

## Interview with Deborah Sosin, author of *CHARLOTTE AND THE QUIET PLACE*

### 1. Is *Charlotte and the Quiet Place* about more than just escaping noise?

Yes. Charlotte's search for a quiet place to escape her noisy environment leads her to discover mindful breathing, a simple, powerful technique that anyone can learn. When we're breathing, we can relax and let go of tension, worries, and fears. Even young children can reap positive benefits from connecting to their breath, including improvement in their moods, attention, concentration, and outlook. *Charlotte and the Quiet Place* celebrates the beauty of silence, where wonderful, creative possibilities can grow and flourish—not just for children but for adults as well.

### 2. Is the breathing practice Charlotte discovers a form of meditation?

Absolutely. Tuning in to the rhythm of our breath, noticing the physical feelings—the sensation of air, the belly rising up and down—is a form of concentration meditation. Focusing gently on the breath and noticing how the mind wants to relax and slow down is a technique that children can easily learn.

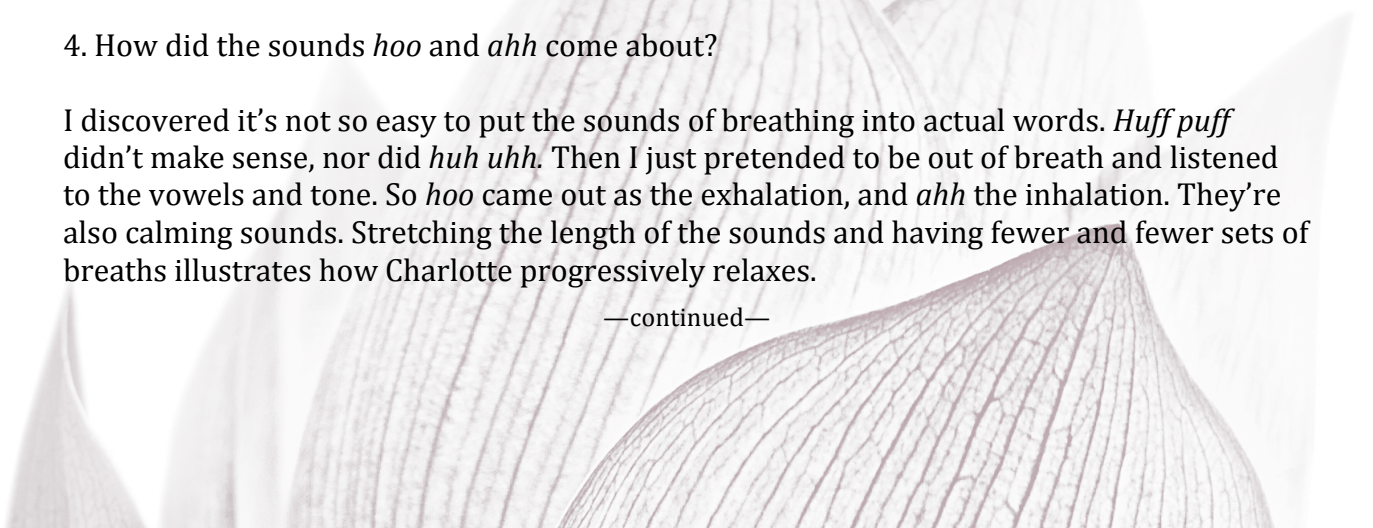
### 3. What is your own experience with mindfulness and meditation?

I have been a meditator for more than forty years. I first learned transcendental meditation in college. More recently, through studying Buddhist psychology, I have learned mindfulness or insight meditation. I meditate for twenty minutes twice a day no matter what. Meditation has become as important as eating, sleeping, and exercising for me to maintain my busy schedule and feel grounded, alert, and alive. Mindfulness meditation and the practice of *metta*, or loving-kindness, especially mindful self-compassion, have helped me to manage stress, anxiety, fear, sadness, anger, and self-doubt. Now I can always count on the quiet place inside me.

### 4. How did the sounds *hoo* and *ahh* come about?

I discovered it's not so easy to put the sounds of breathing into actual words. *Huff puff* didn't make sense, nor did *huh uhh*. Then I just pretended to be out of breath and listened to the vowels and tone. So *hoo* came out as the exhalation, and *ahh* the inhalation. They're also calming sounds. Stretching the length of the sounds and having fewer and fewer sets of breaths illustrates how Charlotte progressively relaxes.

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5. Is *Charlotte and the Quiet Place* at all autobiographical?

I grew up in a family where there was often a TV, a radio or two, or a record player on (yes, I'm ancient!), sometimes all at once. On top of that, my older brother practiced piano every day. It was hard to find a quiet place. Even though I was an outspoken and extroverted child, I had a serious, reflective side too, and I cherished silence. I wrote in my diary about my innermost feelings and concerns, and that helped me feel better. But I also suffered from anxiety and worry and would have benefited from knowing I could find peace inside myself whenever I wanted, through mindful breathing.

6. How did you come up with the names "Charlotte" and "Otto"?

Charlotte is my grandmother's name on my father's side. She died suddenly when I was eight and I wanted to honor her. If I'd had a daughter, I would've liked to name her Charlotte. Otto is named after Michael Otto, a Boston psychologist who taught me wonderful, practical skills for managing anxiety.


7. Do you own a dog?

No. I'm a confirmed cat person! But I needed to figure out a way for Charlotte to get out of breath. So I thought it would be fun to have her chasing Otto, who is chasing a squirrel.

8. You're a clinical social worker as well as a writer—how did your work as a therapist influence *Charlotte*?

Mindfulness-based psychotherapy is increasingly offered these days as a way to help people have a calmer, happier life. So many of us are stressed out, coping with constant demands and obligations. And now that most of us are wired up to our phones, TVs, and computers 24/7, it's harder than ever to find some peace and quiet. Children are wired up too, seemingly attached to their devices and screens, even at a young age. In my work as a therapist, I offer clients tools and strategies for managing internal as well as external "noise." Meditation and mindfulness can help us form a positive relationship with ourselves—noticing our thoughts and worries without judgment; bringing compassion to ourselves and others, especially in difficult times; and clearing the space to tune in to our deepest wishes, fears, and desires. It's hard to achieve our goals if we are out of touch with our true selves. Children desperately need the adults in their lives to stop, notice, quiet down, and simply "be" rather than "do." So I hope *Charlotte* will appeal to adults as much as children.

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9. Do you have any recommendations for parents of children who are especially sensitive to noise and environmental stimulation?

Some children, including those who are diagnosed with certain disorders, such as Sensory Processing Disorder or some types of Pervasive Developmental Disorder, need extra help managing our noisy world. In addition to providing low-stimulation environments and activities, parents and caretakers might find it helpful to practice breathing or meditation with the child. Many children who aren't diagnosed with a specific disorder can simply be sensitive to noise, or just temperamentally more prone to being quiet. I was once babysitting the young son of some friends during a loud thunderstorm. He was scared and overwhelmed, crying and covering his ears. I couldn't make the noise go away, but, instead of saying, "Don't worry, it's just thunder," I tried a little mindfulness. I sat on the floor next to him and made eye contact, not talking, just smiling, breathing audibly, slowly, calmly. He noticed and began to mimic me—so we rode out the storm together, breathing in and out, smiling. By the end, he was laughing, and so was I.

10. What about teachers? How can they help kids to find a quiet place inside themselves?

I'm often struck by the high stimulation level in today's classrooms. There is rarely a moment to reflect or breathe or listen to one's own thoughts as the children rush from one activity to the next. I believe that silence is vital to growth and learning. If teachers added even a few mindful breaths per day to their classroom activities, it would be great for all the kids (and maybe for the teachers too!), not just the ones who are sensitive to noise.

