



SESSION 1: AWARENESS AND AUTOMATIC PILOT

A DEFINITION OF MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness is the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally, to things as they are.

—WILLIAMS, TEASDALE, SEGAL, AND KABAT-ZINN (2007)

SUMMARY OF SESSION 1

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”. Events around us and thoughts, feelings, and sensations in the mind (of which we may be only dimly aware) can trigger old habits of thinking that are often unhelpful and may lead on to worsening mood.

By becoming more aware of our thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, from moment to moment, we give ourselves the possibility of greater freedom and choice; we do not have to go down the same old “mental ruts” that may have caused problems in the past.

The aim of this program 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 focus of attention, over and over again.

To begin with, we brought awareness to eating a raisin, bringing our full attention to the experience to explore how to step out of automatic pilot. We then brought our awareness to different parts of the body, using these to anchor our awareness in the moment. We will also be training ourselves to place our attention and awareness in different places at will. This is the aim of the body scan exercise, which forms the main home practice exercise for next week.

ATTITUDES SUPPORTING MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

Non-judging

“These judgements of mind tend to dominate our minds and make it hard for us ever to find any peace” - judgement and rejection of experience is extremely common. “Being with” whatever arises requires gentleness, kindness and often the encouragement of a group environment.

Patience

“To be patient is simply to be completely in each moment, accepting it in its fullness”. To keep bringing the mind back again to the breath, back to sensation of body requires tremendous patience and perseverance. This is the working ground of a meditation practice.

Beginner’s mind

“Too often we let our thinking and our beliefs about what we ‘know’ prevent us from seeing things as they really are”. Approaching each meditation as if it were your first time, building from “the ground up” from the body, contacting the breath, asking of yourself “what is really happening now” are hallmarks of beginner’s mind.

Trust

Learning to trust one’s own experience, feelings and intuition — loosening oneself from the tyranny of authority and inner harsh judgement — has the “taste of freedom

Non-striving

“Almost everything we do, we do for a purpose, to get something or somewhere. But in meditation, this attitude can be a real obstacle” The tendency to “driven-ness” in our culture and society has enabled us to enjoy unprecedented standards of living, comfort and security. However, “driven-ness” has resulted in extraordinary levels of stress and ‘unsatisfactoriness’. Within this context, the attitude of “non-striving” is best understood as not straining or forcing for a result. Loosening up expectations of our meditation practice can be both challenging and liberating.

Acceptance

“You have to accept yourself as you are, before you can really change” This attitude is about attending to one’s experience with clarity and kindness, an essential foundation of meditation practice. Whereas a formal kindness meditation is not taught within the course material, this quality is inferred to within all the course content.

Letting go

“Cultivating the attitude of letting go, or non-attachment, is fundamental to the practice of mindfulness” The tendency to want to hold on to what is pleasant in our experience and to reject what is unpleasant, is usually an automatic response sometime known as being on autopilot. To be asked to neither hold onto, nor to reject experience, is a challenging principle of MBSR and MBCT courses.

References

“The seven attitudinal factors of mindfulness “constitute the major pillars of mindfulness practice”

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2004 edition), Full Catastrophe Living; How to cope with stress, pain and illness using Mindfulness Meditation. (Piatkus)

HOME PRACTICE FOR THE WEEK FOLLOWING SESSION 1

1. Do the body scan exercise six times before we meet again. You can choose between the longer 40-minute body scan or the shorter 20-minute or 15-minute body scan. Don't expect to feel anything in particular from doing the practice. In fact, give up all expectations about it. Just let your experience be your experience. Don't judge it, just keep doing it, and we'll talk about it next week. Record on the Home Practice Record Form each time you do the practice. Also, make a note of anything that comes up in the home practice so that we can talk about it at the next meeting.
2. Choose one routine activity in your daily life and make a deliberate effort to bring moment-to-moment awareness to that activity each time you do it, just as we did in the raisin exercise. Possibilities include waking up in the morning, brushing your teeth, showering, drying your body, getting dressed, eating, driving, taking out the rubbish, shopping, and so forth. Simply zero in on *knowing what you are doing as you are actually doing it*
3. Eat at least one meal "mindfully" in the way that you ate the raisin.

WHAT IS THE INTENTION OF THESE PRACTICES?

THE BODY SCAN PRACTICE can...

- Reconnect us with our bodies. The body is both a sensitive emotional radar and an amplifier for our emotions. By learning to pay attention, read, and understand the messages from our bodies we can become more attuned to this early warning system for unhappiness, anxiety, and stress.
- Offer an alternative way to experience the moment. People who have been depressed, stressed, or anxious often try to think their way out of their troubling feelings. The body scan offers an alternative - moving our attention from being in the 'head' and 'thinking about our experience', to being in the body and 'sensing our experience.'
- Develop concentration, calmness, flexibility of attention and mindfulness, gentleness and curiosity.
- Enable us to notice the chatterings of the mind and its wandering as a normal experience.
- Provide a backdrop against which we can begin to notice the 'doing mode' of mind and associated feelings – thinking about the practice, thinking about a body part, feeling a sense of irritation, boredom, urgency, wanting to get on.

THE RAISIN PRACTICE and MINDFUL EATING PRACTICES can...

- Enable us to notice the contrast between mindful awareness and automatic pilot.
- Enable us to observe things we had not noticed before or had forgotten. We begin to get 'our moment's worth'.
- Transform an experience. We can discover new ways of relating to what is happening moment-by-moment.
- Provide a backdrop against which we can begin to notice feelings – a sense of irritation, boredom, urgency, wanting to get on.
- Enable us to notice the chatterings of the mind and its wandering as a normal experience.

MINDFULNESS OF EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES can...

- Bring the practice of mindfulness into our everyday lives. This is important because that is where we need it. It is easy to go about our daily activities and mindlessly slip into daydreaming and problem-solving. However, daydreaming is the first cousin of rumination.
- Enable us to notice the contrast between mindful awareness and automatic pilot
- Enable us to gently wake up to our experience of life, and know what we are doing as we are doing it.
- Provide us with a way to immediately switch modes of mind – shifting from doing to being – making it harder for low mood, anxiety and stress to take root.

TIPS FOR THE BODY SCAN

1. Regardless of what happens, "just do it!" (e.g. if you fall asleep, lose concentration, keep thinking of other things, keep focusing on the wrong bit of body, not feeling anything). These are your experiences in the moment, just be aware of them.
2. If your mind is wandering a lot, simply note the thoughts (as passing events) and then bring the mind gently back to the Body Scan.
3. Let go of ideas of "success", "failure", "doing it really well", or "trying to purify the body". This is not a competition. It is not a skill you need to strive for. The only discipline involved is regular and frequent practice. Just do it with an attitude of openness and curiosity.
4. Let go of any expectations about what the Body Scan will do for you: Imagine it as a seed you have planted. The more you poke around and interfere, the less it will be able to develop. So with the Body Scan, just give it the right conditions - peace and quiet, regular and frequent practice - that is all. The more you try and influence what it will do for you, the less it will do.
5. Try approaching your experience in each moment with the kindly attitude: "OK, that's just the way things are right now". If you try to fight off unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or body sensations, they will only distract you from doing anything else. Be aware, be non-striving, be in the moment, see things clearly, just do it.

AN MBCT PATIENT'S EXPERIENCE

This patient had been hospitalized for depression 4 years before, after which her husband and children left her. There had been no further contact except through lawyers. She had become very depressed and lonely, although she had not been in the hospital again. She was now over the worst of her depression and started to use the body scan exercise to help prevent her mood from deteriorating. These were her comments looking back after 8 weeks:

“For the first 10 days, it was like a burden. I kept ‘wandering off’ and then I would worry about whether I was doing it right. For example, I kept having flights of fantasy. My mind was all over the place. I tried too hard to stop it, I think.

“Another problem at the start was him saying, ‘Just accept things as they are now.’ I thought that was totally unreasonable. I thought to myself, ‘I can’t do that.’

“Eventually, I just put the audio tracks on and expected to go off into a realm of thoughts. I didn’t worry if concerns came in. Gradually the 40 minutes passed without me losing him and from then on, the next time was more effective.

“After 10 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 up the audio tracks 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.

“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.’

“It’s not something you can do half a dozen times. It’s got to be a daily thing. It becomes more real the more that you try it. I began to look forward to it.

“If people have got to structure the time for the 45 minutes for their recordings, it may be easier to structure other things in their life as well. The recordings would prove an impetus.”

HOME PRACTICE RECORD FORM

You can record each time you practice on this form or use your own diary/journal. Make a note of anything that comes up in the home practice so that we can talk about it at the next meeting.

Day/date	Practice (Yes/No)	Comments: Discoveries, Delights, Difficulties?
Saturday	Body scan: Everyday mindfulness:	
Sunday	Body scan: Everyday mindfulness:	
Monday	Body scan: Everyday mindfulness:	
Tuesday	Body scan: Everyday mindfulness:	
Wednesday	Body scan: Everyday mindfulness:	
Thursday	Body scan: Everyday mindfulness:	
Friday	Body scan: Everyday mindfulness:	