatter that can often be negative. Automatic negative thoughts can plague us with insecurities and keep us from doing the things we love. Or even worse keep us from paying attention to the people we love.

From an early age we are brought up with the idea that unpleasant emotions are to be numbed. Many people shy away from strong emotions, or have learned to ignore them. The issue with this is that we are suppressing the emotions

that should be embraced. We often dismiss the root of why someone is upset, frustrated or sad. As an onlooker, it is difficult to find words to say when someone close to us is upset. We just want them to feel better! Anger, frustration and sadness are all emotions that are part of our human condition. Often in adolescence and adulthood, we find external means of escaping feelings. A therapist friend of mine once made an excellent point, "At funerals friends and family will often give a bottle of alcohol to the person experiencing extreme grief". This observation really struck a chord with me. It got me thinking of other ways we numb the pain of unpleasant emotions. Some people use drugs and alcohol to numb the pains life throws us. Others might use food as a coping mechanism. Sometimes people even self harm. It is no wonder why we have an epidemic of increased anxiety in this country. Why do I bring up these unpleasant emotions? Becoming mindful is also about leaning into the emotions that make you feel bad, so that our being can start the healing process. If we learn to shove our emotions and bury them away, they still exist, but they fester in the darkness of our souls, waiting for triggers to release the pain

when we least expect it. I believe that these suppressed emotions can manifest into anxiety, panic attacks, shame and a sense of worthlessness.



Finding Mindfulness Through Photography

There are many correlations I found when studying both mindfulness and photography. Come and let me guide you through a mindful and wonderfully deliberate process of photography.

It is just you and your camera. There are no distractions, and you are tuning into the world around you. You watch and listen, enriching your senses. You then are drawn to something to photograph. You look carefully through the viewfinder, manually focus and finally CLICK. You have taken your first frame. The camera starts showing you the world through a fresh lens.

Creating photographs is about showing others how you see the world. Before you click the shutter you focus on what you notice. It is your fingerprint in this world that is unlike any other. What you choose to photograph is an individual choice that is only yours. We often photograph what is important to us. The people we choose to capture are often the ones we love the most. The places we want to capture give us peace and happiness, or can capture sadness or grief. We also have the ability to catch emotions on still images that will be forever frozen in that moment. We see light and

objects differently through the lens of a camera. The camera is an extraordinary tool that allows us to see the world objectively. I have just given you a taste of the journey you will begin as we intertwine mindfulness and photography.



Guidelines For Success

1. Your camera can be anything that takes photos. Please do not fall into the trap of not doing the tasks because you do not have the means of a fancy camera. Your camera can be film, digital, instant or even your smart phone (though if you use your smart phone, I highly recommend you put it on airplane mode, as it will distract you with calls, texts and social media). This is about your journey, not the gear you use.

2. This is a series of tasks that will increase your mindfulness while decreasing stress and anxiety. For it to be effective all the tasks need to be completed, then reflected upon. The reflections are about you and your journey. Be present and be kind to yourself. If you need more time, take the time you need.

3. It is encouraged to print the photos that best encompass your feelings in the task. When you print it out you can hold it and it separates it from your computer or phone. They do not have to be perfect prints. You can print them from your home printer, or at your local drug store for less than a

quarter in cents. This will be a helpful tool in the future in reminding you of your journey.

4. I suggest you start a journal. In this journal you can write about your feelings and experiences with each of the challenges. Leave room in your journal where you can paste your photographs amongst your thoughts. This will serve you for optimal reflection when you have completed this course.

5. Be safe while taking photos. Never put yourself in dangerous situations and always be aware of your surroundings.

6. This is the most important. If at any time you feel overwhelmed or feel like you have uncovered feelings too big to handle, I urge you to ask for professional help. There is no shame in seeking therapy, as emotions are internal and our physical body is external. We seek medical help when we break a bone. Please seek mental health if you ever feel overwhelmed. You are important. You matter.





1

Opening Your Mind



“Judge nothing, you will be happy. Forgive everything, you will be happier. Love everything, you will be happiest.” ~Sri Chinmoy

What does it mean to have an open mind? An open mind is the ability to become an observer and see things objectively. It is being able to develop a multi-sense of perspectives. Sometimes an open mind will clear the path of understanding yourself.

It is important to notice when your thoughts are criticizing or judging self or others because it can cause harm and prevent growth. When you open your mind and take in what is around you, you are basically removing the connector between thoughts and body to look at it objectively. It is only then we can turn these thoughts into ones of compassion and love. When automatic negative thoughts infiltrate the mind, two things can happen, the mind will go outward and criticize others or the mind will go inward and place judgments on self. The negative energy seems to go in the path of least resistance. What if the mind is left open to observation? As a negative thought enters the mind, stop,

recognize it is there. This leads to quicker acceptance with the negative feeling or thought. With acceptance, comes self forgiveness and moving forward. This helps especially when memories of unpleasant or even embarrassing events that come up over and over again.

When negative thoughts go outward, it is like a vibration that affects others. Think of it like energy. If you displace negative energy, it will go where you least intend it to be. For example; If you have had a bad day at work, you have stress and anxious thoughts. When you come home, it is very easy to displace that negative energy to the ones you love the most. Think of the last time someone you love was in a bad mood, while you were in a good mood, if they had said something negative, think about how it would impact your day. You are lucky if it has little to no impact, but most people I have discussed this with feel the effect immediately. It is a displacement of negative energy. So what the heck do you do with the negative energy? **Do not ignore it.** This is not about squishing it somewhere deep inside you and putting a happy face on. Your feelings deserve your time and they are there for a reason. The first thing you can do is

notice the negative energy or thought. The power of opening your mind and observing these occurrences, is in creating the choice other than displacing the energy or ignoring it. Developing this skill takes a little practice so lets start small. Let us look into our day to day life.

Most of us have a daily routine that can sometimes feel monotonous and ordinary. We sometimes go into auto-pilot mode, not seeing the world that surrounds us. Thoughts swirl from what needs to be done, insecurities, everyday stressors to the huge problems that plague us. We put ourselves on a daily or weekly schedule where we wake up at a certain time, and continue our day seeing many of the same things throughout the day. Yet, is everything really the same? I mean, sure, we pass the same buildings, or drive on the same streets and see the same trees, but were the same people walking by on your morning commute? Did you notice that kitten hiding in the bushes on your last walk? Or what about the new roses your neighbor planted. Taking notice of the small changes can give life to the mundane. Regardless of what your surroundings are, they are part of your current reality. Close your eyes, breath in the good and

exhale the unpleasantries. Part of becoming more mindful is noticing your environment, and from there you can learn to give it your full attention.

I invite you to step into the role of the observer. The observer starts to notice the small things in the everyday environment. When you wake up, does sunlight stream into your room? How does it stream in? Is it a warm beautiful hue of orange or is it more blue with the early dawn? What sounds do you hear when you wake? How do your toes feel? How about your fingers? Go through each of your body parts and feel their existence. Try giving yourself a morning stretch before leaving your bed. Take a deep breath in through your nose. Pause. And exhale slowly.

When you get up out of bed, what will you do next? What do your family members do when you see them? Or if you live alone, what is your morning routine? Do you have pets? Do they get excited to see you up? How do they look at you? Observe the physical cues of the objects, people, or pets around you. With other people, you can learn to see the mood of those around you by simply observing body

language and facial expressions.

Let us think about how you go on with the rest of your day. You may work from home and not go anywhere, you may have a morning commute that involves public transportation, or you might simply jump into your car and head to work. Regardless of your regular schedule, really observe the routine you complete so mindlessly each day.

Carry your camera everywhere. Compile photographs that encompass your typical day. Place it by your bed so when you wake up it is next to you. You will be taking photos of the things that pull your attention. These photos do not need to be sequential, actually it is better if they are not because it may cause unnecessary stress. Just capture your observations as they present themselves to you. You can choose how many are needed. Some individuals can do it with just a few photographs, while others need many! Choose your favorite observations and place them in your journal. Write some notes about how it was like to play the observer of your own life. What did you notice that you would have otherwise missed? Write about the parts of the day that you found to appreciate.

2

Slowing Down



“Patience is an ever present alternative to the mind's endemic restlessness and impatience. Scratch the surface of impatience and what you will find lying beneath it, subtly or not so subtly, is anger. It's the strong energy of not wanting things to be the way they are and blaming someone (often yourself) or something for it. This doesn't mean you can't hurry when you have to. It is possible even to hurry patiently, mindfully, moving fast because you have chosen to.” - Jon Kabat Zinn

We currently live in a world where we can obtain anything almost instantly. If you are wondering, you look it up on the internet. If you are hungry and don’t feel like cooking, you order from one of the many food delivery services. We get annoyed if things we order online can't be shipped within two days. In this fast paced world what we seem to be seeking is control, and what we are often lacking is the patience that comes with identifying what we can control. Control can give us a sense of security in this unpredictable life. Though when we are not in control, it can cause anxiety, stress, fright, frustration and even anger. Next time you feel the overwhelming feeling of not being in control, take a deep

breath in through your nose, and exhale through your mouth. Repeat three times. Notice the uncomfortable feeling as if you are just an observer. Then think of the things you do have control over. If you are stuck in traffic, put the negative thoughts of the other vehicles aside, and focus on what you can control. We can control how we behave and react to certain situations. If you are experiencing anxiety, observe the anxiety. What part of your body is it effecting? Learning patience is finding the pieces of your life you can control. When something frustrates you, which is an emotion that is part of being human, lean into that emotion. Think carefully why you are frustrated. Is it the task at hand? Or is it something that has been bothering that you haven't addressed? Be careful not to confuse this method with pretending the emotion does not exist. When we suppress emotions, they sit deep within us and come out unexpectedly in undesirable ways. Learning patience will give you a sense of control that you need to handle the largest pressures in life.

In our fast moving lives, it can be a challenge to slow down. Even when forced to slow down, as when most had to

during the COVID pandemic, we find ourselves feeling guilty of not doing enough or having to face our thoughts without our everyday distractions. Your reality could include hardship, loss, grief, divorce, or maybe a haunting past. Emotions are all part of the human experience, and if it is part of your existence, it is worth your attention. Attend any large issues by talking or writing about them. Give them the focus they deserve. Your feelings are worth the time. This has a direct connection to finding your inner patience. I am going to take you through a journey of finding calm within your busy day. We will slow down for a short time each day. You will be seeking your patience. You will be identifying what you can control. You have both calm and patience inside of you, regardless how deeply buried it is. Once you find these, they will be your greatest assets.

This is a two part challenge. The first step is to draw a a line in the center of your journal. Think of all the things you do not have control of in your life. Write them down on one side of the line. Now think deeply about what you do have control of, and place those on the opposite side. Mark a huge X over the things you do not have control over. You have

now created a list that clearly identifies what you need to focus on, which will help center you in a distressful situation.

The second part of this challenge takes you outside with your camera. It is imperative to avoid distractions. Find at least an hour in the day to go outside. Heck, let's be real. Find a half hour of your day to yourself. It could be a beach, a lake, a park, or even just a quiet bench outside. Close your eyes. Take three deep breaths. When you open your eyes, look out at the nature before you. What trees are around you if any? What color is the sky? What does the temperature feel like? What does the air smell like? Are there clouds? Do you feel whatever season it is in the air? Find something you would like to photograph that encapsulates that moment.

For the next week, take at least a half hour for yourself each day and photograph what pulls your attention. Each day will feel a tiny bit different, because it is. When the week is over, print your photographs and place them side to side in your journal. Write some notes in your journal about this experience. What do you notice about these photographs? How did you feel when you completed the task each day?

How did you feel when you finished the week? Did you find your patience? Or do you still need to find it? If you found it, celebrate it! Do not fret if you did not, this is only the beginning.

3

Seeing the World Through Your Inner Child



“Look at everything as though you were seeing it for the first time or the last time. Then your time on earth will be filled with glory.” - Betty Smith

When a baby is born into our world everything is new. Children see the world in wonderment and have a fresh excitement in life. New parents can live vicariously through their children when they experience things for the first time. It is not until ego gets a hold of our human spirit that we become tainted with experience. Having a beginner’s mind is really about finding your inner child. Learning to see again. Putting on a fresh lens of the world. Your camera can give you the eyes of innocence. With a new lens, expectations can fade away and you are allowed to experience life as if it were the newest of days.

The camera is the most incredible tool as it can give you the vision of your inner child. A fresh lens on life. It is extraordinary how through the lens you can see things as if it were for the first time. Your kitchen sink you may have washed a hundred dishes in, your windows you have

mindlessly looked through everyday, or even objects throughout your home or work. What if you saw these all for the first time? Would you marvel at the water coming out of the faucet? If you have ever watched a baby with water, you would say they are mesmerized. Windows and mirrors hold magic if you are viewing it for the first time. Windows stream light in while you can watch birds flying by. If you live in the city it might be cars or traffic or even walking pedestrians. Mirrors can be magic as they slightly distort the world we see to its reverse.

In finding your fresh eyes, observe things as you would see them for the first time. The key element is to be curious. Take out your camera and find either water, a window, mirror or any chosen object for your next set. You can even do all, though I would highly recommend doing one a day so you can truly embrace the activity. Look at what you have chosen. If it is an object, how does the light fall on it? If you're photographing water, what happens when you move it with your hands? If you are lucky enough to be living by the beach, look how the sand sparkles with seemingly bright glitter. If you are looking through a window, what is

happening outside that you find interesting with your new lens? When we experience life with a new way of seeing we become mindful of the daily magic we can miss. It gives us a new appreciation of the normalcy that surrounds us. Once you learn to see with your new vision of an inner child, you will see the world in a different light. There is no unseeing after the veil is lifted.

If you have a difficult time with this, first observe a small child. Watch how they make sense of their world. Take notes on how you can apply these observations in your own journey in mindful photography.

4

Embrace Your Weather



“Peace comes from within. Do not seek it without.” - Gautama Buddha

We all have an internal calm that can be obscured by layers. The peace that lies within is always there as the sun and the moon in the sky. Sometimes we want to see the bright calm moon or feel the rays of sunshine on our skin, but then when we look outside it is covered in clouds. Though it is still there, waiting for the weather to pass. When the clouds finally reveal the sun, moon and even the stars, what a beautiful sight it is! This is what our emotions are like. We all have peace within, strong emotions are like the clouds moving over our calm. Some of us live in a place where it can be mostly overcast. The calm is still there. It is about finding and feeling it within despite the weather that is there. We can do that by embracing whatever weather is present and seeing the purpose it brings. Strong bad weather can help us appreciate the sun. Without the bad can we fully acknowledge the good? Embracing our personal weather will not only strengthen our inner peace, but help us understand ourselves in a kinder manner.

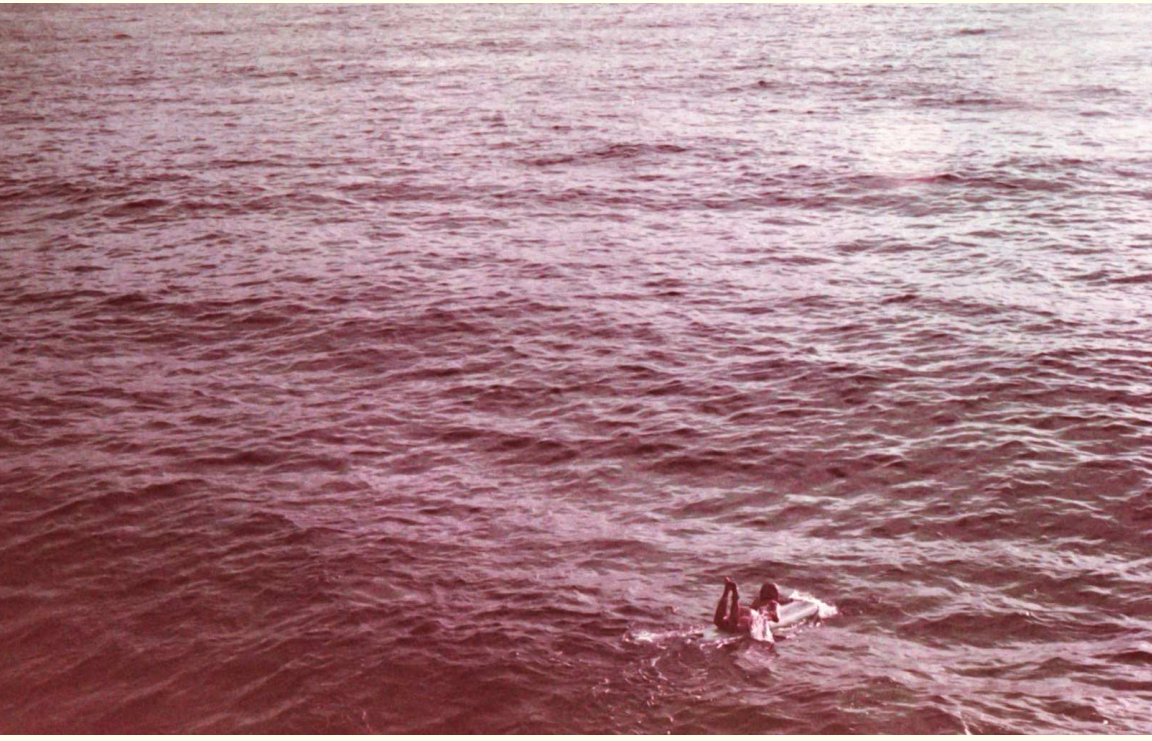
Close your eyes. Think about the current emotions you are experiencing. Are you feeling heavy with emotions? Are you already feeling calm and light? Sometimes we experience secondary emotions that can be incredibly confusing. Like when we are sad, but express it in anger. Sometimes we feel anger, and feel like crying instead of yelling. Sadness and anger are siblings and rarely like to be apart. Frustration, impatience and lack of control are a trio. We often get frustrated or impatient when we have little control on a situation. Remember from exercise 2, when you feel like you have little or no control, it is helpful to think about what you do have control in. Everyone will have different elements of what they can control and what they feel comfortable doing. *The main key is to discard the things you cannot control and embrace what you can control.* Observe the emotion that is bringing you anger, frustration or anxiety and become friends with it. Care for it as it does have a purpose. When you can embrace the emotion you feel, you can acknowledge it and know it comes with a reason.

Get your camera out and while you're intensely paying attention to your emotions photograph what you're drawn

to. You might feel inclined to find things that represent your state of mind. Do not think too hard about what you are photographing. Just think about your emotions and shoot. I recommend you look at your photos the next day. Or if your shooting film, after development. Can you remember your emotional state through the photographs? It may be more difficult if you were experiencing mild emotions because they are not as memorable. But if you are experiencing strong emotions you will be transported as an observer of self through your own pictures. When you put some distance between, you are that much closer with your inner peace while putting your strong emotions at arm's length. This is an exercise that can be done whenever needed. Keep it in your back pocket.

5

Recognizing Your Truth



“Live your truth. Express your love. Share your enthusiasm. Take action towards your dreams. Walk your talk. Dance and sing to your music. Embrace your blessings. Make today worth remembering.”
-Steve Maraboli

We all are magnificent beings with complex grand differences from each other. We each are going through our own journey and have a past unlike any other. Even siblings with the same home environment and the same parents have a different perspective on life and their own self. We each have an individual truth.
Once we start understanding ourselves, we can have an easier time finding our inner peace and get stronger in practicing mindfulness. It is so easy to live outside ourselves. Pushing emotions down or shoving them to others, instead of recognizing they are in fact ours. Introspection can sometimes be obscure, and as soon as we own our emotions, we can discover and embrace our inner truth.
I do want to emphasize that in this section we will be doing some soul searching. This can be difficult as some of us have

a difficult relationship with the self. You might not feel good in your own skin, which happens to be most humans living in a society that creates unhealthy perceptions of what our bodies should look like. Your body is miraculous. How the past has shaped you has significance in how you feel. The fact of the matter is that there is only one you and you have a purpose. If you have not found that purpose, it does not mean it does not exist, it just means it has yet to reveal itself. Spend some time thinking about what brings you sadness, anger, frustration, anxiety, worry, excitement and happiness. I will not just focus on the positive emotions, because each emotion has a purpose to our existence. When are times that you feel at most peace? What are your insecurities? What are your personality strengths? If you were to spend one day doing anything anywhere, what would it be like? We have so many inner workings that make us the individuals we are. In challenge 5 you will be finding your truth and all your beautiful imperfections. The main objective is self discovery and to bring forth your emotions. There is no right or wrong in this exercise, it is what it means to you. Photograph what brings these various emotions to you. Think about things

that may represent these emotions. For example, I did this exercise while on a family vacation in San Diego. With the pandemic raging in Southern California, I felt safe inside, but my anxiety heightened as I left the house. I took a photograph of the view exiting the house. When I returned home, I sat in my backyard and I photographed the palm trees in my yard while feeling calm and relaxed. When we can identify what triggers certain emotions, we can recognize them for what they are and can choose to embrace them. After you complete this, print your photos and write a reflection on what you discovered in this process.

6

Intentional Living



“Taking pictures is savoring life intensely, every hundredth of a second.”- Marc Riboud

Living intentionally. Let these words sit with you for a moment. This is placing a purpose to the things you do each day. The words you speak to others, the foods you choose to eat, the messages you send on social media, the choices we make in a given day. When you learn to live with purpose, you become more mindful of the type of life you want to lead.
I am going to sum this concept with one word: Why?

As soon as we recognize the *reason that drives our words, actions and thoughts, we start grasping purpose.* The why can be found by explicitly identifying our own moral compass. What are the values that we stand by? Have you ever reflected on them? This is often what drives our internal motives. It is worth reflecting on.

Before the next photography challenge, I would like you to write down four to six things that are important to you. I did

this exercise myself and I will share my own. I am an individual that loves my family so much it hurts. My spiritual journey drives my moral compass. You can find me eating Mexican food with chips and salsa, almost daily. I absolutely love Disneyland, and my favorite treat there is the Tiki Room Dole Whip. I gravitate towards people who inspire me, and I am completely smitten with analog film photography. I am drawn to the ocean and the salty air, I may be a secret mermaid.

In this activity you will photograph things that represent your items that are important to you. These are pillars of what makes us individuals and help us to connect to others with shared interests. After you print your photos, answer this in your reflection: Why did you take the photographs you took? Take notes next to each photograph describing each representation. Have fun with this challenge. Embrace all the things you love!



Mindfulness is a Lifelong Practice

“Always remember you are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, smarter than you think and twice as beautiful as you'd ever imagined. Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself” -Rumi

This now is the time for you to reflect on the journey you have begun. There is no one like you, and no one who shares your perspective. Finding yourself has insurmountable meaning, because you have a purpose. I have shared with you a journey that has brought me inner strength, patience, perspective and peace. Mindful living is a practice, meaning that this is merely the beginning. The most difficult part is over. You have started. Just like plunging in cool water, the initial dip is the most jarring, but then you can enjoy the experience, relish in the moment. When you practice mindfulness, you lift the weight of anxiety, stress, worry, doubt and negativity and unleash the calm that is quietly living underneath the storm. With your camera, you can slow down, breath in the precious moments of life, take notice of your weather and live with intent. This book is just the beginning. You matter.






ROLLEIFLEX

I am a mom, wife , and work as a school counselor. I have gone through my own struggles with stress, loss and anxiety. When I was going through my most challenging time, I found a hobby that saved me from the uncomfortable stress and anxiety that overwhelmed me. I found a vintage camera and it was like a veil lifted. I learned how to be mindful behind the camera and through that process my anxiety subsided tremendously. I started teaching mindful photography to my students at school. I saw the power of intertwining these two concepts, with the not only myself, but the many I serve. My hope is you have gained from reading this little book I have put out into the world.

May your journey be fulfilling and rich. I wish you peace, happiness and kindness.

Finding Mindfulness Through Photography

You might want to seek a way to live more peacefully. This has been created for those who want to uncover their inner calm. Yes, we all have calm inside of us. I have created a simple, easy to follow process that will bring you into the world of mindfulness. These steps are carefully curated activities that weave in practices that help anxiety subside with the fun of photography! If you suffer from stress, anxiety, grief or any other large emotion, please read on. I will take you through my journey in developing a more peaceful mindset.