

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy

Course Information

This information contains notes and quotes to back up the discussions that we have during our group session. The home practice is detailed at the end of each week's session notes.

You may find it useful to keep notes of your experiences as the course progresses. There are spaces in the information to do this. Any notes you make are entirely to facilitate your own learning process and there will be no need for them to be seen anyone else. If you wish, you can use your notes to remind you of your experiences during the week, and any questions you have, which you may want to bring to our session.

If there are any difficulties in connection with the course, please contact your teacher to discuss things.

We hope that the course is a useful and enjoyable learning experience for you.

'...make the moment vital and worth living...do not let it slip away unnoticed and unused'.

Martha Graham

Quoted in 'Mindfulness Meditation for Everyday Life' by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Piatkus: London, 1994

Session 1 – Automatic Pilot

- The aim of the programme is to learn new and more effective ways of handling our moods and emotions.
- We do this by focusing on the small changes in thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations that are linked to mood fluctuations.
- To focus on these changes we have to become more aware of them.
- The raisin exercise shows how our attention is not always placed fully in the moment – we are often not at ‘home’.
- The body scan helps us gain control over our attention, enabling us to enter more deeply into our present experience.

In a car we can sometimes drive for miles on automatic pilot, without really being aware of what we are doing. In the same way, we may not be really present, moment-by-moment, for much of our lives. We can often be miles away without knowing it.

On automatic pilot, we are more likely to have our buttons pressed. Our thoughts, feelings, and sensations, as well as events in the world around us – many of which we may be only dimly aware of – can trigger habits of thinking that are unhelpful and lead to stress.

By becoming more aware, from moment to moment, of our thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations, as well as the world around us, we give ourselves the possibility of greater freedom and choice. We do not have to go down the same old mental ruts that have caused problems in the past.

The aim of this course is to increase awareness so that we can respond to situations with choice, rather than react automatically. We do that by practicing becoming more aware of where our attention is and deliberately changing the way we pay attention, over and over again. Mindfulness is not about trying to get anywhere. Rather, it is simply a matter of being aware of where and how we are and giving ourselves the space to make conscious choices.

To begin with, we place our attention in different parts of the body, using each part of the body as a focus to anchor our awareness in the moment. We train ourselves to place our attention and awareness in different places at will, thus enabling us to enter more deeply into our present experience. The process of entering more deeply into our current experience is the aim of the Body Scan exercise, which forms the main home practice exercise for next week.

Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way:
on purpose
the present moment
and non-judgementally

JON KABAT-ZINN

(‘Full Catastrophe Living’, Piatkus: London, 1996)

The Benefits of Mindfulness Meditation

Thousands of peer-reviewed scientific papers prove that mindfulness reduces pain, enhances mental and physical wellbeing and helps people deal with the stresses and strains of daily life. Here are a few of the main findings:

- Mindfulness can dramatically reduce pain and the emotional reaction to it. Recent trials suggest that average pain 'unpleasantness' levels can be reduced by 57 per cent while accomplished meditators report reductions of up to 93 per cent.
- Clinical trials show that mindfulness improves mood and quality of life in chronic conditions such as fibromyalgia and lower back pain, in chronic functional disorders such as IBS, and in challenging medical illnesses, including multiple sclerosis and cancer.
- Mindfulness improves working memory, creativity, attention span and reaction speeds. It also enhances mental and physical stamina and resilience.
- Meditation improves emotional intelligence.
- Mindfulness is a potent antidote to anxiety, stress, depression, exhaustion and irritability. In short, regular meditators are happier and more contented, while being far less likely to suffer from psychological distress.
- Mindfulness is at least as good as medication or counselling for the treatment of clinical-level depression. One structured programme known as Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) is now one of the preferred treatments recommended by the UK's National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.
- Mindfulness reduces addictive and self-destructive behaviour. These include the abuse of illegal and prescription drugs and excessive alcohol intake.
- Meditation enhances brain function. It increases grey matter in areas associated with self-awareness, empathy, self-control and attention. It soothes the parts of the brain that produce stress hormones and builds those areas that lift mood and promote learning. It even reduces some of the thinning of certain areas of the brain that naturally occurs with ageing.
- Meditation improves the immune system. Regular meditators are admitted to hospital far less often for cancer, heart disease and numerous infectious diseases.
- Mindfulness may reduce ageing at the cellular level by promoting chromosomal health and resilience.
- Meditation and mindfulness improve control of blood sugar in type II diabetes.
- Meditation improves heart and circulatory health by reducing blood pressure and lowering the risk of hypertension. Mindfulness reduces the risks of developing and dying from cardiovascular disease and lowers its severity should it arise.

Live More

Love Better

Worry Less

Less Stress

Smile More

Learn Better

Listen Better

Eat Better

Focus More

Sleep Better



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If I Had My Life To Live Over

I'd like to make more mistakes next time.

I'd relax, I would limber up. I would be sillier than I had been on this trip.

I would take fewer things seriously. I would take more chances.

I would climb more mountains and swim more rivers.

I would eat more ice cream and less beans.

I would perhaps have more actual troubles, but I'd have fewer imaginary ones.

You see, I'm one of those people who live sensibly and 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 another, instead of living so many years ahead of each day.

I've been one of those persons who never goes anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat, and a parachute.

If I had to do it again, I would travel lighter than I have.

If I had my life to live over, I would start barefoot earlier in the spring and stay that way later in fall.

I would go to more dances. I would ride more merry-go-rounds. I would pick more daisies.

Nadine Stair 85 years old

One Person's Report

This man had been in hospital for depression four years before, following which his wife and three children left him and there had been no further contact except through lawyers. He had become very depressed and lonely, although had not been in hospital again.

He was now over the worst of his depression, and started to use the body-scan tape to help prevent his mood from deteriorating. These were his comments after eight weeks:

For the first ten days it was like a burden. I kept 'wandering off' and then I would worry about whether I was doing it right. I kept having flights of fantasy.

After ten days I relaxed more, I stopped worrying if I was thinking about anything else. When I stopped worrying about it then I actually stopped the flights of fancy. If I did think of something else I picked him up again when I stopped thinking. Gradually the flights of fantasy reduced. I was happy to listen to him and then I started to get some value from it. I began to feel very relaxed, when he got to the bit about the neck it felt like someone was massaging my shoulders. I was able to breathe into my toes.

It becomes more real the more you try it. I began to look forward to it.

Soon I had developed it so that I could actually feel the breath going down to the base of my foot. Sometimes I didn't feel anything, but then I thought, 'if there's no feeling then I can be satisfied with the fact there is no feeling.'

I tried too hard to start with. Eventually I just put it on and expected to go off into a realm of thoughts. I didn't worry if concerns came in. Gradually the forty minutes passed without me losing him and then from then on, the next time was more effective.

It's not something you can do half a dozen times. It's got to be a daily thing.

It sounds silly, but I found it helpful in a snooker match I was playing. There were five of us in the team and we were two-all with me as the last one to play so everything depended on me. There was a blue and pink and black to pot so it could go either way. I felt very highly stressed, felt my heart beating and other team members urging me on. And then I felt the breath going into my fingers and I relaxed and I won. Those little thoughts themselves relaxed my arms.'

Home practice is an important part of the course!

The patterns of the mind that we will be working to change have often been around for a long time. These patterns are also frequently habitual and automatic. We can only expect to succeed in making changes in these long established ways of mind if we put time and effort into learning new ways.

It can be challenging to find the time to do the home practice that is part of this course. It really is worth it though. A useful attitude to adopt is – ‘I’ll give this my best shot, with an open mind. At the end of the course I’ll decide what the learning has been for me and what I can take away with me’. In order for you to make a decision about whether this approach could be a useful part of your life you need to engage with it fully during these 6 weeks.

A part of each session will be used to reflect on your experiences of the home practice during the week. We will discuss too any difficulties that you may be experiencing with the practice – either in getting to do it or things that arise for you during the practice itself. Much of the learning of the course can be drawn from these experiences.

Facing difficulties

A central aim of the approach is to learn how to be more fully aware and present in each moment of life. The good news is that this makes life more enjoyable, interesting, vivid and fulfilling. On the other hand, this means facing what is present, even when it is unpleasant and difficult. In practice you will find that turning to face and acknowledge difficulties is, in the long run, the most effective way to reduce unhappiness. In this course you will learn gentle ways to face difficulties and will be supported while doing this.

Patience and persistence

Because we will be working to change established patterns of mind, much of the approach will involve investing considerable time and effort, the effects of which may only become apparent later. In many ways, this is much like gardening – we have to prepare the ground, plant the seed, and ensure that they are adequately watered and nourished – and then wait patiently for results.

The encouragement is therefore to approach this course with the same spirit of patience and persistence – committing yourself to put the time and effort into what will be asked of you, while accepting, with patience, that the fruits of your efforts may not show straight away.

The Practicalities of home practice

The meditations in this programme take only twenty minutes and should, ideally, be carried out once daily. It is up to you when you do them, but it is generally best to slot them in at the beginning or end of each day.

Most people find early morning is best, shortly after getting up. Other good times are immediately before lunch, or before the evening meal. This may mean that you have to rise a little earlier in the morning and, if you should do so, go to bed a little earlier too, so that the practice isn't carried out at the expense of sleep. Only you know your own natural cycles of alertness, sleepiness and suffering, so we'll leave it up to you to decide the best times.

Regularity is important too. It cuts down procrastination and allows you to schedule your day more efficiently. As the course progresses, you may also like to make your sessions a little longer - perhaps doing two meditations in a row in the morning or evening. But make sure you keep practising at least twenty minutes each day to maintain regularity.

If you are attending the group with someone that you live with, it will be helpful for you to discuss how you would like to practice, whether in the same room at the same time, at separate times, or perhaps at the same time in a different room. This may bring up thoughts and feelings for you in asking for someone to sit with you, or perhaps your own space to practice. We invite you to hold those thoughts and feelings kindly as you navigate this part of your practice.

Guidelines for doing the body scan

Regardless of what happens (falling asleep, losing concentration, being distracted by thoughts, emotions or other physical sensations, don't feel anything), just do it! These are your experiences in the moment. All you have to do is be aware of them, even if your mind is wandering a great deal. If you are distracted by wandering thoughts, emotions or other physical sensations, simply notice them as passing events, and then gently return to the instructions on the CD.

- Notice if you have ideas about 'success', 'failure', 'doing it really well', or 'trying to purify the body'. This is not a competition. It is not a skill that you are striving to perfect. The only discipline involved is regular and frequent practice. See if it's possible to cultivate an attitude of openness and curiosity about whatever you happen to experience during the body scan.
- Try approaching your experience in each moment with the attitude: 'Ok, that's just the way things are right now'. If you try to fight off unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or body sensations, this may only distract you from experiencing anything else.
- Notice if you have expectations about what the body scan will do for you; instead you might that you're planting a seed. The more you poke around and interfere, the less it will be able to develop. When you leave it to grow, this seed will eventually expand to become a life lived with more mindfulness, and the freedom to choose skilful behaviours.
- So with the body scan, you only have to give it the most helpful conditions: time that you set aside to devote to yourself and the body scan, privacy and quiet, and regular and frequent practice. The more you try to control the effects of the body scan, the less effective it will be.
- The most important guideline is: **just do it!**

Informal Practice for Week 1 - The Coffee Meditation

Coffee and tea are drinks that we take for granted, which makes them ideal for meditation. You can use this meditation to settle the mind before making a decision or simply to gain a glimpse of mindful awareness. Repeat it whenever you choose or do it with any drink at all.

- If you are making the drink yourself, look closely at the coffee grounds (or tea leaves). Really observe them. Spend a few moments letting your eyes soak up every detail. Observe how the light bounces off the grounds or leaves.
- Add the water. What can you hear? What can you smell? If you are buying your drink, soak up all of the sounds and smells of the café. Can you hear tinkling cups? The hiss of water? The chatter of other customers? Try to tune directly into your senses, rather than mentally describing the experience in words.
- If you are adding milk and sugar, watch how they dissolve. Does the smell change? Focus on the subtly different aromas.
- Take a sip. Coffee has thirty different flavours and tea has many more. See if you can sense some of them. Are there some bitter notes, sweet ones, sour ones...?
- Resist the temptation to gulp down that sip; instead, after a few moments, or when you feel that your taste buds have become saturated, swallow it. How does it feel? When you breathe in, how do your mouth and throat feel? Hot? Cold? Or hot followed by cold?
- Repeat the previous two steps with another sip of your drink. Carry on repeating this for five minutes or until you've finished your drink.

How do you feel? Is it different from normal? Did the drink taste better than if you had consumed it at your normal speed?

The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting their bad advice –
the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug at your ankles.
'Mend my life!'
each voice cried.
but you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried it's stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognised as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world
determined to do
the only thing you could do –
determined to save
the only life you could save.

*Mary Oliver, from Dreamwork
In New and Selected Poems, Beacon Press, Boston, 1992*

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