

## Adapting Mindful Practices to People with Special Physical Needs

One in seven adults in the U.S. has mobility impairments. Students may require accommodation or adaptation because of acute injuries or long-term challenges. It's a good idea to prepare options as a starting point.



### Creating a welcoming space

- ❖ Inquire about any need for physical accommodation or adaptation on initial signup forms as preparation.
- ❖ Explicitly discuss what you can do to make the student feel welcome. Ideally, this happens before the beginning of class. This may need to be an ongoing conversation.
- ❖ Use whatever language the student prefers regarding their body.
- ❖ When addressing the class as a whole, face in the direction of any deaf or hard of hearing students so that they can read your lips. You may suggest that the hard of hearing sit up front during guided meditations.
- ❖ Emphasize common humanity when possible—that illness, injury, etc. are a part of life and a normal part of the human condition.
- ❖ If activities in class may be challenging, consider how they might be adapted and speak to the student beforehand to ensure inclusion. When possible, provide a student with options for adapting the exercise. If not possible, brainstorm with the student.
- ❖ Encourage mindful awareness, so you both observe how the adaptations work and for the student to share insights about their experience.
- ❖ When speaking with students who cannot comfortably be in an upright position, offer to sit down.
- ❖ Please note: While a short-term injury, such as a sprained ankle, might be a minor inconvenience, often long-term challenges trigger layers of shame for the student, so please be sensitive.
- ❖ If the location of the class has stairs, lacks an accessible bathroom, etc., clearly provide this information in the class description so students can make an informed choice re: their participation. Attempt to hold class in an accessible location that ensures all participants' comfort and dignity.
- ❖ Ideally, discuss and choose strategies and options with the student before the start of class. Coordinate by phone, email, text, etc., so that the student can comfortably participate in class.

## Walking exercises

Consider the following adaptations as a starting point and adjust as needed:

- ❖ The slower pace of mindful walking can be difficult if balance is an issue.
  - Encourage students to try walking at a slightly faster pace to see if it's easier. Note—others in the class may find this helpful.
  - Try bringing in ski poles, canes, or other similar equipment to add extra support.
- ❖ Consider having the student sit and touch the foot down from heel to toe in a walking movement.
- ❖ If leg movements are impossible, a student can walk with their hands on their legs. The student places the heel of each hand, then the fingers down, as though walking.
- ❖ If most types of movement are uncomfortable, students may opt to either visualize walking or watch the teacher's body or feet and visualize the sensations of doing the exercise.
- ❖ If the class is doing longer walking meditations, consider using a finger labyrinth.
- ❖ It's normal for capacity and energy to vary on different days—for all humans! Consider reminding students of impermanence and change by instructing them to modify directions depending on how their body is feeling today, and to let their body be their teacher.



At home:

- ❖ Some may find that crawling may be a wonderful way of experiencing the awareness of a slow and controlled sensation of shifting weight from hands to knees.

## Standing Exercises

Consider the following adaptations as a starting point and adjust as needed:

- ❖ Many standing exercises can be done seated. The teacher may opt to experiment personally and develop ideas before class.
- ❖ Explore having the student sit at the edge of their seat, with more weight distributed forward. Even if they are shifting their weight 5% forward, it can change their center of balance, and will usually mean a posture that is more upright and alert.
- ❖ Invite the student to lie down with knees bent and feet on the floor, applying gentle pressure to approximate the sensation of standing.
- ❖ If sensations in the feet are painful, the student can use sensations in the seat as the anchor in an exercise.
- ❖ If leg sensations are uncomfortable, consider using the hands as “feet,” such as in the image on the page prior, and have the student notice sensations of standing. They may also try this at home and notice the sensation of their hands “standing” in the grass or on the earth.
- ❖ If movement is not advisable, students may opt to either visualize standing, or watch the teacher’s body or feet, and visualize the experience of the exercise.



### For larger groups/day-longs

- ❖ Presume there is someone present with physical limitations. Offer guidance to adapt instructions as needed and encourage self-care.
- ❖ Consider saying “if possible” when giving directions on a specific posture, or use an inclusive phrase, like a posture that embodies dignity rather than a direction to sit up straight--or offer a choice of postures.
- ❖ Encourage compassion around ensuring access to bathrooms and food.
- ❖ Consider other needs, such as assistive listening devices, etc.

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Additional Resource:Breathworks: <https://www.breathworks-mindfulness.org.uk/>

Comments? Contact Cheryl@harriswholehealth.com

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