

SESSION 2: ROLES - CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

It is useful to keep in mind the following four statements as we consider the themes of this session. They can help us respond more wisely to the everyday ups and downs of the workplace.

- **Work is a Mess - Fact**
- **Turn towards the Present Moment**
- **Tune into your Authentic Self**
- **Cultivate Integrity and Common Decency**

THE VOICES IN OUR HEADS

We are often caught up in an internal dialogue, a running commentary on what we think, feel and believe. It's the voice in our head that speaks of doubt, insecurity, fear and anxiety. If we aren't present and aware, these negative messages can drain a huge amount of our energy. They pull us away from what is actually happening in the here and now, and from our authentic true selves.

These thoughts and messages can be particularly prevalent at work, and they often encourage us to make judgements and comparisons. We might find ourselves thinking:

- I am not smart enough.
- I am too smart for this role.
- I don't have the right qualifications.
- I am over qualified for this role.
- I am not earning enough.
- I must not be too comfortable with this income, it might change.
- This role is too challenging for me.
- This role is too easy for me.
- They are smarter than me.
- They are earning more than me.
- I work harder than them.
- They make more mistakes than me.
- They manage things better than me.
- I am better than them
- People like them more than me.

Notice how you feel when you read the statements above. Do you feel present in the here and now or caught up in your head? Do you feel happier, energised and motivated? More than likely, you feel somewhat uncomfortable, unhappy and demotivated.

This is an interesting Cherokee parable about two wolves – A grandpa tells his grandson that there are two wolves inside all of us. One wolf is unkind – representing doubt, despair, jealousy, ego and other dark feelings, while the other wolf is kind – representing compassion, hope, empathy, humility etc. These two wolves are always fighting with each other. The grandson asks, “Grandpa, which wolf will win?”
Grandpa smiles and says, “The one you feed!”

If you focus on:

- who you aren’t
- what you don’t have
- the skills, knowledge and experience you think you are missing
- comparing yourself to other people’s successes and failures

You buy into storylines about yourself and others that might not be wholly true. These storylines are an obstacle to being happy and well, and also to being authentic and effective at work and allowing others to be authentic too.

‘Whatever you frequently think and ponder upon, that will become the inclination of your mind’ - the Buddha

Whilst it is important to bring appropriate attitudes, skills and knowledge to our roles, and to be paid a fair salary for the contribution we make, if we become preoccupied with our own stories about these we can lose sight of the wider picture.

If we gently let go of our preoccupation with job titles, status, qualifications and credentials, we create space for a wider view of our working world and to engage with curiosity, creativity, responsibility, and appreciation for others. This is true whether we are a CEO, manager, carer, cleaner, administrator, teacher or cook.

ROLE STRESS

We can easily get stuck in our various personal and professional roles. We may have little awareness of this, or if we do, we may feel helpless to break out of the rigid constraints the roles have imposed on our attitudes and behaviors. Roles can have a driving force of their own: patterns from the past, the way other people have done things, the expectations we hold for ourselves or that we think other people hold for us.

We can all have strong views about our situations, about what we do and how things should be done. These views are influenced by our beliefs about what can and cannot be done, what represents appropriate behaviour, what we would feel comfortable with, and what it means to be a _____ (you fill in the blank) mother, father, man, woman, husband, wife, son, daughter, success, executive, manager, worker, carer, team member.

Some roles are inherently challenging. However, often it is not the role itself but our relationship with it that makes it stressful. Our unexamined perceptions, views and expectations of the roles, ourselves and others influence our experiences at work.

We need to be cautious of identifying so strongly with one view or one feeling that it blinds us to seeing the full extent of what is actually happening. This can drive us to the point where our roles become prisons rather than opportunities for expressing our true selves and our wisdom.

The clash of multiple roles (including our work-life balance) and their pull in different directions is an ongoing stressor for many people. It must be acknowledged and worked with. A balance must be established. Without awareness of the potential dangers of role stress, the damage may be done long before you realize what is happening. This is one reason why there is so much friction between partners in families and between parents and young children, and adult children and their elderly parents.

“It is certainly possible to grow and change within our roles without abandoning them. But roles can become confining and can limit further growth if we lock ourselves or each other into them. If we bring awareness to our various roles, we will be more likely to

function effectively without getting stuck in them. We might even risk being ourselves in all our various roles.”

We can decide to bring an element of intelligent attention to our roles. We can practice seeing our own impulses to fall into habitual patterns and confining mind-sets. In those moments we can choose to gently let go and be open to the bigger picture.

WHEN THINGS GO WRONG

Because work is a mess, it is inevitable that we will make mistakes. Some mistakes are small and inconsequential. Others are big and can have far reaching serious consequences. If we do our jobs well, we limit our mistakes and don't intentionally mess up.

We don't like making mistakes because they:

- Create confusion and doubt
- Leave ourselves and colleagues feeling inadequate and embarrassed
- Slow us down
- Cost money
- Can cause harm to ourselves and others

At work, mistakes are often treated like enemies and as such, they can test our integrity and decency. We may try and distance ourselves from what has gone wrong rather than accept responsibility. Rather than turn towards the situation with precision and accountability, we blame or make excuses.

How might it be if we instead learn to respect mistakes at work, our own and those of others? How might it be if we allow workplace mistakes to be our teachers? How might it be if problems could be discussed discreetly and all points of view heard with interest and respect. Could we learn to treat facts as friends and allow them to improve our jobs and our workplace? This approach requires us all to pause, and to be fully with the detail and discomfort rather than to turn away and rush to move. This can be demanding but refreshing.

PRACTICES TO TRY

THE 3-STEP BREATHING SPACE

STEP 1. BECOMING AWARE

Becoming more aware of how things are in this moment by deliberately adopting an erect and dignified posture, whether sitting or standing and if possible, closing your eyes. Then bringing your awareness to your inner experience and acknowledging it, asking yourself:

- What body sensations are here right now?
- What moods and feelings are here?
- What thoughts are going through the mind?

STEP 2. GATHERING

Then re-directing your attention to focus on physical sensations associated with breathing. Bring the mind to settle on the breath, wherever you feel it most vividly. Tuning into these sensations for the full duration of the in-breath and the full duration of the out-breath. If the breath is not a neutral anchor for you, choose a more supportive bodily anchor such as the sensations in the bottom of your feet, or in the hands. Alternatively, focus on sounds coming and going around you.

STEP 3. EXPANDING

Then expanding the field of awareness around the breath, so that it includes a sense of the body, your posture and facial expression.

As best you can, bring this wider awareness to the next moments of your day.

The breathing space provides a way to step out of Automatic Pilot and reconnect with the present moment. Each time we do a breathing space we become aware of the breath, our bodies and our wider experience.

MINDFULNESS OF TEA DRINKING - ED HALLIWELL

Bringing mindfulness to simple activities like drinking tea trains us to direct attention consciously. By deliberately choosing to attend to an activity, we slow things down and let ourselves become aware of the process of paying attention and perhaps how little control we have of mind wandering.

By coming back repeatedly to the various aspects of tea-drinking, we are cultivating the capacity to focus. We practice this with gentleness, without judging ourselves or striving to reach some goal (even the goal of becoming better at paying attention).

Mindfulness means paying attention with the senses, in the body—feeling, touching, seeing, hearing, and tasting. Sensing always happens within the body and in the present moment, so this tuning in to sensing helps to bring us into the reality of here and now. Sensing mindfully allows us to experience what is actually happening, rather than what we think should happen. It's a chance to practice resting the analytical mind that habitually searches for solutions.

We are also practicing conscious choice. By watching how we make simple decisions—pouring water, disposing of a teabag, swallowing—we are bringing a deliberate awareness to activities that are often performed half-asleep, on automatic pilot.

Below are a few suggestions on how to practice mindful tea-drinking. Obviously, you can make and drink the tea in any way you like, or you can replace it with another drink or regular activity. The important thing is to let go into seeing, feeling, tasting, touching, and hearing, and to return gently to the senses whenever you notice the mind straying into thought.

1. Pay attention to the sound of the water heating and boiling in the kettle. Can you see wisps of steam coming from the spout? Does the kettle subtly shake from the movement of the water inside? Be open to your senses, rather than try to analyze what's happening.
2. Notice the feeling of being in your environment: your bottom's contact with the chair or the floor, if you're sitting down; the weight of your feet on the ground, if you're standing.
3. Pouring the tea, watch the colour of the water change as it meets the teabag. Be interested in the transformation from clear water to tea. When your mind wanders into thought, as it probably will, gently return your attention to sensing.
4. Lifting the teabag out with a spoon, feel the touch of the handle against your fingers, and the weight of the bag dropping away as you tip it into the bin. Let yourself hear any related sounds, such as the opening and closing of the bin lid. Notice any tendency to do this on autopilot, and come back to present-moment sensing when you find you've drifted to distraction.

5. If you take milk and sugar, be interested in how you feel as you reach for and add these ingredients to the brew.
6. Notice the warming of the cup. How do your hands feel as you hold it?
7. Now, bring the cup to your lips. Be interested in how your hand and arm know how to move in this direction without you having to tell them consciously what to do.
8. Take a sip of tea. Rather than gulping it down, see if you can let the taste tickle your tongue. Perhaps gently move the liquid around your mouth. Savor the taste—is it pleasant? Or perhaps you'd prefer it stronger or weaker? Just be aware of your sensations and the liking or disliking of them. If there are thoughts, let them enter into and then pass through your mind without following them. Try to stay with the tasting. Notice without judgement any desire to rush the drinking, and any impatience that comes.
9. When you decide to swallow the tea, notice how that decision is made. Is it a conscious choice, or does it happen automatically? Stay present to the swallowing, the reflex movements in the back of the mouth and the throat, the trickle of liquid down into the stomach. How does it feel to be swallowing?
10. Notice how the liquid seems to disappear. Is there a point when the tea stops being separate from you? When and how do you recognize that moment?
11. Pause now, noticing any feelings of irritation, or thoughts such as: Hurry up, I've got better things to do. Or perhaps a sense of peace or stillness enters you. If so, where do you feel it? Is it changing from moment to moment, or staying the same? Maybe there's something else going on in your mind and body, perhaps unrelated to the tea-drinking, pulling you into thoughts of the past or the future. If so, just notice it. Whatever comes up in your experience is okay —there's no right or wrong thing to notice.
12. Take a look around you, opening your eyes to your surroundings without buying into evaluations about them. Just be aware of any thoughts or feelings that come up.
13. Now, return your attention to the cup of tea in your hand. (Has the temperature dropped?) Watch as you decide when to begin the process of taking another sip. Continue drinking the tea until the cup is empty, or you decide to stop drinking. If the latter, be curious about what is prompting that decision. Whatever you choose to do in each moment, try to watch the experience from an engaged observer's perspective.

You don't have to follow these steps like a strict to-do list. The key is to open yourself to the spirit of the practice, sensing with gentle precision what's happening, moment by moment, and coming back to sensing whenever you notice you've drifted into thought.

MOUNTAIN MEDITATION - Elaine Smookler

This week, we explored the Mountain Meditation, a practice aimed at grounding us in the present moment. With an upright and dignified posture, reminiscent of a mountain's enduring presence, we embodied the mountain's steadfast calm amidst the swirling winds and shifting clouds of life.

You can try this any time you wish to ground and steady yourself. Now, let's begin our Mountain Meditation.

1. **Begin by sensing the support under you.** Whether you're sitting here, standing up or lying down, notice the sensations of contact—with the chair, the floor, or your bed. And bringing your attention to feeling your feet. Notice sensations in the legs, the hips, the lower body, the upper body, your arms, shoulders, neck, and head.
2. **Allowing your eyes to close, bring attention to the natural rhythm of your in breath and out breath.** With each outbreath, invite a sense of feeling more grounded and connected. Letting the shoulders drop. Relaxing the belly. Feeling present.
3. **Now bring to your mind's eye the most majestic mountain that you can imagine.** See its lofty peaks, its rolling green, its fragrant, loamy grandeur. Maybe your mountain has streams, waterfalls, snow-covered tops, meadows, or lakes. Observe it all, noticing its qualities.
4. **When you feel ready, see if you can bring a sense of the mountain into your own body.** What we mean here is allowing yourself to feel its massiveness and its stillness as though it were a part of your own body. Your head becomes the lofty peak. Your shoulders and arms, the sides of the mountain. Your buttocks and legs, the solid base, rooted to your cushion or your chair or your bed. And so on.

5. **With each breath, become a little more of a breathing mountain.** You can even say these words to yourself. *Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain. Breathing out, I feel calm and stable. Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain. Breathing out, I feel calm and stable. Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain. Breathing out, I feel calm and stable.*
6. **As a mountain, notice how thoughts and emotions come and go like weather.** If you're a mountain, it isn't personal. Everything comes and goes. *Breathing in, I see and feel myself as a mountain. Breathing out, I feel calm and stable. Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain. Breathing out, I feel calm and stable.* Feel what it is to embody this grounding quality, the grandeur and presence of a mountain.
7. **Taking one more breath together, say again:** *Breathing in, I see myself as a mountain. Breathing out, I feel calm and stable.* And on an outbreath, bring this sense of presence and grounding in connection to the next moments of our day.

TAKING CARE OF CHALLENGING THOUGHTS

WHEN YOU BECOME AWARE OF DIFFICULT THOUGHTS

During your working day, when you become aware of negative thoughts, you may wish to hold the thoughts in a gentle, interested awareness, and consider the following:

Perhaps I am treating a thought like a fact?

Perhaps I am jumping to conclusions?

Perhaps I am thinking in black-and-white terms?

Perhaps I am condemning myself totally because of one thing?

Perhaps I am concentrating on my weaknesses and forgetting my strengths?

Perhaps I am blaming myself for something that isn't my fault?

Perhaps I am judging myself?

Perhaps I am setting unrealistically high standards for myself, so that I will fail? Perhaps I am mind reading/crystal ball gazing?

Perhaps I am expecting perfection?

Perhaps I am overestimating disaster?

As best you can, bring an attitude of gentle interest to your thoughts.

WAYS YOU CAN RELATE TO YOUR THOUGHTS DIFFERENTLY

When we sit quietly to pause and meditate, the mind can get very busy with trains of thoughts coming and going, drifting and spiralling. This is quite natural, and we do not need to battle to rid our mind of the thoughts, images and words that arise. Instead, we can practise relating skilfully to thoughts, both the pleasant and unpleasant.

1. Try watching thoughts arrive and leave, without feeling that you have to follow them. You could practise viewing them as buses that come along and want to take you for a ride. Anchoring your attention in the breath or body is a way to stay on the pavement rather than getting on the bus, or to get off the bus if you notice you have been carried away. We don't have to get rid of difficult thoughts... we can just practise letting them come and go.
2. Try viewing your thoughts as images or words generated by the mind rather than actual facts. Thoughts are always a representation of a situation rather than situation itself. It's good to remember that if we're in a troubled mood, tired, uncomfortable or unwell, we're probably perceiving a situation clearly but rather through 'blurred eyes'.
3. Relate to thoughts as you would sounds: let them come, stay awhile and then go. A sound is just a sound, and a thought is just a thought - without physical form we can hold onto.
4. Notice and label repetitive thought patterns very simply as "judging", "planning", "worrying", "catastrophising" rather than getting caught up in the detail.
5. Consider 'what are your current top ten thoughts?' When they arise, simply say to yourself, 'ah, it is one of those thoughts again!'
6. Write difficult or repetitive thoughts down on paper. This lets you see them in a way that is less emotional and overwhelming. In addition, the pause between having the thought and writing it down gives time to unhook from complete belief in the storyline.
7. You might be able to notice some underlying feelings that are 'giving birth to' the difficult thoughts and you may also notice some associated body sensations. See if it's possible to bring a kind and interested awareness to these feelings and sensations.
8. For particularly difficult thoughts, it may be helpful to take another look at them intentionally, in a balanced, open state of mind when this feels available to you. In your calmest moments, how do you view this thought or situation? What does your 'wise mind' have to say about this?