

Don't Forget to Wear Your SPF

A Daily Practice for Protecting Your Emotional Health

The MindBodySpiritss® SPF Framework: Safety, Presence, Forward

By Naila Qureshi, M.A. Counseling | Founder, MindBodySpiritss®

Educational note: This article is written for coaching, education, and self-reflection. It is not therapy, diagnosis, crisis care, or a replacement for professional mental health treatment. If you are in immediate danger or experiencing a mental health crisis, seek local emergency support or contact a qualified professional.

Publication note: SPF is used here as a familiar sun-protection metaphor. In the MindBodySpiritss® SPF Framework, SPF stands for Safety, Presence, and Forward.

Most of us understand the importance of applying SPF before stepping into the sun. We do not wait until our skin is already burned to protect it. We apply sunscreen as prevention.

But what about our emotional health?

Every day, we step into situations that can affect our emotional wellbeing: difficult conversations, criticism, conflict, disappointment, pressure, comparison, rejection, uncertainty, or stress. These moments may not leave visible marks, but they can influence how we think, feel, communicate, and connect.

That is the purpose of the MindBodySpiritss® SPF Framework for Emotional Health.

Just as sunscreen helps protect the skin, Emotional SPF is a practical reminder to protect the inner layer of emotional wellbeing before we react. It is a simple pause that helps us regulate, notice, and choose.

S - Safety: Create enough emotional safety before responding. P - Presence: Return to the present moment and notice what is happening inside you. F - Forward: Choose the next response that reflects your values, not your triggers.

Why Emotional SPF Matters

Emotional intelligence is not about never feeling angry, hurt, anxious, or overwhelmed. It is about learning how to notice emotions, understand the information they carry, and respond with intention.

Many people try to force themselves to be calm. But regulation is not the same as suppression. Regulation means creating enough inner steadiness to think clearly, communicate respectfully, and make choices that protect both dignity and connection.

When we are emotionally activated, our reactions can become automatic. We may defend, withdraw, criticize, shut down, over-explain, people-please, or say something we later regret. The SPF Framework creates a small but powerful space between the trigger and the response.

That space is where emotional intelligence grows.

How to Use the SPF Framework

SPF is not meant to be a long checklist that adds pressure in a stressful moment. It is a short sequence you can practice until it becomes familiar: first create safety, then return to presence, then choose the next step forward.

In daily life, this can take one minute or less. In deeper conflict, it may take longer. The goal is not perfection. The goal is awareness, regulation, and values-based action.

S - Safety

Create emotional safety before you respond.

Safety is the first step because we cannot be fully present when we feel emotionally threatened. Before asking yourself to be calm, logical, compassionate, or solution-focused, ask a more basic question: Do I feel safe enough to respond right now?

Safety does not always mean the situation is physically dangerous. Emotional threat may look like feeling judged, misunderstood, dismissed, pressured, criticized, abandoned, controlled, unseen, or afraid of someone's reaction.

When we do not feel safe, the nervous system often moves into protection. We may fight, flee, freeze, or please. These responses are not character flaws. They are signs that something inside us feels threatened or overloaded.

The purpose of Safety is to create enough internal and external steadiness to respond thoughtfully rather than automatically.

How to Apply Safety in Daily Practice

When you feel triggered, ask yourself the following questions before you continue:

- Am I physically safe? If there is real danger, my priority is protection and support.

- Am I emotionally safe enough to continue this conversation right now?
- What is my body telling me? Notice a tight chest, clenched jaw, shallow breathing, racing heart, tense shoulders, stomach discomfort, heat in the face, or the urge to interrupt, escape, or shut down.
- Do I need a pause before I respond? A pause is not avoidance. A pause can be emotional protection.
- What would help me feel safer in this moment? I may need a breath, a boundary, a moment of silence, physical space, clarification, reassurance, or time to process.

Safety Practices You Can Use

Choose one small safety action. The practice does not need to be dramatic. It only needs to help your body and mind move from protection toward steadiness.

- Take three slow breaths. Let the exhale be slightly longer than the inhale.
- Relax your shoulders and unclench your jaw. The body often prepares for defense before the mind finds the words.
- Place both feet on the ground. Feel the floor beneath you and remind yourself: I am here. I can slow down.
- Use a grounding statement, such as: I do not have to respond immediately.
- Name what you need: I need a moment to think before I answer.
- Set a respectful boundary: I want to continue this conversation, but I need us to slow down.
- Step away when necessary: I am feeling overwhelmed. I am going to take a short pause and come back to this.
- Seek support when a situation feels unsafe, coercive, threatening, or beyond what you can manage alone.

Safety in Real Language

Safety becomes more useful when people have words they can actually say. Try adapting these phrases:

- I want to respond thoughtfully, so I need a moment.
- I am noticing that I am becoming defensive. Let me pause and listen again.
- I care about this conversation, and I do not want to say something from a reactive place.
- I can continue when the tone feels respectful.
- I need some time to process before I give an answer.

Safety does not mean avoiding hard conversations. It means preparing yourself to have them with more clarity, respect, and self-control.

P - Presence

Return to the present moment.

Once you create enough safety, the next step is Presence. Presence means noticing what is happening inside you and around you without immediately reacting to it.

Many emotional reactions are not only about the present moment. A current comment, silence, tone, facial expression, or conflict may touch an old wound, fear, assumption, or pattern from the past. Presence helps you slow down enough to separate what happened from the story you are telling yourself about what happened.

Fact Versus Story

This distinction is central to emotional intelligence.

What happened	The story I may be telling myself
Someone did not reply to my message.	They do not care about me.
My partner gave short answers.	They are angry with me.
My supervisor gave feedback.	I am failing.
A friend cancelled plans.	I am not important to them.

Presence invites you to ask: What do I actually know, and what am I assuming?

Research on affect labeling suggests that putting feelings into words can reduce emotional reactivity and support regulatory brain pathways (Lieberman et al., 2007). Slow breathing practices have also been associated with changes in autonomic regulation and psychological state (Zaccaro et al., 2018). This is why breathing, grounding, mindfulness, and emotional labeling can be useful daily practices.

How to Apply Presence in Daily Practice

When you feel emotionally activated, move through these questions:

- What am I feeling? Name the emotion honestly: anger, hurt, anxiety, embarrassment, disappointment, overwhelm, fear, rejection, or powerlessness.
- Where do I feel this in my body? Chest, throat, stomach, shoulders, face, hands, or head?
- What thought is repeating in my mind? Is it a fact, fear, assumption, memory, or prediction?
- What story am I creating? Am I assuming intention, predicting rejection, personalizing something, or expecting the worst?
- What is happening right now? Bring yourself back to the present moment.

Presence Practices You Can Use

The Three-Breath Reset

Take three slow breaths before speaking. During the first breath, notice your body. During the second breath, name the emotion. During the third breath, ask what matters most right now.

Label the Feeling

Quietly name what you are experiencing: This is anger. This is anxiety. This is hurt. This is disappointment. Naming the feeling helps you observe it instead of becoming controlled by it.

The Body Check-In

Ask: What is my body trying to tell me? The body often notices emotional stress before words become clear.

The Fact and Story Practice

Write or think through three short lines: The fact is... The story I am telling myself is... Another possible explanation is...

The Five-Senses Grounding Practice

Notice five things you can see, four things you can feel, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste. This brings attention back to the present moment.

A Mindful Minute

Set a timer for one minute. Breathe naturally. Notice thoughts as thoughts, feelings as feelings, and body sensations as body sensations. You are not trying to empty your mind. You are practicing observing without immediately reacting.

Mental Relaxation

Imagine a place that helps your body soften: sunlight on your face, a quiet room, a walk by water, or a peaceful memory. This is not escape. It is a brief internal reset that can help you return to clearer thinking.

Presence does not ask you to deny what you feel. It asks you to stay close enough to your experience to understand it.

F - Forward

Choose the next response that reflects your values.

After creating Safety and returning to Presence, you are ready to move Forward. Forward does not always mean fixing the situation immediately. It means choosing the next step that aligns with your values, your wellbeing, and the kind of person you want to be.

Forward asks: What response will help me move toward clarity, connection, respect, repair, or peace?

Sometimes the forward step is speaking up. Sometimes it is listening. Sometimes it is apologizing. Sometimes it is setting a boundary. Sometimes it is asking a question. Sometimes it is walking away from a conversation that is no longer healthy.

Forward is not about winning the moment. It is about choosing a response that protects your integrity.

How to Apply Forward in Daily Practice

- Ask: What outcome do I want from this moment? Understanding, repair, clarity, respect, connection, space, or closure?
- Ask: What value do I want to lead with? Honesty, kindness, courage, patience, dignity, accountability, or compassion?
- Ask: Will my next response help or harm the relationship? This does not mean ignoring your needs. It means expressing them with intention.
- Ask: What is mine to own? Do I need to acknowledge my tone, assumption, reaction, or part in the conflict?
- Ask: What boundary is needed? Forward may require saying no, slowing the conversation, or protecting your emotional wellbeing.

Forward Practices You Can Use

- Use a values-based response: Does this response reflect who I want to be?
- Ask before assuming: Can you help me understand what you meant by that?
- Pause before defending: I want to hear you, but I need a moment to process.
- Name your need clearly: I need us to speak respectfully if we are going to continue this conversation.
- Choose repair when possible: I realize I reacted strongly. Let me try again.
- Choose distance when necessary: This conversation does not feel productive right now. I am going to step away and revisit it later.

Forward is not passive. Forward is intentional.

Applying SPF in Everyday Situations

Before a Difficult Conversation

Before entering the conversation, ask: Safety - What do I need to feel grounded before I speak? Presence - What am I feeling, and what assumptions am I carrying? Forward - What outcome do I want to create?

A simple preparation may sound like: I am feeling nervous. I want to stay honest and respectful. My goal is not to win. My goal is to communicate clearly and listen with care.

When You Receive Criticism or Feedback

Criticism can feel like emotional sun exposure. It can burn quickly if we have no protection.

Apply SPF by taking a breath before defending yourself, noticing the difference between feedback and shame, and asking whether there is something useful to learn even if the delivery was imperfect.

Try saying: I need a moment to process that. I want to understand the feedback without reacting defensively.

When You Feel Rejected

Rejection often activates old stories about worth, belonging, or not being chosen. Apply Safety by reminding yourself: This feeling is painful, but it does not define my worth. Apply Presence by naming the experience: I feel hurt and disappointed. Apply Forward by choosing care instead of self-abandonment.

Ask: What do I need right now that does not depend on someone else's response?

During Conflict With a Partner or Family Member

Emotional intensity can rise quickly with the people closest to us. Apply Safety by slowing the conversation down. Apply Presence by noticing whether you are responding to the current issue or an old pattern. Apply Forward by choosing connection with boundaries.

Try saying: I want to continue this conversation, but I need us to pause so I can respond from a calmer place.

At Work or in Leadership

Leaders often absorb pressure from multiple directions. Without emotional SPF, stress can spill into tone, decisions, communication, and relationships. Apply Safety before entering the meeting, Presence by noticing facts versus pressure, and Forward by choosing leadership behavior that aligns with trust and clarity.

Workplace research on psychological safety highlights the importance of environments where people can ask questions, admit mistakes, and take interpersonal risks without fear of humiliation or

punishment (Edmondson, 1999). Although the SPF Framework begins as an internal practice, leaders can also use it relationally by creating spaces where honesty and respect can exist together.

On Social Media

Social media can expose us to comparison, urgency, conflict, and emotional overload. Apply Safety by noticing whether a post or comment is affecting your body. Apply Presence by asking what you are feeling and why. Apply Forward by deciding whether to engage, pause, mute, unfollow, or step away.

A Daily Emotional SPF Practice

You do not have to wait for conflict to practice SPF. The more you practice in small moments, the easier it becomes to use in difficult moments.

Morning Check-In

Safety: What do I need today to feel grounded? Presence: What emotion is already present this morning? Forward: What is one intention I want to carry into the day?

Example: Today I feel overwhelmed. I need to move slowly and not overcommit. My forward step is to communicate clearly and protect my energy.

Midday Reset

Safety: Am I tense, rushed, or emotionally overloaded? Presence: What is my body telling me? Forward: What is one small adjustment I can make right now?

Example: I am holding tension in my shoulders. I need two minutes to breathe before my next meeting. My forward step is to respond rather than rush.

Evening Reflection

Safety: Where did I feel emotionally safe or unsafe today? Presence: What emotion needed my attention? Forward: What did I learn about how I respond under stress?

Example: I noticed I became defensive when I felt misunderstood. Next time, I want to pause and ask for clarification before reacting.

The 60-Second SPF Pause

When you do not have time for a long reflection, use this short version:

- 0-15 seconds - Safety: Am I safe enough to respond right now? What does my body need first?
- 15-40 seconds - Presence: What am I feeling, what am I assuming, and what is actually happening?

- 40-60 seconds - Forward: What response reflects my values and moves this moment in a healthier direction?

This pause can be less than one minute. The goal is not to become perfect. The goal is to become aware.

What Emotional SPF Can Look Like

- Taking a breath before answering.
- Asking for clarification instead of assuming.
- Setting a boundary without guilt.
- Naming your emotion instead of denying it.
- Stepping away before saying something harmful.
- Choosing not to internalize someone else's mood.
- Reminding yourself that urgency is not always truth.
- Listening without abandoning yourself.
- Speaking honestly without attacking.
- Choosing peace without avoiding responsibility.

What Emotional SPF Is Not

- It is not pretending you are fine.
- It is not avoiding accountability.
- It is not staying in unsafe or harmful situations.
- It is not controlling how other people feel or respond.
- It is not replacing therapy, crisis care, or professional support when those are needed.

Emotional protection is not emotional avoidance. It is learning how to stay connected to yourself while navigating the world around you.

Final Reflection

Before your next difficult conversation, stressful moment, or emotional trigger, pause and ask: Have I applied my emotional SPF today?

Safety helps you regulate. Presence helps you become aware. Forward helps you respond with intention.

Your emotional health deserves protection. Not only after you feel burned out. Not only after the conflict. Not only after the damage is done.

Apply your Emotional SPF before you respond.

Protect your emotional wellbeing. Respond with intention. Move forward with purpose.

Reflection Questions

- What situations make me feel emotionally unsafe?
- How does my body tell me I am becoming activated?
- What helps me return to presence?
- What responses do I regret when I react from a trigger?
- What would a values-based response look like this week?
- Where do I need more emotional protection in my daily life?

Selected References

- Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350-383. DOI: 10.2307/2666999
- Grossman, P., Niemann, L., Schmidt, S., & Walach, H. (2004). Mindfulness-based stress reduction and health benefits: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research*, 57(1), 35-43. DOI: 10.1016/S0022-3999(03)00573-7
- Lieberman, M. D., Eisenberger, N. I., Crockett, M. J., Tom, S. M., Pfeifer, J. H., & Way, B. M. (2007). Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity in response to affective stimuli. *Psychological Science*, 18(5), 421-428. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9280.2007.01916.x
- Zaccaro, A., Piarulli, A., Laurino, M., Garbella, E., Menicucci, D., Neri, B., & Gemignani, A. (2018). How breath-control can change your life: A systematic review on psycho-physiological correlates of slow breathing. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 12, 353. DOI: 10.3389/fnhum.2018.00353

Copyright Notice

Copyright © 2026 Naila Qureshi. All Rights Reserved.

This article, written expression, layout, reflection prompts, and educational materials are protected by copyright. No part of this publication may be copied, reproduced, distributed, adapted, stored, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission from the author, except for brief quotations used with proper attribution for educational or review purposes.

The MindBodySpiritss® SPF Framework - Safety, Presence, Forward - is presented as an original educational coaching framework for self-reflection and emotional intelligence development. The acronym SPF is used descriptively as a familiar sun-protection metaphor.