

Perspective

Learning New Ways of Knowing and Being

Learning mindfulness starts with the foundational skill of gathering our scattered minds and stabilizing our attention. This awareness and stability helps us to see and recognize the climate of our minds and bodies – perhaps a sense of tension or ease, excitement or fear, focus or reverie, for example. Our experience is normally first registered in one of our senses (hearing, seeing, touch, other body sensations). But our minds very quickly and automatically integrate this to try to make sense of what is happening. Mindfulness helps us to see this unfolding process more clearly. One of the most important insights is that there are different ways of knowing and being, sometimes called different modes of mind.

Perhaps the most familiar mode for many of us is when we *think about* what's happening and use words and images to describe it. In this mode we represent our experience with words and ideas. This is excitement or fear, for example. I'll call this "***thinking mode.***" This extraordinary mode enables us to be creative, plan, and have a rich set of personal memories. We can re-create the world in imagination. As a species it has enabled us to send humans into space, create the complex digital technologies that are part of everyday life, write novels, create historical narratives and produce political manifestos. It's what has enabled us the progress that means we have a much better change of living into old age and it is what we'll use to address the challenges of climate change. As individuals thinking mode is what helps us to plan, get educated, get a job, learn from our mistakes, and so on.

While a great asset, thinking mode of mind can also be a liability. For example, emotional and relationship problems are sometimes made worse by our over-thinking and attempts to *solve* them with our thinking mind. These problems often need something else, careful listening, empathy and good communication, for example. Thinking mode can also

create problematic thinking loops, where we beat ourselves up for failing to meet goals, where we worry about things that may or may not happen, where we fantasize about the sort of person we want to be, and so on and so on. Besides, there are dimensions of our lives that are not helped by thinking, making love and simple appreciation of nature, to give just two examples.

There is another mode of being in which we experience the world more directly, in the present moment, with all its detail and richness; be that our inner world of sensations, moods, impulses or thoughts, or; our outer world. In this mode experiences unfold moment-to-moment without being elaborated by thinking about them or turning them into words or ideas. A sensation is simply a sensation, a mood a mood, an impulse an impulse, a thought a thought. I'll call this "*experiential mode*." This mode is available to us in any moment. We can gather our minds, stabilize our attention and choose to step into this experiential mode (Box below).

Box. Mindfulness Practice: Noting the Mind and Body's Climate

Pause just now and turn your attention inward. Can you sense the climate of your mind just now. Does it feel busy, still, focused, scattered ...? Just noting the state of your mind in this moment, no need to change anything, simply noting your state of mind. Now turn your attention to your body, maybe scanning your body from your feet, up through your legs, pelvis, torso, hands, arms, shoulders, neck and head. Noting any sensations in the body, whether they are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. Again, no need to try to change anything, simply noting any sensations in your body. Being with whatever you become aware of in your mind and body. Is there any overall sense in this moment, for example of calm or agitation, safety or being on edge, resting in the moment or impatience?

We share this rich experiential mode with other species. It provides us with information about changes in our internal and external world; cues about safety, satiety, energy/fatigue and so on. This makes sense because in our evolutionary history we had to continually register and respond to key cues in our world that enable us to adapt in ways that help us survive. In this mode we have learned throughout our lives what to do to keep safe, to ensure we drink and eat enough, and to stay connected with others. Can we stay as we are or do we need to move to safety; should we eat or drink, or are we sated; should we rest, or can we be active; are we with people we can trust, or do we need to be alert to possible threats from the people around us? This is as true for us as any social animals - a group of gazelles in the African savannah, a pack of wolves in Siberia or a family of ravens. The minds of these other social species have evolved in much the same way to scan their internal and external world and adapt in every moment to ensure they remain safe, watered, fed, connected to their “family” unit and so on.

We tend to give our thinking mind a lot of importance and it is important. But our experiential mode of mind provides information about safety, connection, satiety and so on; which is also important. If we learn to really tune in and listen to this information it can be reliable and invaluable. The experiential mode also allows us to savor many positives in life. For example, the sun on our face, the way music, or art more generally makes us feel, the touch of a loved one, the taste of food. It can also powerfully connect us to negative emotions, sensations and experiences, of physical pain or emotions like anger and fear. This can be difficult; but provides an important source of information to guide wise action. Because it has evolved to support our survival, experiential mode is quite good at making sense of social situations, providing us with a sense of the dynamics of our social group, for example.

On the other hand, experiential mode is not suited to helping us with situations or problems that need planning or analysis. Also, in the midst of a very challenging situation it can be over-whelming to be in touch with our bodies and minds – as the saying goes, if the room is on fire we need to just get out as fast as possible. Also, individuals with histories of mental health problems and/or trauma may have understandably learned to avoid this mode of mind because it brings to mind strong negative memories and emotions, which may be over-whelming.

Mindfulness develops a real familiarity with these modes of mind, we can really recognize the landscape of our minds and bodies. We can know when we're in thinking or experiencing modes of mind, or maybe a mixture of the two. This is the ability to stand back from our experience. It is a deliberate stance, in which we choose to step back and take a different *perspective*. It is as though we can step into a hot air balloon and look down on our lives. Crucially, from this perspective, we are able to see experiences, sensations as sensations, moods as moods, impulses as impulses, thoughts as thoughts. Rather than be carried away by our experience, we're able to see sensations, moods, impulses, thoughts and images come and go.

It is a perspective from which we can ask, "Where is it skillful to place my attention, and how?" By taking this different perspective we have the option to stop and ask, "Is this helpful?" The space that is created makes it possible for people to take this decentered perspective. From this perspective it is more possible to can sit with difficult thoughts or experiences that may previously have tripped into automatic, understandable reactions or just felt overwhelming. It is a space in which it is possible to choose how to respond in any given moment, a theme we will return to later.

Each of these modes of mind is a way of being that serves us in different ways, helping us to make sense of and navigate our way through the world. We'll introduce a

mindfulness practice that supports us in any moment to pause, recognize what's happening, stabilize ourselves, and create the possibility to intentionally choose which mode will best serve us in that moment. This is a mindfulness skill that can be very powerful because it opens up a sense of choice and freedom in any moment.

Box. Mindfulness Exercise: The Breathing Space

Step 1. Becoming Aware

Become 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 redirecting your attention to focus on physical sensations associated with breathing. Bringing 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.

Step 3. Expanding

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

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

Note. Adapted from Teasdale, Williams and Segal (2014, p. 183).

Key points

The Breathing Space can help us in a number of important ways. We are able to gather our minds, whatever state our minds are in – scattered, frantic, agitated, sleepy, alert ... We become better and better at recognizing and labelling our experiences, be that sensations in our body, moods, impulses or thoughts. We learn that we can always “anchor” our attention. We learn which anchors work best at different times. We learn that the body is always available as an anchor, sometimes the best anchor is the feet, sometimes the hands, sometimes the breath, it depends. We learn to intentionally shift out of autopilot and between thinking and experiential modes of mind. Finally, the Breathing Space is always available as a way to recognize, allow, anchor ourselves and step back from what is happening.

Taking care of ourselves, taking care of others. One of the most important lessons we learn when we become more aware, is the current state of our bodies and minds. Our cell phones have battery indicators, when they’re low we charge them. Modern cars have alarms telling us when to get them serviced, when we’ve forgotten to put on our seat belts, when the oil level is low, and so on. Mindfulness enables us to better read these indicators for our minds and our bodies. It can help us to know when our minds and bodies need something and as we become more attuned, what is needed (See Box below).

Box. Self-care

Psychologists know quite a lot about what supports our well-being, and it’s not rocket science. Well-being is maintained by:

- **Adequate sleep,**
- **A healthy diet,**
- **Exercise,**

- **Positive social connections and,**
- **Doing things that give us a sense of accomplishment and that we enjoy.**

In the same way we “practice” a sport or a musical instrument to get better at it, we can practice doing what supports our well-being. We can find ourselves making excuses, “I don’t have time,” “it’s self-indulgent.” But that’s like saying I don’t have time to charge my phone battery or fuel my car. We too need to charge our battery and fuel ourselves - it is foundational for us to live our lives.

It is key to ask ourselves the questions, “What keeps my mind and body healthy?” (See Box above) and “How can I make this self-care a part of my life?” Even though some of these ideas are really simple, the changes to make it part of our life are not. Good sleep habits are an example of this, sleep is one of the most important things we can do to take care of ourselves.

Choosing to shift our attention intentionally between pleasant, unpleasant and neutral experiences. I’ve introduced the idea of Velcro and Teflon mind. I invite you to start noticing your own particular tendencies. What are you most likely to get stuck on and what are you least likely to savor. I’ve introduced the Breathing Space as a way of intentionally pausing, anchoring and becoming aware.

Throughout our day, using the Breathing Space, we can start to recognize small moments that the mind labels, automatically and very quickly – “ah, that’s pleasant,” or “ah that’s unpleasant.” If we can bring awareness to these moments we see how automatically and quickly Teflon and Velcro mind can set in. Mindfulness training involves a certain orientation of mind, discipline and rigorous honesty. We are learning to bring awareness to

very quick, automatic processes, to lift our gaze beyond what we normally notice, to see all that is pleasant and right in any moment and in our lives. We are choosing to recognize, allow and savor these moments. A cup of coffee or tea, the smile of a stranger, the kindness of someone at home or at work, a task completed, a show on TV that we enjoy, the feeling after exercising, the smell and taste of good food, dawn, dusk, the sun breaking through the clouds, and so on.

When we encounter everyday pleasant experiences, it is a small step to bring attention intentionally to seeing, touching and listening more wholeheartedly – to really feel the breeze on the skin, hear the laughter of friends, the touch of a lover. By bringing attention to these bodily sensations, moods, impulses, thoughts and images, they can be savored and enjoyed. For example, I always love standing in the arrival hall of an airport, train or bus station, watching people being reunited. It's a great way to see the pleasure of being reunited, the sense of people being together again having been separated, the connection that comes from a hug or a kiss. Mindfulness can open us up to experiencing more of our lives in this way, really alive to moments of joy.

Key points

As soon as we become more aware of and able to discriminate pleasant and unpleasant moments we can begin to rebalance our attention. This is a launch pad for taking better care of ourselves. If it is true that with our attention we create the world of our experience, this rebalancing is a profound skill because we potentially start reshaping our minds and our experience of the world. We can start to dismantle the tendencies towards Teflon and Velcro attention. We start to recognize, allow and be with pleasant and unpleasant experiences with curiosity, friendliness and care.

The Breathing Space is a way of gathering our attention, creates a pause and different perspective. We learn that we have access to both thinking and experiential modes of mind,

which can serve us at different times and in different ways. In time we can learn to use them to better care for ourselves and to re-orient ourselves towards appreciation and joy.