



STAFF MINDFULNESS-BASED WELLBEING PROGRAMME

WHY DO WE GET STUCK?

We all go through life with rises and fall in energy and mood. Often changes in mood can come out of the blue. One minute all is going well and we feel happy, but then something shifts and we start to feel a bit stressed. Life seems to have got a bit too busy and there's not quite enough time to fit everything in. We feel tired and edgy. Nothing has really changed, there have been no big life events, but somehow the joy has gone out of life and has been replaced by a general unease and dissatisfaction.

Most people, most of the time, snap out of these mood drops. But sometimes they can tip us into a tailspin that lasts for days, weeks, or months for no apparent reason.

Although persistent periods of stress and exhaustion seem to appear out of nowhere, in the 1990s and early 21st century our understanding of the mind and its processes during such episodes improved. With this understanding has come the realization that we can learn to work with our minds and bodies to 'step outside' of our troubles and free ourselves from unhappiness, stress, anxiety, exhaustion, and even depression.

Understanding emotion.

Emotions are bundles of thoughts, raw feelings, body sensations, and impulses to act. All these different elements interact subtly with each other, and each element can enhance or temper an overall mood.

Thoughts can influence moods, and moods can influence thoughts. The mind and body also share emotional information with one another: much of what the body feels is affected by thoughts and emotions, and what we feel in the body can impact our mood and thoughts. Have you ever noticed how when you feel stressed or worried the body tenses, or feels agitated or achy? Perhaps you are aware of how pain in the body triggers tension elsewhere, worried thoughts, or feelings of frustration or fear.

When you are chewing over a past event or stressing about the future, the feedback loops between mind and body can inadvertently perpetuate feelings of anxiety and stress. This is because the primeval part of the brain makes no distinction between an external threat (such as being chased by a lion) and an internal threat (such as a troubling memory or a future worry). The mind senses the body tensing and interprets the tension as a threat which then makes the body tense up even further. So, although the memory is just a memory, and the thoughts of the future are just speculation, the body reacts as if they were real and happening now.

We rarely experience one emotion on its own.

We rarely experience tension or sadness on their own. Anger, irritability, bitterness, jealousy, and hatred can all be bound up in an uncomfortable knot of pain and suffering.

Over a lifetime, these emotional bundles get ever more closely entwined with thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and even behaviour. If we trip one emotional switch the others can quickly ‘get online’ too. All of these can trigger habitual ways of thinking, behaving, and feeling that we sense are counter-productive but we just don’t seem to know how to stop. A slight emotional turbulence can be whipped into a mighty storm.

Gradually, the repeated triggering of negative thoughts and moods can wear ‘tracks’ into the mind. Over time these tracks get deeper and deeper, making it easier to set off negative self-critical thoughts, and low panicky moods. It also makes it harder to shake these thoughts and moods off – we literally get stuck in a rut. We start asking ourselves harsh questions like: *Why am I so unhappy? Where have I gone wrong? When will things get better?*

Sometimes dips in mood can disappear as quickly as they arrived. But at other times, the stress and fatigue or low mood seem particularly sticky, and nothing helps to get rid of them. It seems that the mind has switched to high alert and does not switch off again. Why does this happen?

Our reactions to anxiety, stress, fatigue, and dissatisfaction can transform what might otherwise be a brief, passing dip in mood into a more persistent downward spiral. Let’s look more closely at what’s going on here. We can distinguish three crucial stages:

Stage 1: Unhappiness, anxiety, stress, and fatigue arises.

Stage 2: The unhappy mood brings up negative thinking patterns, and feelings, and the mind trawls through memories from the past to try and explain why we feel this way. These are often memories of when we felt stressed, anxious, or unhappy in the past—and this makes us feel more unhappy.

Stage 3: We create scenarios of what might happen in the future if we cannot explain and change what is going on now. This adds to our felt sense of stress and tension.

New evidence from brain scans confirms that people who spend their days rushing around mindlessly, who find it difficult to stay in the present and get so focused on goals that they lose touch with the outside world, have an amygdala (the primeval part of the brain involved in fight or flight) that is on high alert all the time. When humans recall other threats and losses, as well as their ‘worrying’ current scenario, the body’s fight or flight systems tend to remain on high alert and do not switch off.

Two common but critical habits underly many emotional problems.

These are ways we try to get rid of unhappiness that actually keep it going and just make things worse.

1. A tendency to overthink, ruminate, or worry too much about some things
2. A tendency to avoid, suppress, or push away other things.

Ruminating just makes us feel even worse:

Our attempts to get rid of unhappiness by thinking our way out of it can deepen and prolong our sad moods. When you try to solve the problem of unhappiness (or any 'negative emotion') you deploy one of the mind's most powerful tools: rational critical thinking. It works like this:

You hold in mind, three ideas:

1. where you are at each moment (the current state)
2. where you want to be (your destination, goal, or desired outcome)
3. where you don't want to be (your non-destination or outcome you want to avoid)

The mind then analyses the 'gap' between where you are at the moment, where you would like to be, and what you are trying to avoid. To do this it uses its 'Doing Mode' – the problem-solving part of the mind.

Doing-Mode

The Doing-Mode of mind enables human beings to problem solve and get things done. We can achieve goals, innovate, go about daily tasks, and change things to make them more like we want them to be. By analysing the gaps between the current state, desired outcomes, and outcomes to avoid, the human mind has achieved some remarkable goals—from developing computers to building cities and putting a man on the moon!

The Doing-Mode of mind can time travel. When confronted by a challenge it thinks back: "Ah, I should have done this, or avoided that..." and it thinks forward: "What shall I do next, or how shall I fix this?"

The Seven Core Features of Doing Mode.

1. It often comes online automatically.
2. It uses thoughts and ideas, holding them in mind as you work.
3. It dwells in the past and future to help get where you want to be.
4. It keeps in mind what to avoid—where you don't want to end up.
5. It needs things to be different, always focusing on the gap between where you are and where you want to be.
6. It takes thoughts/ideas as real (it would not be useful to keep doubting your destination).
7. Left to itself, it continues to focus on the goal until the task is complete, or until you are too tired and depleted to continue. The demands of the doing mode can be quite harsh and unkind.

Unfortunately, the doing mode is not a useful strategy for dealing with our internal, emotional problems. But why not, why can't we problem-solve emotional pain?

The doing mode needs to keep in mind the gap between the kind of person we are and the kind of person we want to be. But this just reminds us how much we are falling short of where we feel we need to be, creating more unhappiness. Try saying these sentences to yourself two or three times:

"Why am I feeling so tired?"

"Why do I feel so anxious?"

"I don't want to feel like this."

"What's wrong with me?"

"What will happen if I can't shrug this off?"

What was your experience? You probably felt worse. Most people do.

Escaping the vicious cycle

When we are unhappy it is natural to try and work out why we are feeling like this, and to find a way to solve the problem of our unhappiness. But tension, unhappiness, and exhaustion aren't *problems* that can be solved. They are *emotions that reflect states of body and mind*. As such they cannot be *solved* - only *felt*. Once you've 'felt' them, that is 'acknowledged' their existence, and let go of the tendency to either get rid, suppress or explain them away, then these emotions are much more likely to dissipate and vanish of their own accord, quite naturally.

You can't stop the triggering of unhappy memories, negative self-talk or judgemental ways of thinking – but you can stop what happens next. You can stop the vicious cycle from feeding off itself and triggering the next cycle of negative thoughts. Mindfulness offers both a way to break the vicious cycle and to look at the world again with open eyes.

Through mindfulness we can learn to:

1. Recognize ruminative worry and driven–doing as they arise in our moment-by-moment experience and to see them for what they are.
2. Cultivate an alternative mode of mind that allows us to respond more skilfully to sadness, unhappiness, and other unpleasant emotions.
3. Cultivate a sense of quiet contentment and stability.

Through mindfulness practice, we begin to spend more time in 'being mode' and become more aware of when we are slipping back into the habits of 'driven-doing' mode.

'We are human beings not human doings.'

The Dalai Lama

Doing Mode and Being Mode

1. Living on “Automatic Pilot” versus Living with Conscious Awareness and Choice

IN DOING MODE we live on automatic pilot much of the time: we drive, walk, eat, even speak without clear awareness of what we are doing. Doing starts up automatically whenever there is a mismatch between where we are now and where we want to be. Focusing narrowly on our goals, we rarely stop and notice the wonder of what is happening around us as we move through our lives. We can end up missing much of our lives, forever postponing the time when life will be less hectic and we’ll really notice things again.

THE BEING MODE is intentional rather than automatic. This means we can choose what to do next, rather than run on old, worn-out habits. This allows us to see things as if for the very first time. We “reinhabit” the present moment and become fully conscious of our lives. Being brings a freshness to our perception. We become fully alive and aware again.

2. Relating to Experience through Thought versus Directly Sensing Experience

THE DOING MODE works on *ideas*—that’s what goals are. It thinks *about* the world in which we dwell, *about* the kind of person we are, *about* the feelings, sensations, and thoughts we have—thinking, thinking, thinking fills our minds much of the time. When we deal with a thought about life as if it were the “real thing,” we live one step back from life—we connect with life indirectly through a veil of thoughts that filters out the color, vibrancy, and energy of life.

IN BEING MODE we connect with life directly—we sense it, we experience it, we know it intimately by close acquaintance. We get a taste of the richness and ever-shifting wonder of the experience of life.

3. Dwelling on and in the Past and Future versus Being Fully in the Present Moment

IN DOING, we engage in mental time travel. Our minds go forward to the future—to our ideas of how we want things to be—or back to the past, to memories of similar situations, to see what guidance they can offer. In mental time travel we feel as though we are actually *in* the future or *in* the past. This disconnects us from experiencing the fullness of life in the present. We can easily wind up ruminating on the past, re-experiencing the pain of past losses and failures. Worrying about the future, we experience fear and anxiety over threats and dangers that may never happen.

IN BEING, the mind is gathered, here, now, in this moment, fully present and available to whatever the universe may offer. We can have thoughts about the future and memories of the past—but, crucially, we experience them as parts of our present experience. We witness them without being drawn into the past or future worlds the thoughts might otherwise create.

4. Needing to Avoid, Escape, or Get Rid of Unpleasant Experience versus Approaching It with Interest

IN DOING MODE the immediate, automatic reaction to any unpleasant experience is to set up a goal—to avoid the experience, to push it away, to get rid of it, or to destroy it. This reaction is called **aversion**. Aversion underlies all the thinking patterns that get us stuck in unwanted emotions.

IN BEING, the basic response is to **approach** all experience, even the unpleasant, with interest and respect.

There is no setting of goals for how things should be or should not be. Rather, there is a natural interest and curiosity in all experience—whether it is pleasant, unpleasant, or neither.

5. Needing Things to Be Different versus Allowing Things to Be Just as They Already Are

DOING is dedicated to **change**—to making things more like we think they should be, less like we think they shouldn't be. Always **focusing on the gap** between what is and what should be, we can have an underlying sense that we or our experiences are falling short in some way—we or they are just “not good enough.” This sense of unsatisfactoriness can quite easily turn into self-criticism and self-judgment. There is a basic lack of kindness to ourselves and our experience.

BEING brings with it an underlying attitude of “allowing” to ourselves and to our experience. There is no demand that experience fit in with our ideas of how it should be—being allows experience to be just as it already is. We can be content with experience, even if it feels unpleasant. We can be content with ourselves, even if, from the perspective of the doing mode, we are not all we should be. This radical acceptance embodies a basic attitude of unconditional kindness and goodwill.

6. Seeing Thoughts as True and Real versus Seeing Them as Mental Events

DOING MODE treats thoughts and ideas about things as if they were the same as the things themselves. But **the thought of a meal is not the meal itself**—a thought is just a mental event—very, very different from the reality of the experience it is about. If we forget this and treat thoughts as reality, then when we think “I'm a failure,” we can feel as if we had just *experienced* being a failure.

IN BEING, we experience thoughts as part of the flow of life—in just the same way we experience sensations, sounds, feelings, and sights. We cultivate the ability to experience thoughts **as thoughts**—as mental events that enter and leave the mind. With this shift, we rob thoughts of their power to upset us or to control our actions. When we see thoughts for what they are—just thoughts, nothing but passing mental events—we can experience a wonderful sense of freedom and ease.

7. Prioritizing Goal Attainment versus Sensitivity to Wider Needs

IN DOING MODE, we can become relentlessly focused on pursuing highly demanding goals and plans with a sort of tunnel vision, excluding everything else, including our own health and well-being. We may give up activities that nourish us to focus on what seems more important. Our inner resources can become depleted, leaving us feeling drained, listless, and exhausted.

IN BEING we remain sensitive to the wider picture. Aware of the costs of a narrow focus on reaching goals, we can balance achievement with a kind and compassionate concern for our own and others' well-being. We value the quality of the moment, rather than focusing only on the distant imagined goal.