MINDFULNESS-BASED STRESS REDUCTION (MBSR)

8-Week Programme

Course Booklet
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Introduction

A very warm welcome to the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course.

The course booklet

This course booklet is designed to guide you through the essential teachings for each week and support your mindfulness practice at home. It includes a range of exercises that will help you to maintain good momentum on the course.

The booklet also includes a range of quotes and poems from various authors past and present to help inspire you along the way.

The course aims to:

- Introduce you to a range of mindfulness meditation practices that will help you to cultivate, maintain and enhance your well-being.

- Enhance your ability to deal effectively with the causes and consequences of stress-related symptoms through mindfulness meditation.

- Provide a foundation for developing your own personal mindfulness practice.

- Provide the basis for further training in mindfulness, such as for example, the teacher training pathway, for those who wish to take their practice further.

What do the sessions involve?

Mindfulness is cultivated through the practice of meditation, and to truly understand mindfulness one needs to practice it. This course therefore will be highly experiential, giving participants many opportunities to learn and practice a range of meditation techniques, as well as discuss their experiences throughout the 8-week period.
This course will cover the basics of mindfulness practice from establishing a suitable posture to bringing mindfulness into everyday life. You will be introduced to different mindfulness meditation practices, and each week new techniques will be introduced that you can add to your repertoire of routine practice.

Following each meditation, you will be invited to partake in an inquiry process in which we explore each-others’ experiences of the practice, giving us the opportunity to deepen our learning. This process is purely invitational, and so there is no pressure to share your observations. However, you may find that as you get more comfortable with the group, this becomes a key learning opportunity for you and others.

The course is taught from a secular perspective, but we will draw upon teachings from a range of traditions, and evidence from current research.

Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth that ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one’s favour all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now.

William Hutchison Murray
Week 1

Introducing Mindfulness

Aims:

- To introduce you to the course structure and expectations.
- To introduce you to the raisin meditation in order to help you gain a sense of what mindfulness is and is not.
- Introduce you to the body-scan meditation practice to prepare you for home practice.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness can be defined as the ability to bring conscious attention to all aspects of our experience, including what we find difficult, without judgement, and with an intention of kindness and compassion toward ourselves and others.

It is also about holding a space for ourselves and others in which we can explore the human experience with support, safety and sensitivity, so that we can flourish at our own pace.

Daniel Siegal puts it this way:

‘Mindfulness in its most general sense is about waking up from a life on automatic, and being sensitive to novelty in our everyday experiences. With mindful awareness the flow of energy and information that is our mind enters our conscious attention and we can both appreciate its contents and come to regulate its flow in a new way. Mindful awareness, as we will see, actually involves more than just simply being aware: It involves being aware of aspects of the mind itself. Instead of being on automatic and mindless, mindfulness helps us awaken, and by reflecting on the mind we are enabled to make choices and thus change becomes possible.’ (2007)
Jon Kabat-Zinn puts it a little more succinctly:

‘The ability to direct the attention to experience as it unfolds, moment-by-moment, with open-minded curiosity and acceptance’. (1996)

So mindfulness …

- Is both a practice and a way of living our life. In fact, we can train the mind to become more mindful. Like going to the gym, we can train the mind to pay more conscious attention to what is going on presently in our experience, much like training the muscles. The more we practice the more we benefit.

- Involves bringing our attention and awareness to our thoughts, feelings, sensations and physical experiences in the present moment as they arise and pass away. Doing so with intention, which includes renewing our awareness should we lose it. In other words, about living life in the here and now by waking up to our present moment reality - the opposite of being on automatic pilot, absent-minded, or spaced-out.

**Key Benefits of Mindfulness**

**Here and now:** The practice of Mindfulness enables us to interact with life and those around us in a more responsive, skilful and relaxed manner. We feel more content and happier and our experiences of the pleasurable things in life are deepened and enriched. Less of our time is spent in “automatic pilot” and more of our time in the “here and now”.

**Respond as opposed to react:** The results of paying attention to the “here and now” can be significant and even profound. We notice some space around our thoughts and emotions and they no longer seem all-consuming. This new and greater perspective gives us potential to consciously and with awareness respond to our thoughts and emotions as opposed to simply react, and to reflect on whether they are helpful or true. Recognising and coming to terms with our mind can be a joy.

**Habits:** We can see more clearly where turning to face life’s challenges may be appropriate, and where habitual patterns of turning way and non-engagement may not be.
Healthy acceptance: Greater equanimity can arise; events that we find challenging and difficult don’t seem quite so significant. We gain a greater acceptance of our current situation, which can give us the inner tools to both change that which is necessary and learn to be content with that we can’t or don’t wish to change.

Self-kindness: The self-compassion and kindness inherent in giving ourselves the time to undertake a daily mindfulness practice can be a catalyst for greater kindness and compassion in itself and implies a commitment to our own happiness and well-being.

Letting go: Mindfulness gives us the ability to let go - let go of stress and anxiety, of the constancy of thinking, of reliving the past or pre-living the future. The conditions that cause the stress and anxiety may well still exist, but we can relate to them in a more peaceful, harmonious and relaxed way which decreases our unhappiness and discontent.

There have been numerous research studies highlighting the benefits of regular mindfulness practice. These include:

Physiological
• Reduced heart rate
• Lower blood pressure
• Better breathing patterns
• Better/Deeper sleep
• Healthier digestion
• Strengthening of immune system

Psychological
• Improved confidence and self-esteem
• Ability to be kinder to oneself and others
• Increased empathy and compassion
• Heightened awareness of the body leading to recognition and release of pain
• Reduced stress and anxiety
• Greater calmness and clarity
• More effective concentration
• Increased resilience in difficult situations
• Improved listening skills
• Improved ability to quieten the chattering mind
• Increased ability for lateral thinking and creative solutions to problems
• Greater self-awareness and awareness of others

What is meditation and what is its relationship with mindfulness?

Mindfulness can be cultivated through a variety of means. For example, during sport activity our attention can be very much concentrated on the moment. We are focused, present, and meaningfully engaged. Similarly, we may find that we can arrive at similar states through other pursuits such as mountain climbing or even reading. However, whilst a state such as this is mindful and intentional, the focus can be narrow, for example, on considering our next move, or caught up in a story in our imagination. Such a sense of mindfulness can also be lost quite easily as we move on to the next pursuit.

Meditation however can help us to cultivate a more expansive and sustained mindful awareness. As a practice (and it is fundamentally something we have to practice if we are to reap the benefits!) it can help us to develop a more wholesome awareness of all aspects of our experience, such as the physical and emotional sensations in the body, thoughts, sounds, tastes, what we see, etc. Through training ourselves to be mindful, much like we train our body to be stronger, we can learn to hold these experiences in our awareness moment-to-moment, without the judgement we are habitually used to, and with a sense of kindness and compassion towards ourselves and others.

However, such practice requires patience. Whilst we may find immediate benefit from taking some time out to meditate, there will be times when, along with a positive sense of personal development, we also feel that we are moving backward. This is entirely normal and part of the practice. Much like nurturing the growth of a plant over many months, we need to gently cultivate mindfulness, to notice how our experience ebbs and flows and learn to pay attention to what is happening in our life, and how we respond. Over time, we slowly begin to notice our habitual responses to life’s events and simultaneously see the opportunity for change. These are themes that we will continue to revisit throughout the course.
Establishing a Meditation Posture

There are many different forms of meditation taught in a variety of traditions, and similarly, a range of guidance on how to establish a posture. Of course, we can meditate on the move, but traditionally most forms of meditation involve sitting in some way or other. Here, we will introduce you to the basics of finding a suitable posture.

In finding a posture that feels right for you, you may wish to experiment. Fundamentally however, aim to establish a sitting position that enables you to feel both relaxed (and thus able to sustain the position for a length of time), but alert. So, rather than lying back as one would do in an armchair, sit upright with a sense of positive intention. Finding a balance between relaxation, comfort and alertness should set you up well for your meditation.

There are good reasons for this. The teachings of mindfulness tell us that mind and body are integrated and that the mind can affect the body and vice versa. So, if we find ourselves slouching, we may notice that we begin to feel sleepy quite quickly. Conversely, if we are too rigid in our posture, our mind may also feel rigid and even uptight. Therefore, the relaxed but alert position is a good foundation for a steady but open and relaxed mind - not too wound up and not too relaxed; much like a fine-tuned string on a guitar.

You may choose to sit on a chair, a stool, cushions or even cross-legged in the traditional lotus or half-lotus position. If on a chair, push yourself to the back of the chair so that you are not reclining back, and so that your back is naturally straight. Sitting on a meditation stool will naturally place you into this position. Place your hands either in your lap or on your legs, and keep your feet firmly on the floor. This position ensures that you are steady and grounded, providing a good foundation for the meditation practice.

You may have noticed images of people meditating showing them with their eyes shut. Many people do of course keep them shut during the whole meditation practice. However, there are various different teachings on whether to keep them open or shut and for very specific reasons. Some practitioners like to keep their eyes wide open, or half open for duration of the practice. Feel free to experiment with this in your own practice.
Week 2

Perception

Aims:

• To enhance our understanding of how mindfulness can help us to develop a new relationship with stress-related symptoms by changing the way we see events in our lives.

• To introduce the awareness of breath meditation to help us to steady the body and mind and maintain present moment awareness.

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Changing Perspectives

Imagine yourself on holiday for a month. Lying on a beach with no cares, you look back at your life at home, and reflect upon it. The worries and stresses of daily life now seem so petty and a waste of precious time. You have gained perspective to the point that you can see clearly what is going on.

You return from holiday. Within two days, you are back in the bubble. The worries and anxieties have crept in by the fourth email. You have lost perspective. You do not see clearly what is going on.

What is the difference here? In the first scenario, you have distance. In the second scenario, you are caught in a small world of suffering. From the perspective of scenario 1, your home life may seem neurotic, and unhealthy. From the perspective of scenario 2, a holiday may seem like a distant dream. You are the same person in both instances, but you act and think differently.

What then makes us change our perspective so radically and so quickly? Why do we let ourselves suffer so much? What can we do about it?
**Little mind, big mind**

In traditional mindfulness teachings there are the metaphors of little mind and big mind. Little mind is the ordinary everyday mind that gets caught up with little dramas. In fact it often seeks them out, moving from one to the next. It is a reactive mind, partly unconscious and susceptible to the winds of change. It is the mind that gets stressed, and spends an unnecessary amount of time worrying.

Big mind on the other hand has huge capacity. Any potential little dramas are insignificant. They have space to play themselves out. Big mind is able to observe these dramas from the vantage point of awareness. It does not get caught up or caught out. It is conscious of the elements of experience.

Mindfulness practice allows us to take a mental holiday, to gain perspective even in the midst of life’s dramas. It allows big mind to come into play, and for its capacity to expand. When we practice we are guided to observe our thoughts, sensations in the body, as well as sense experience such as sounds. We are observing from the vantage point of awareness. This awareness is greater than our thoughts and our emotions, and is a natural part of our intelligence. However, we fail to see it when we are caught in the web of life’s dramas. We practice, and we once again gain perspective, and so on.

It turns out that we all have, lying deep within us, in our hearts and in our very bones, a capacity for a dynamic, vital, sustaining inner peacefulness and well-being, and for a huge, innate, multifaceted intelligence that goes way beyond the merely conceptual. When we mobilise and refine that capacity and put it to use, we are much healthier physically, emotionally, and spiritually. And much happier. Even our thinking becomes clearer, and we are less plagued by storms in the mind.

John Kabat-Zinn

In big mind, we more easily let things go. We are resourceful, creative, flexible, and have greater capacity for kindness, reasoning, and forgiveness. We are in control. It is a state of well-being and resilience. We are more likely to be kind to ourselves as well as to others.
In little mind, we do not let things go so easily. We are reactive. There is little space for tolerance, we do not reason well, are meaner, inflexible, and find it harder to forgive. We are more likely to be unkind to ourselves and to others. We are not particularly resilient.

You may have noticed in the raisin meditation how it is possible to gain a new perspective on something we might see as an ordinary every-day object (and possibly take for granted). With mindful awareness we can start to see our experiences afresh; to begin to see the richness and unique qualities of what we experience. In this moment-to-moment non-judgemental awareness, we are cutting through the labels that we attribute to objects and others, and are learning to see things more directly, without added layers of interpretation; almost seeing the world as we once did as children - noticing the beauty and richness around us.

_The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself._

_Henry Miller_

**Mindful Breathing**

The breath is often a key focus of mindfulness meditation and yogic practices, and for many reasons. The breath can act as a kind of barometer of how we feel from moment-to-moment. When we are stressed our breath can feel constricted, short, and rapid. When we are relaxed, our breath is more fluid, relaxed and open. Try this short experiment: hold your fists tightly for 30 seconds and notice what happens to the breath - you are likely to find that the breath almost seems to stop.

The breath is also a great focus for our attention. We don’t have to do anything to breath - the breath in a way breathes entirely by itself controlled by the autonomic nervous system (more on this later). In mindfulness meditation, we may notice that we try and control the breath, but we guide you to just allow the breath to work at its natural pace and rhythm and to bring a gentle feather-light awareness to it. Awareness of the breath in this way should almost feel effortless. With this effortless attention, we can watch the breath non-judgmentally - in fact, the breath is one of the things in life that we do not judge, so this makes it a reliable source to practice non-judgemental awareness.
The breath, like the body, and our general sense experience is reliably always in the present moment. So, whenever we hold our attention on the breath we are also bringing ourselves back to the present. As Lehrhaupt & Meibert put it,

‘Mindful breathing teaches us that it is possible to be present in each inhalation and exhalation, breath by breath. It helps us to anchor ourselves in the here and now, to experience the present moment to the fullest. At the same time, it demonstrates that mindfulness is not a permanent state but one established again and again. Returning the attention to the breath each time we notice we have drifted away is a powerful step toward sustaining wakefulness as well as the practice of meticulous attention in our lives.’

Lehrhaupt & Meibert, 2017

Working with Thoughts

During mindful breathing meditation, we can practice observing the phenomena of the mind and body; that is, the rising and falling away of thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations.

Working with thoughts is an essential mindfulness practice. Our thoughts are powerful, and can influence both the conscious and unconscious decisions that we make every day. Therefore, bringing mindfulness to thoughts can enable us to take more control over our life and make wiser more considered decisions.

We are often so preoccupied with thoughts that we fail to notice what is going on in our life. Living as such on automatic pilot is a common human experience. Have you ever noticed when you have arrived somewhere, how on earth you got there? Can you remember the journey? Much of our daily life can be like this. Spending most of the time in our heads, we can be lost for hours worrying of fantasising about something, or planning the hours or days ahead. How much time is left where we are actually engaging with life as it happens?

What is more, our thoughts can occur almost constantly. We are not quite finished with one, then we are caught up in another one, and so on. We may even have multiple concerns at once occupying our minds which quickly drain our energy, leaving us exhausted. We may find that we tell ourselves stories about ourselves and others that, although perhaps partly true, dominate our attention, not only for days, but sometimes months or even years. How satisfying to have even a moment's release from such states of mind!
Mindfulness practice can enable us to step out of automatic pilot, even if for a short while, at least in the beginning. As practice evolves it is not uncommon for practitioners to spend significant parts of the day living consciously, only occasionally susceptible to the draw of automatic pilot.

**So how do we work with thoughts?**

Firstly, it can be helpful to come at our practice with consideration of thoughts as mere mental events. No matter what they are, whether judgment of self or other, or an attempt to plan our afternoon tasks, if we look at thoughts carefully, we notice that they are events that occur in the mind, hang around for a while, then disappear.

Our thoughts are like fisherman’s hooks. They drop in the pool of our mind, and we bite, then off we go. Before we know it we are caught in a net, struggling through our lives. We can learn however to just swim on by the hooks, observing them for what they are. This gives us choice. We can choose to consider those thoughts that are most helpful or that we need to prioritise, whilst allowing the pull of other more unhelpful thoughts to drift in and out of our experience.

Working with thoughts takes a constant effort, but it gets easier. As we practice we build up the ability to observe the mind and to remind ourselves to do so. The point of the practice is not to make great effort to eliminate our mind of thoughts, but to observe the natural play of the mind. When we notice a thought arising, the task is to just notice it, even label it, then gently bring our attention back to the focus of our meditation.

Our breath, the body and sense experiences can all act as anchors that bring us into the present moment. When we are lost in thought, either mulling over past or future events, we are not present. However, our breath, body, taste, sounds, etc. are always in the present. In this way they act as reliable anchors upon which we can rest our attention whenever we drift off into thought.

**Watching out for mind traps**

One major way that mindfulness helps with stress is by enabling you to observe the mind traps that may play a role in your stress and your reaction to stress. Once you know what they are, you will begin to recognise them as you begin falling into them, and eventually you may be able to avoid them and this can make a real difference in your life.
Everyone’s mind, startled by challenge, responds spontaneously with an emotional state, characteristic to him or her, and that confuses it. Described as hindrances, they hinder the mind’s capacity to clearly assess what’s happening. As energies, they ruffle the mind’s surface and distort the truth. Mindfulness recognises these confusing energies and responses and enables you to see through them or around them so that good sense can prevail. Concentration dissolves hindrances. When a mind is concentrated, deeply relaxed and steady, filled with warm intention, upsetting thoughts and feelings arise, but they don’t stick.

**Negative Self-talk**

Self-talk is the way we talk to ourselves. It refers to our habitual ways of thinking and how we automatically interpret events. Often this internal monologue is negative. The beauty of mindfulness is that you can learn to treat these negative thoughts as mental events rather than facts.

**Habitual Styles of Thinking**

By becoming familiar with your own negative thought patterns you can then become mindful of when you might be falling into your traps.

**These are some of the most common mind traps. See if you can recognise any of these in yourself and your responses to situations:**

- **Catastrophising** is a style of thinking that amplifies anxiety. It’s a what-if game of worst-case scenarios. An example would be telling someone that it’s raining pretty hard, and they respond with “yes, it seems like it will never stop. It’s going to flood and we’re all going to lose our crops.”

- **Exaggerating the negative and discounting the positive.** For instance “I’m doing better at work but I’m still making mistakes.” This discounts the positive and gives more power to the negative. Experiment with replacing “but” with “and” to give both aspects equal weight.

- **Mind reading** involves convincing yourself what other people are thinking and feeling and why they act as they do, without actual evidence. For instance, you may incorrectly assume that someone doesn’t like you. Such misinterpretations can lead to anxiety and depression.

- **Being the eternal expert** is a recipe for heightened stress, as it necessitates being constantly on guard.
• The ‘shoulds’ are an all too common thought pattern that can lead to guilt or anger in addition to stress. You may apply your list of ‘shoulds’ to yourself and others, and no one will reach your expectations.

• Blaming involves holding others responsible for your own pain or holding yourself responsible for the problems of others. If you perceive the solution lies outside of you, you deprive yourself of the power to effect change.

• So, by labelling our response eg the mind is catastrophising, we can depersonalise it. We can create space and then make a choice to instigate mindfulness.

Awareness of Breath Meditation

To begin your meditation it can be helpful to take a few deep but soft breaths to mark the transition into the meditation and connect with the breath. The following sequence which is based on a typical breathing meditation, can help secure a foundation as well as bring closure to the practice:

1. Establish your posture.
2. Bring awareness to your environment such as the near and distant sounds around you. Notice your reactions to the sounds.
3. Check in with general states of mind such as your current mood, asking yourself ‘how do I feel right now?’.
4. Similarly, check your state of mind - is your mind busy, quiet, etc.?
5. Scan the body from toe to head or vice versa, noting any physical sensations. You can take as long as you wish for this, but make sure you maintain the intention to complete the whole practice, as it can be easy to drift off after a while.
6. Connect with the breath. Breathing naturally, follow the in-breath and the out-breath. Start by following the whole breath as it enters the nose or mouth all the way in and all the way back out again. You might find it helpful to silently say to yourself ‘breathing in’ when you are breathing in and ‘breathing out’ when you are breathing out.
7. If you notice any arising sensations or thoughts, just acknowledge them as such and then gently guide your attention back to the breath. If you feel any discomfort in your posture, of course change position if you need to, but if you can, make this also part
of the practice. Observe, for example, the bodily movement, stretch of the muscles, etc.

8. Now, direct you attention to the sensations of the breath in the nostrils. Notice whether you are breathing through both nostrils at once, or not. Notice the subtle sensations of the in-breath (e.g. coolness) and the sensations off the out-breath (e.g. a slightly warmer sensation). Notice perhaps the sound of the in-breath and the out-breath.

9. Later in the practice you ay wish to drop the focus on the breath and sit in an open awareness observing whatever is going on in the body and mind and in your environment.

10. Before you bring the session to a close, check in with your body, emotional state, state of mind, etc. as you did at the beginning, and then sit for a minute or two just noticing how you are. There can be a tendency at this point for the mind to want to re-engage with tasks that need doing, but just notice this urge, and then gently and slowly ease yourself out of the practice.

11. For experienced meditators, practice does not just occur during the meditation itself, it can be in everything that one does. Bringing such an attitude to the transition from the chair, stool or cushions to your daily life can help you to maintain a greater sense of mindfulness. So, when ending the practice, try not to immediately pick the phone up or get involved with tasks. Observe any physical sensations, your mental attitude, mood etc, as you stand up and walk around. If required to work, pay conscious attention to the tasks that you are doing. This way, you find that your mindful awareness impacts positively on the rest of your day.

Throughout the course we encourage you to pay particular attention to your thoughts and your thought patterns. The following questions might be of help:

- Do you notice any habitual patterns of thought that you maintain? How and why do you maintain them? Do you need to?
- How easy or difficult was it to notice thoughts as they arise? Were you able to label them and return to the breath, for example?
- To what extent did you find treating thoughts as mental events helpful? Were you able to maintain some distance from them? Did you find that you could not help but invest in certain thoughts?
- What were the results of investing in certain thoughts?
- What were the results of observing thought as mental events?
Week 3

Embodied Awareness

Aims:

• To introduce you to mindful movement practices.

• To develop our ability to tune in to the subtle sensations in the body in order to spot the early warning signs of stress, and heighten our awareness of when we may be compromising our well-being.

Mindfulness of Movement

When practising mindful movement, part of the feeling it evokes is that of coming home to your body. Your body is a portal or doorway to your mind and it helps us to “remind” ourselves of that connection.

Step one to helping your body to heal is to practice being “in” it. Tuning into your breathing and to the sensations that you feel in your body helps you to become more acutely attuned to its messages.

Mindful movement is the third formal meditation technique that we practice in the MBSR course, along with the body scan and breathing meditation. Mindful movement provides another way in which you can learn about yourself and come to experience yourself as whole, regardless of your physical condition or level of fitness.

We practice it without striving or forcing, accepting our body as we find it in the present, from one moment to the next. While stretching or lifting or balancing, we learn to work at our limits, maintaining moment to moment awareness. We are patient with ourselves. As we carefully move up to our limits in a stretch, for instance, we practice breathing at that limit, dwelling in the creative space between not challenging the body at all and pushing it too far.
Unlike many aerobic exercise classes which focus on the doing, emphasising progress, mindful movement focuses on the being. Professional athletes are now realising that unless they pay attention to the mind as well as the body, they are disregarding an entire realm of personal power that can make a critical difference in performance.

On this course, the ground rule is that every individual has to consciously take responsibility for reading their own body's signals whilst practising. This means listening carefully to what your body is telling you and honouring its messages, erring on the side of being conservative. No one can listen to your body for you. If you want to grow and heal, you have to take some responsibility for listening to it yourself, working within your own limits and savouring the experiences that come as the result of your practice.

**Awareness of Feelings**

Millions of us suffer with stress every day. We can struggle to acknowledge or communicate when we are in a stressed or anxious state, especially within the workplace where we may perceive this to be a sign of weakness (or worry that it will be perceived by others that way). As such we may suppress such feelings and the thoughts that arise with them; ignoring our stressors or pretending they don't exist. We may not even notice when we are stressed, especially if it has built up over time but especially if we have not practiced attuning to the indicators of stress within the body. Over time, our stress can re-define our sense of what we perceive as a normal state leading us to forget what it is like to experience peace of mind and a positive sense of well-being, free from stress.

From a mindfulness perspective, the answer isn't to turn away from these feelings. Rather, by taking careful steps we practice leaning toward them with kindness and sensitivity. Bringing our attention to feelings in the body in this way can help us first to acknowledge that they are there, and secondly, it allows us to sit with them without habitually reacting in unhelpful ways. Over time, this gets easier with practice and we can find that we can live alongside such feelings, learn to accept them, without being affected by them so much.

We are not aiming to eliminate our stressors, but are engaging with them differently. By changing the way we see ourselves in relationship to them, we can actually change our experience of the relationship and therefore modify the extent to which it taxes or exceeds our resources or endangers our well-being.

If we can change the way we see, we can change the way we respond. We have a choice!!
Between stimulus and response there is a space. 
In that space is our power to choose our response. 
In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

Viktor Frankl

Doing and Being Modes of Mind

Much of the time we may find that our awareness is mainly in our heads. We may feel somewhat detached from our bodies as we engage with our thoughts throughout each day. In doing so, we may lose a sense of full body awareness or what we might call wholeness. Within this state we can be going from thought to thought to thought without even realising that we are doing so; what we might refer to as being on automatic pilot. This ‘thinking’ state is often referred to as ‘doing mode’ - a state in which we are constantly on the go, always doing and thinking, always trying to get somewhere or achieve something or other. This can make us weary and more susceptible to stress.

‘Being mode’ on the other hand involves a more embodied awareness. In this mode we are more conscious of our whole experience, less ‘in-the-head’, and more present with whatever we are doing or with whoever we are with. Mindfulness is a practice that helps us to spend more of our time in this mode. Advocates of mindfulness are not saying that doing mode is wrong and being mode is right but it’s about making a conscious choice as to which one is more appropriate and supportive at that moment.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Doing Mode (Thinking Self)</th>
<th>Being Mode (Observing Self)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Automatic pilot</td>
<td>Conscious choice</td>
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<td>Analysing</td>
<td>Sensing</td>
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<td>Striving</td>
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<td>Depleting</td>
<td>Nourishing</td>
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Exploring Stress

Aims:

• To develop our understanding of the causes, signs and symptoms of stress.
• To help us to identify and develop skilful ways to navigate the stresses of life.

Working with Stress

We have all experienced stress in our lives. Stress can arise when we feel overwhelmed with the amount of work we have to do, when life is uncertain or traumatic, or when we are tasked with doing something we have never done before, such as speaking in front of an audience for example.

Stress can occur, even when we are in a non-stressful situation. For example, we might be enjoying a coffee with a friend, but suddenly a thought pops into our head about a deadline we have in a week’s time. This triggers an unpleasant emotion, which then feeds further thoughts and worries. Before we know it, we are having a miserable time and find ourselves cutting the meeting short. In such circumstances, we may have not only magnified the thought, we may have also given it some authority over our life - allowing it to dictate what we do next.

Research tells us that, whilst a little bit of stress can be quite motivating, too much can affect our health and impede our ability to pay attention, problem-solve and regulate our emotions. So how can we alleviate stress in our lives?

Through practicing mindfulness meditation, which involves regularly tuning into and observing bodily sensations, mind states and emotions, we become very sensitive to stress triggers. We begin to notice in our experience the often very subtle thoughts, emotions and external stimuli that work together to make us feel stressed. If we catch them early, we might find that we can nip them in the bud, before they grow too large and cause us a great deal of trouble.
We also learn to look at things for what they are, without embellishing them with qualities they don’t have. Have you ever put a task off because it seems too onerous, only to find out that, in reality, it’s a 5 minute job?

Try this exercise: begin to notice the things in your life that trigger stressful thoughts and feelings. Notice how a situation sets off a thought and how the thought creates a feeling in the body. Notice the thought but bring your awareness mainly to the associated feelings. Breath gently in and out of the centre of these feelings, with a sense of kindness and gentleness toward yourself. You may find that, with practice, such a focus softens the feelings and calms down the mind, helping you to see more clearly.

**How does stress affect our body?**

**What happens when we feel stressed?**

When you perceive that you are in a threatening situation you feel unable to cope with, then a cascade of things happen in the neurological, emotional and hormonal systems. Messages are carried along nerves in the brain from the cerebral cortex, the place which regulates our thought processes and the limbic (emotional) system to the hypothalamus.

**The Hypothalamus**

The hypothalamus is an important regulatory centre in the centre of the brain. It controls the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS) which, in turn, controls all the automatic functioning of the body i.e. the functions without conscious control such as heartbeat, blood pressure, breathing etc. When stressed, the Sympathetic branch is stimulated, and the release of adrenaline and other physiological functions leads to the “fight and flight” response, which:

- Decreases blood clotting time
- Increases heart rate
- Increases sugar and fat levels
- Reduces intestinal movement
- Inhibits tears, digestive secretions.
- Relaxes the bladder
- Dilates pupils
• Increases perspiration
• Increases mental activity
• Constricts most blood vessels but dilates those in heart/leg/arm muscles

The other branch of the ANS is known as the Parasympathetic and it has the opposite effect on our body to the Sympathetic responses above.

**How does Mindfulness help?**

Mindfulness helps in a number of ways:

• Through increased awareness we are able to identify what causes us stress which helps us to reduce our exposure to stressful situations.

• It trains us to take conscious control over our breathing, slowing the breath down for example, and thereby soothing the body.

• It stimulates the other branch of the ANS called the Parasympathetic system which is responsible for our “rest and digest” functions. By continuously stimulating this branch, it turns down our stress response, rather like turning down the volume on the radio and over time our system becomes more calm and balanced.

**Responses to Stress (Palmer & Dryden, 1995):**

**Biological**

• Diarrhoea/constipation/flatulence
• Frequent urination
• Allergies/skin rash
• High blood pressure/coronary heart disease(angina/heart-attack)
• Epilepsy
• Dry skin
• Chronic fatigue/exhaustion/burn-out Cancer
• Diabetes
• Rheumatoid arthritis
• Asthma
• Lowered immune system
• Flu/common cold
• Poor nutrition, exercise and recreation

Biologically based mental disorders

Behavioural

• Alcohol/drug abuse
• Avoidance/phobias
• Sleep disturbances/insomnia
• Increased nicotine/caffeine intake
• Restlessness
• Loss of appetite/overeating
• Anorexia, bulimia
• Aggression/irritability
• Poor driving
• Accident proneness
• Impaired speech/voice tremor
• Poor time management
• Compulsive behaviour
• Checking rituals
• Tics, spasms
• Nervous cough
• Low productivity
• Withdrawing from relationships
• Clenched fists
• Teeth grinding
• Type A behaviour e.g. talking/walking/eating aster; competitive; hostile; Increased absenteeism
• Decreased/increased sexual activity
• Eat/walk/talk faster
• Sulking behaviour
• Frequent crying
• Unkempt appearance
• Poor eye contact

Affective (Emotions)
• Anxiety Depression Anger Guilt
• Hurt
• Morbid jealousy Shame/embarrassment Suicidal feelings

Sensations
• Tension
• Headaches Palpitations
• Rapid heart beat Nausea
• Tremors/inner tremors Aches/pains Dizziness/feeling faint Indigestion
• Numbness Dry mouth Cold sweat
• Clammy hands Abdominal cramps Sensory flashbacks Pain

Feelings
• Helplessness
• Isolation/being alone
• Losing control
• Humiliation/shame/embarrassment
• Poor self-image
Cognitive
- I must perform well
- Life should not be unfair
- Self/other-damning statements
- Low frustration statements e.g. I can't stand it. I must be in control
- It's awful, terrible, horrible, unbearable etc.
- I must have what I want
- I must obey 'my' moral code and rules
- Others must approve of me
- Cognitive distortions e.g. all or nothing thinking

Interpersonal
- Passive/aggressive in relationships
- Timid/unassertive
- Loner - no friends
- Competitive
- Put other' needs before own
- Sycophantic behaviour
- Withdrawn
- Makes friends easily/with difficulty
- Suspicious/secretive
- Manipulative tendencies
- Gossiping

Some Perspectives from Neuroscience

Until recently it was thought that our brains developed during our childhood and teens and then stopped once we’d reached maturity. In fact, the medical world believed that it started to deteriorate during the 20’s until the end of life. We now know, as a result of modern medical technology and scientific research, that this is far from the truth. Our brains have an extraordinary capacity to keep changing and adapting to new circumstances, whether it’s learning a new language or hobby or adjusting to new challenges such as a change in career. This ability of the brain to reshape and alter its physiological make up throughout life is known as neuroplasticity.

The advent of functional MRI scanners over the last decade have taught us so much about how the brain works by observing and recording what happens when a person is lying in the scanner, meditating. Before this time, we were only able to see the brain in static images which didn’t give us the full picture. Even small changes can be detected from one moment to the next, giving us fascinating insights into the functioning of the brain.

Amygdala

The amygdala is part of the “old” or “lizard” brain, a part that developed millions of years ago, before the higher functions of thoughts and emotions evolved. The amygdala is primarily involved in our survival and it is still providing the same function in us today, always looking out for predators. Whilst this was helpful when we lived on the savannas and we had to remain constantly vigilant, the amygdala still fires off even when our survival is not threatened, such as when we worry about what the boss will say about our performance at work, why our friend hasn’t called, our appearance and so on. When our amygdala is stimulated, a cascade of events are triggered via the pituitary gland, including adrenaline and cortisol secretion which increases blood pressure and heart rate, sweating and making us feel anxious.

Memory

Memory also plays an important role in this fight and flight response of the autonomic nervous system. We are constantly scanning our surroundings in order to identify potential harmful threats. Therefore, if we had a bad experience say with a teacher sporting a moustache in our childhood, we may automatically move into a state of amygdala arousal every time we see someone with facial hair. This primitive,
unconscious response can be overridden by identifying habitual reactions and bringing conscious reasoning to the encounter.

**Negativity Bias**

Our brain is designed so that negative experiences trump the positive. Negative experiences stick like Velcro to the brain in microseconds whereas it has been shown that positive experiences take at least 20 seconds of our attention to embed in the memory banks. This is why we often see life from a ‘glass half empty’ viewpoint, we have been designed this way and it is not our fault. The more negativity we experience, the more is embedded and this can lead to depression and low mood. Depression creates changes in the brain which can make them more predisposed to further episodes. Mindfulness meditation has been shown to help heal these brain changes.

Trauma can also have a huge impact on the functioning of the brain, reducing the hypothalamus, the area responsible for storing memory, by up to 20%. Over time the brain can recover and memory and concentration may return to previous levels.

**Benefits of Mindfulness and meditation on the brain and nervous system**

Stimulation of the left pre-frontal cortex, which is responsible for a sunnier outlook on life, occurs during meditation practice.

Mindfulness helps by enabling us to see things in a clearer perspective and teaches our body not to react to the threat so readily by turning down its activity over time, rather like turning down the volume on a radio. Regular meditation has been shown to reduce the stimulation of the amygdala to such an extent that it can actually shrink in size!

Research demonstrates that it can improve mood, promote optimism and lower stress responses.

By providing the brain with store of good experiences including of happiness, peace, pleasure, appreciation, gratitude, loving-kindness, it can offset earlier negative experiences and change the inner atmosphere of our lives. Specific practices can help us to tap into and savour good memories, thereby giving ourselves a lift whenever we wish.
Abdominal Breathing

Many people who have symptoms of stress and anxiety have discovered that their breathing is impaired or restricted in some way. Very often they are experiencing rapid and shallow breathing, known as hyperventilation. It is helpful to return to natural breathing as it helps a person feel more in control of their health and wellbeing.

When the breath is rapid and shallow and moved predominantly by the upper chest, back and shoulder muscles, it is tiring, using muscles that were not designed for this purpose.

Hyperventilation causes loss of carbon dioxide which results in the blood becoming more alkaline, adversely affecting the transport of various important elements in the blood and may result in:

- cerebral vasoconstriction - mental fuzziness, memory lapses, headaches, poor sleep, bad dreams
- cerebral glucose deficit; coronary vasoconstriction - chest wall tightness or pain, palpitations; cardiac arrhythmias
- too little oxygen in the cells results in lowered cellular energy production
- bronchial constriction - exacerbation of asthma
- gut smooth muscle constriction - exacerbation of IBS
- platelets clump together more - increased risk of blood clots
- calcium imbalance; magnesium deficiency; muscle fatigue, spasm and pain
- loss of CO2 directly stimulates neuronal activity, with increased sensory and motor discharges - muscle tension and spasm, heightened perceptions
- higher incidence of allergies due to histamine excess – sweaty palms and flushed face.
- It is very common – figures suggest that 40% of people attending their GP are hyperventilating.

Overview

If you imagine a little baby lying in their cot fast asleep, you’ll see the gentle rise and fall of the abdomen as it breathes in and out. Somewhere along the line many of us have left this relaxed pattern of breath behind. There may be several reasons for this which may include:
• poor posture, rounding the shoulders and collapsing the front of the body
• increasing stress in people’s lives and a corresponding rise in associated hormones
• sedentary lifestyles, weakening muscles used in effective breathing techniques
• emphasis on tightening the stomach muscles
• a history of asthma
• tight and restrictive clothing

Clearly, without this oxygen and movement we become susceptible to illness and disease. We have an increase in circulating stress hormones which, in turn, promote upper chest breathing and the cycle is perpetuated.

What is abdominal breathing?
Abdominal breathing is also known as diaphragmatic breathing. The diaphragm is the large muscle located between the chest and the abdomen. When it contracts the dome is forced downwards, displacing the abdominal organs and causing the abdomen to expand. This causes a negative pressure within the chest forcing air into the lungs quite naturally. The negative pressure also pulls blood into the chest improving the venous return to the heart. To breathe out, the diaphragm domes upwards, creating more space in the abdomen for the organs to return to their original position, flattening the belly and air is pushed out of the lungs.

Interesting facts about breathing
One nostril works at breathing while the other rests and clears out debris. They change over in a regular cycle, with alternate nostrils blocked. If we sleep on our side, the lower nostril gets blocked and the body turns at intervals to alternate the nostrils. Irregular breathing patterns can cause too much or too little turning in bed. Exercise helps vibrate the sinus cavities and keep them clear, when the heel strikes the ground in running or brisk walking and through greater blood circulation. In a healthy person the breath will alternate between nostrils about every two hours. Because most of us are not in optimum health, this time period varies considerably between people and can reduce
our vitality. According to the yogis, when the breath continues to flow in one nostril for more than two hours, as it does with most of us, it will have an adverse effect on our health.

Scientists have discovered that the nasal cycle corresponds with brain function. The electrical activity of the brain was found to be greater on the side opposite the less congested nostril. The right side of the brain controls creative activity, while the left side controls logical verbal activity. The research showed that when the left nostril was less obstructed, the right side of the brain was predominant. Test subjects were indeed found to do better on creative tests. Similarly when the right nostril was less obstructed the left side of the brain was predominant. Test subjects did better on verbal skills.

**Abdominal Breathing Exercise**

- Ensure you are sitting comfortably in a position which you think you can happily maintain for 10 minutes or so.

- Use blocks, blankets or sit on a chair or against a wall to ensure your comfort if necessary

- Ideally, keep your back elevated and chest open. Relax the shoulders and belly

- Start by closing the eyes and focusing in on your breath

- Place one hand on your chest and the other on your stomach just below the ribcage

- As you slowly inhale through your nose, feel your stomach expand into your hand. If your chest expands, focus on breathing with your diaphragm

- After a very slight pause at the top of the breath, slowly exhale through your nose or mouth, whichever feels more comfortable and relaxing for you

- After a slight pause, feel the diaphragm flattening again and drawing the breath inwards.

- Repeat at your own pace of breathing, we’re all different, for a few minutes

- Then sit quietly in reflection as you allow your breathing to find its’ own natural rhythm.
Short Mindfulness Techniques

Try these strategies if you start to feel anxiety building:

STOP

S - Stop

T - Take a breath

O - Observe - thoughts, feelings, sensations

P - Proceed mindfully

MIND THE GAP

G - Give your attention to whatever is happening for you right now - include your thoughts, feelings and physical sensations.

A - Awareness of your breath. Use the physical sensations of the breath to anchor yourself in the present moment.

P - Perceive your body as a whole. Bring a soft openness to any areas of discomfort, pain or tension. "It's OK.....whatever it is, it's already here. Let me feel it, and welcome it as best I can."
Aim: To explore how mindfulness can help us to respond to stress with more creativity than reactivity.

When we are caught up on automatic pilot we may find that when we encounter a problem or feel stress in our everyday lives, we can become rather reactive. For example, we may jump to conclusions, adopt avoidance behaviours, or snap at someone. Such ways of responding to life circumstances can leave us feeling unsettled, perhaps with feelings of regret or guilt, which can then further exacerbate obsessive and sometimes unconscious thinking patterns. When we are particularly busy we may find that we get caught up in a cycle of reactive ways of being, and struggle to find a way out (doing mode).

From a mindfulness perspective there is a way out of this cycle, and this way out starts with a pause. This pause may only last a second or two but it is enough to break the chain that is giving energy to the cycle. In an earlier chapter you may have noticed the quote from Viktor Frankl who said, ‘between stimulus and response there is a space’. Following any stimulus, this space is always possible; we can always pause and then respond, rather than fall into the way of habitual reactivity.

The pause may be a conscious breath or two; it may involve dropping our attention into our body to notice how we feel, listening to sounds, or simply just opening our awareness to our whole experience. In that space, that pause, we are giving ourself a chance to recover from the impact of a stimuli, gather our senses so to speak, gain some perspective, and then consider our options. In other words, we are waking up to our experience and coming out of the slumber of automatic pilot, so that we can respond with clarity and skill. A more creative and successful response will help us to remain at ease, thus reducing the effects of the stress response, and leading to greater peace of mind.

The more we practice mindfulness the more we may find that we naturally take pauses throughout our day. We get into a slower rhythm, realising that very few circumstances require us to react instantaneously, and that taking a few seconds or even a few minutes more is a more helpful way of responding to life’s demands and situations.

The 8 Attitudes of Mindfulness
The practice of mindfulness is like cultivating a garden: it flourishes when certain conditions are present. These conditions include the following eight attitudes which are essential for developing a more mindful, creative response to what we experience.

1. Beginner’s mind

This quality of awareness sees everything as new and fresh, as if for the first time, with a sense of curiosity. This is like looking at the world in the way that you did as a child - everything seeming new and unique. We can bring this attitude to situations that could cause us to be reactive, for example, by bringing a curiosity to how we feel, any thoughts that arise, and perhaps how we are breathing. We may look at the circumstances of an experience with interest, noticing what is happening around us and how it is affecting us.

2. Non Judgement

This quality of awareness involves cultivating impartial observation in regard to any experience - not labelling thoughts, feelings or sensations as good or bad, right or wrong, fair or unfair, but simply noticing things as they are. Taking judgement out of a difficult situation, for example, can take the heat out of it, give us time to observe things more accurately and respond appropriately. Further, we have a tendency to perceive things as problems to solve. With non-judgment we can instead look at these as situations to respond to (although this is not always easy of course).

3. Acknowledgement and Letting be

This quality of awareness validates and acknowledges things as they are without feeling that we need to change or fix anything. Whenever we encounter an experience that triggers our reactive behaviours, we can acknowledge that it is ok to feel what we feel; acknowledging that this is a legitimate response. With awareness, we can learn to accept the reality of a situation, rather than deny or misinterpret it; in other words, just letting it be as it is without adding any embellishment.

4. Non-Striving
With this quality of awareness, there is no grasping, aversion to change, or movement away from whatever arises in the moment; in other words, non-striving means not trying to get anywhere other than where you are. When we find ourselves in a state of striving we can end up on automatic pilot or ‘doing mode’ - always trying to get somewhere, always trying to achieve something. In this mode of being we are more likely to get reactive when someone gets in our way or something slows us down. Non-striving allows us to take our time a little more, to be comfortable in the present, and to respond creatively (or like water) when we encounter a perceived obstacle.

5. Equanimity

This quality of awareness involves balance and fosters wisdom. It allows a deep understanding of the nature of change and allows you to be with change with greater insight and compassion. When we are in reactive mode we may feel out of control and thus out of balance. In responsive mode, and with a sense of equanimity, we may sense greater control over our circumstances and thus become more balanced in the way we take action.

6. Patience

Patience is a form of wisdom. It demonstrates that we understand and accept the fact that sometimes things must unfold in their own time. To be patient is simply to be completely open to each moment, accepting it in its fullness. Following a stimulus a little patience allows us to take a pause, to take a breath, giving us the room to respond in a way of our choosing.

7. Trust

Developing a basic trust in yourself and your feelings is an integral part of meditation training. It is far better to trust in your own intuition and authority than looking outside to others. In reactive mode, we may feel that we have lost a sense of trust with the world and perhaps even with ourselves as we strive to control or fix our circumstances. A little trust that we can allow things to unfold more naturally, and that we are capable of responding in more skilful ways, will help us to live more creatively and with greater peace of mind.

8. Self-Compassion
The cultivation of self-compassion helps us to realise that we need to take utmost care with ourselves if we are to live a fulfilling, healthy and happy life and if we wish to be of service to others. When we sense we are bound in ‘doing mode’, perhaps feeling pushed around by life’s circumstances, we can tap into this natural quality and begin to take more care of ourselves, step off the pedal and realise that there are other more nurturing ways of responding.

The Farmer and the Sage

There was once a farmer in ancient China who owned a horse. “You are so lucky!” his neighbours told him, “to have a horse to pull the cart for you.”

“Maybe,” the farmer replied.

One day he didn’t latch the gate properly and the horse ran off. “Oh no! This is terrible news!” his neighbours cried. “Such terrible misfortune!”

“Maybe,” the farmer replied.

A few days later the horse returned, bringing with it six wild horses. “How fantastic! You are so lucky,” his neighbours told him. “Now you are rich!”

“Maybe,” the farmer replied.

The following week the farmer’s son was breaking-in one of the wild horses when it kicked out and broke his leg. “Oh no!” the neighbours cried, “such bad luck, all over again!”

“Maybe,” the farmer replied.

The next day soldiers came and took away all the young men to fight in the war. The farmer’s son was left behind. “You are so lucky!” his neighbours cried.

“Maybe,” the farmer replied.
Aims:

• To introduce you to the loving-kindness practice.

• To develop your understanding of the mindfulness perspective on kindness and compassion.

Developing Self-Compassion

Regular Mindfulness practice changes the structure and pathways of the brain. Some of these changes occur in the part of the brain associated with compassion and kindness. These changes can be strengthened by intentionally cultivating kindness and establishing a habitual pattern of compassion and kindness to ourselves. Giving ourselves the time to undertake a daily Mindfulness practice implies a commitment to our own happiness and well-being in itself.

Starting with the recognition that we are all the product of thousands of years of human evolution and gene development and have been subject to a lesser or greater extent to influence and conditioning by our parents, family and society, we can relate to and view our current situation as “not being our fault”. This is not to say that we have no wish or responsibility to change things from here but is simply viewing where we are now from the perspective of past events and circumstances. For those of us who are prone to frequent critical and self-judgemental thoughts, this can open our minds and hearts to a new way of looking at the problem.

Loving yourself means accepting yourself as you are with all your faults and shortcomings. Such ideas can feel uncomfortable to some of us raised in western society where we may have a tendency to feel guilty and selfish if we direct acceptance and kindness to ourselves.
Simply bringing our mindful attention to our self-critical and self-judgemental thoughts can help us recognise their transitory and ephemeral nature further increasing our potential to establish new habits and pathways. These patterns can be strengthened by intentionally cultivating kindness during Mindfulness and meditation practice, for example with a loving kindness meditation.

The compassion and kindness engendered is available for others as well as ourselves. It is taught within some spiritual traditions that genuine compassion for others is dependent upon genuine compassion for ourselves. Compassion and kindness can be endless resources so don’t worry that they will run out!

Loving-kindness Meditation Practice

In traditional teachings, loving-kindness is defined as unconditional positive regard toward oneself and others, including other non-human beings. It is a universal sense of openness that is both courageous and tender, whilst also a natural quality that can be cultivated through meditation practice.

When teaching mindfulness, we refer to loving-kindness and compassion as essential components of any practice. In many ways, we could see them as foundational to developing and maintaining a sense of care and open-mindedness in response to our whole experience.

In guiding meditation, we often instruct participants to gently, and with kindness, bring the attention back to the breath or body, if the mind has become distracted. We encourage participants to lean toward rather than retract from difficult and uncomfortable sensations and emotions, but with kindness and compassion toward themselves. We do so for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it is all too easy to fall prey to the ruminating mind; the mind that is self-critical and full of doubt: ‘I’m no good at this!’, ‘I’ll never make it’, ‘I’m not worthy’, we say in our inner dialogue. If we listen to too much of this dialogue we can find ourselves stuck in a downward spiral of thought, with sometimes disastrous consequences. We know for certain that we are not at our best when holding such self-doubt. Therefore, bringing a sense of loving-kindness to these thoughts, can help us to maintain a channel of self-care for ourselves no matter what life throws at us.
With training in loving-kindness we can guard our mind from unhelpful thoughts. We can learn to recognise that no matter what, we deserve to be happy, fulfilled, and prosperous. This can result in a self-forgiveness that, whilst not ‘letting us off the hook’ of our responsibility, enables us to remain buoyant in the face of difficulty, thus more resilient.

Secondly, we know how challenging it is to face difficult emotions or even physical pain. When we examine ourselves in meditation, we can find many subtle and sometimes gross layers of emotion that we may have been harbouring, sometimes even for years. These are like open wounds that we daren’t touch and from which we seek anaesthetisation. To move toward such wounds we need the tenderness and courage of loving-kindness. We can learn that with a kind curiosity, we can begin to befriend the difficulties that we hold.

Ultimately, the practice of loving-kindness is one that leads us toward compassion and empathy toward others too. When we understand our own pain, our own challenges, we understand the pain of others. We develop insight into the root causes of our suffering, and thus see that others are susceptible to the same causes. Arising from this is a sense of universal and unconditional empathic concern - a sense that ‘we are all in this together’.

Loving-kindness can be incorporated into any meditation practice. It is the quality of warmth and forgiveness that we apply when bringing mindful awareness to our various experiences. Like the morning sun it helps to ‘melt the ice’ of our sometimes hardened experience, eventually helping us to see our original qualities that lie beneath the ice; qualities that have so long been forgotten and neglected.

However, there are specific meditation practices aimed at cultivating the qualities of compassion and loving-kindness. The following meditation is called the Metta Bhavana and comes from the Buddhist tradition. It is designed to bring about the following four qualities: compassion, equanimity, friendliness, and appreciative joy.

It comprises of 6 key stages, which are:

1. Bringing yourself to mind, and wishing yourself well.
2. Bringing a good friend/loved one to mind, and so too wishing them well.
3. Bringing to mind a neutral person - someone you may see around but that you may not have made a connection with. Again, wishing them well with the same sense of kindness and warmth that you bring to yourself and the good friend.

4. Bringing someone you find difficult to mind, again extending the same kindness and warmth towards them.

5. Bring to mind all of the people in the previous stages, including yourself, and wish all well.

In each stage, you can bring in other phrases such as ‘may I/they be happy’, ‘may I/they be free from suffering and pain’, ‘may I/they live with ease’, and so on.

Whilst many come to this practice challenged by the idea of wishing themselves well, there are very good reasons for this. Put simply, we are better equipped to serve others when we care for ourselves. When we neglect ourselves, we are often under-resourced to help others. By cultivating loving-kindness and compassion we become like a cup that is overflowing. We cannot help but extend these qualities to others around us.

“There is a saying in the mindfulness tradition - how we relate to one thing is how we relate to everything. When we are compassionate toward ourselves, with sympathy for our own shortcomings and pain, we cannot be anything else to other people. Compassion is naturally ‘other-regarding’.”

Suryacitta
I Would Pick More Daisies

If I had my life over, I’d dare to make more mistakes next time!

I’d relax, I’d limber up. I would be sillier than I have been this trip.

I would take fewer things seriously, take more chance, take more trips.

I’d climb more mountains and swim more rivers.

I would eat more ice-creams and less beans, and would perhaps, have more actual troubles than imaginary ones.

You see, I’m one of those people who lived seriously, sanely, hour after hour, day after day.

Oh, I’ve had my moments and if I had to do it over again, I’d have more of them.

In fact, I’d try to have nothing else, just moments, one after the other instead of living so many years ahead each day.

I’ve been one of those persons who never goes anywhere without a thermometer, hot water bottle, rain coat, parachute!

If I had to do it again, I would travel lighter this trip.

If I had my life over again, I would start going barefoot earlier in the spring and stay that way later into autumn.

I would go to more dances, I would ride more merry-go-rounds.

I would pick more daisies.

Nadine Stair, Age 85
Mindful Communication

Aims:

• To explore the notion of interpersonal mindfulness; in particular mindful listening and communicating.

Mindfulness and Relationships

Interpersonal Mindfulness, the art of mindful communication and listening can impact in a significantly positive way, supporting our health and well-being. We can often experience ourselves as separate entities disconnected from each other, but the practice of meditation and mindfulness brings us much more in touch with the common humanity we all share. As social animals most of us spend a great deal of time interacting with others and each person we interact with, be it at home, work, socially, or elsewhere, whether the relationship is good or difficult, can provide a doorway to a new world. Despite our commonalities, as we know, people can be an enormous stress in our lives. Positive emotions help us feel connected, whereas negative feelings such as dislike, hate, being critical or judgemental, anger, resentment, intolerance, envy or jealousy – these all have their roots in feelings of separation. Sometimes it can be the people we are most intimate with that cause us the most stress, maybe because there is more of a sense of responsibility or that they know you so intimately that they know which buttons to press.

Qualities of Interpersonal Mindfulness
We all need to attend to our relationships to help them flourish and grow, like the cultivation of a garden. When relationships become strained or difficult, bringing mindfulness and compassion can potentially prevent them from withering away. Goldstein and Stahl suggest six qualities they consider essential in cultivating interpersonal mindfulness and dramatically improving relationships:

**Openness**

Similar to beginner’s mind, this is a quality where you’re open to seeing the other person and the relationship as new and fresh, and where you’re open to the other person’s perspective.

**Empathy**

The first step to empathy is first to identify your own feelings and then you can do this with the other person. Trusting your own intuition in respect of how others are feeling can be effective.

**Compassion**

This quality combines empathy and a wish to ease the suffering of another. Imagine the person as your own child and how you would comfort them.

**Loving Kindness**

This is a quality where you truly wish others well - to be healthy, safe, free from harm and free from fear.

**Sympathetic joy**

This is a quality in which you delight in the happiness and joy of others.

**Equanimity**

This is a quality of wisdom, an evenness and steadiness of mind that comprehends the nature of change. Equanimity gives you more balance and composure in understanding the interconnectedness of all life.

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Communicating and listening mindfully is an important set of skills to develop. Such skills can change our relationships for the better and put our minds at ease. The next time you are communicating, you might like to try the following …

Just listen without interruption

Notice any tendency to want to intervene, give friendly advice, finish their sentence or tell your own similar story. Notice any judgment you might be making about the other person and/or what they are saying. Notice how you feel, observing your emotional reactions. As best you can listen with interest, curiosity and with a beginner’s mind - you might learn something new!

Whether speaking or listening - give someone your whole attention

This practice is about presence - about giving your full attention to any communication. Next time you meet someone, try giving them your whole attention as if they are the most important person in your life at that moment in time. Observe any demands or distractions, such as the need to check your phone or to get to your next appointment. Even a few minutes of your attention in this way can make someone feel listened to, accepted and acknowledged.

Pause before responding

As best you can, without judgement give yourself a moment or two to take in what the other person has said. Reflect back to them what you think they said and then give a response.

The greatest gift we can give others is the gift of our own presence. When we listen mindfully, without judgment, we gift our listeners with trust and openness. And we support them so that they can express themselves mindfully.

Linda Lehrhaupt, 2017
Aims:

- To explore how mindfulness can be integrated into everyday life, and how you can best establish a home practice.

**Integrating Mindfulness into Daily Life**

As we have discovered so far, mindfulness meditation is not a practice that only happens when we are sitting on a chair, stool or cushions. It is something that we can bring into our everyday activity. In fact, everything that we do is an opportunity to practice mindfulness.

We are susceptible to drift through our days, half unconscious, on automatic pilot. The days turn into weeks, the week into months, months into years. We can live our whole lives half-conscious. Paying attention in our lives, wakes us up.

With mindful awareness applied into our daily routines and activities, we begin to notice the small things around us, and inside us. We can appreciate the richness of life, and bring a kindly acceptance to all that happens. Taking a moment at a time, we find that we can savour life as it happens - not what it should or shouldn’t be like according to our inner judge.

While regular formal sitting or movement meditation is hugely beneficial, bringing mindfulness to everyday activity, such as our communication with others, doing the chores, etc. can be of great benefit also. It can help us to integrate practice with our lives in a way that helps us to sustain awareness wherever we are and to whatever we are doing. Rather than seeing distractions as a barrier to meditation, we can embrace them as part of the practice. In this way we can find that life’s circumstances bother us less and less, and also become more meaningful as they provide opportunities for practice.
So, whatever we do, we can do with kindness toward ourselves and others. We can bring conscious attention to daily activities, from putting a key in a door, to brushing our teeth, getting dressed or washing the dishes. In this way, we remind ourselves to wake up to our life again and again, step out of automatic pilot, resulting in greater resilience and deeper engagement.

So how might we practice in daily life?

Wherever you are and whatever you are doing, try tuning into the five senses. Focus on sounds, smells, sight, tastes, touch. Or, close your eyes for a few moments and just focus on one or two of the sense inputs - the sound of the wind, for example.

Here are some practical tips for integrating mindfulness into daily life:

- Use something to remind you to pay attention. This might be the door handle as you leave the house in the morning, your child’s demands, or the moment you switch your computer on at work.

- Find a few moments to pause throughout the day. Maybe take a few deep breaths and tune into the body.

- Resist switching on the TV or checking your mobile phone. Notice the temptation to reach for the button. Enjoy some time out.

- When you find yourself waiting for a train or in a queue, see this as an opportunity to practice. Maybe bring your attention to the breath. Notice your mood.

- Turn judgement into curiosity and kindness. Whenever you catch the mind in judgment of another person for example, instead show interest in that person and even silently wish them well.

- To counteract the speediness of our minds, just slow down. Perhaps take a slow walk in the park, stop and sit doing nothing for a while, or give your full attention to the preparation of a meal. Savour the experience.

- Pay attention to the environment. Notice the flowers and trees, the colours and textures of things, the people walking by, or the sounds of the city, such as the cathedral bells, for example.
• Drink and eat mindfully. As with the raisin exercise, bring your attention to the smells, sounds, tastes, physical movements, etc.

The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.

Henry Miller