

## **SESSION FOUR: MINDFULNESS OF THOUGHTS AND THE CHOICE TO ENGAGE OR DISENGAGE**

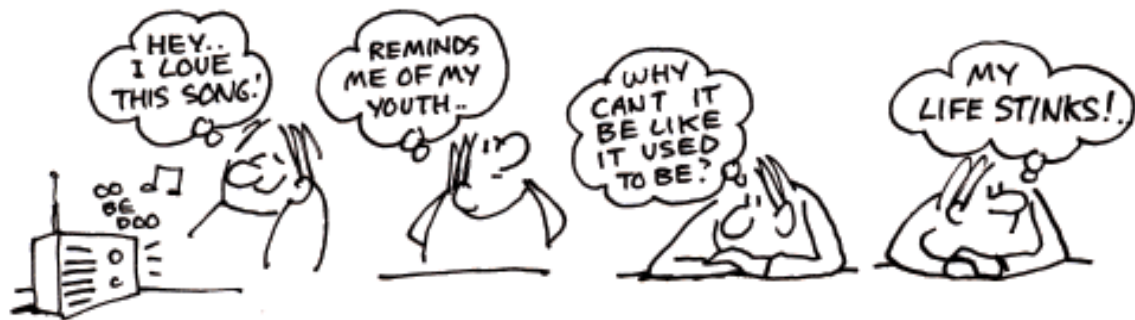
This session involves developing awareness of thinking, and how thinking can be both helpful and unhelpful on the path of freedom. Firstly a reactive stress spiral will be described as having thoughts, emotions, behaviours and physical sensations. Then, the nature of destructive thinking patterns will be highlighted and two different ways of dealing with unwanted thoughts and unhelpful thinking patterns will be explored. The first way involves changing what we think. The second way involves using mindfulness to change the way we relate to thoughts and thinking patterns. When we use mindfulness and curious investigation with thoughts, wisdom arises. With wisdom it is possible to transform our relationship to unhelpful thoughts and thinking patterns and reduce the struggle and suffering with them.

### **Thinking**

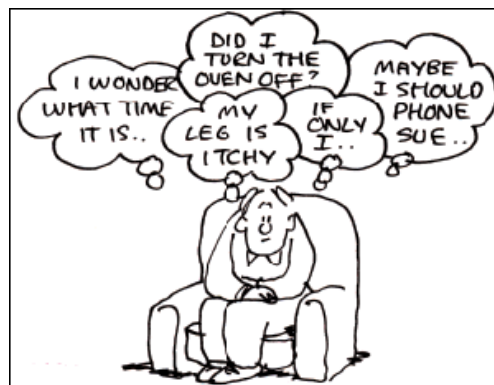
“Thinking” can have many meanings. The types of thinking and thought processes discussed in this session include: imagery, stories, memory or messages expressed either with words (verbal) or pictures (visual). These types of thoughts may include what seems like random and unrelated images or words or it may include trains of thought that appraise evaluate, compare, judge and comment. These types of thoughts are like we are talking or having discussions with ourselves. Sometimes people become completely stuck in their heads thinking about life rather than experiencing it.



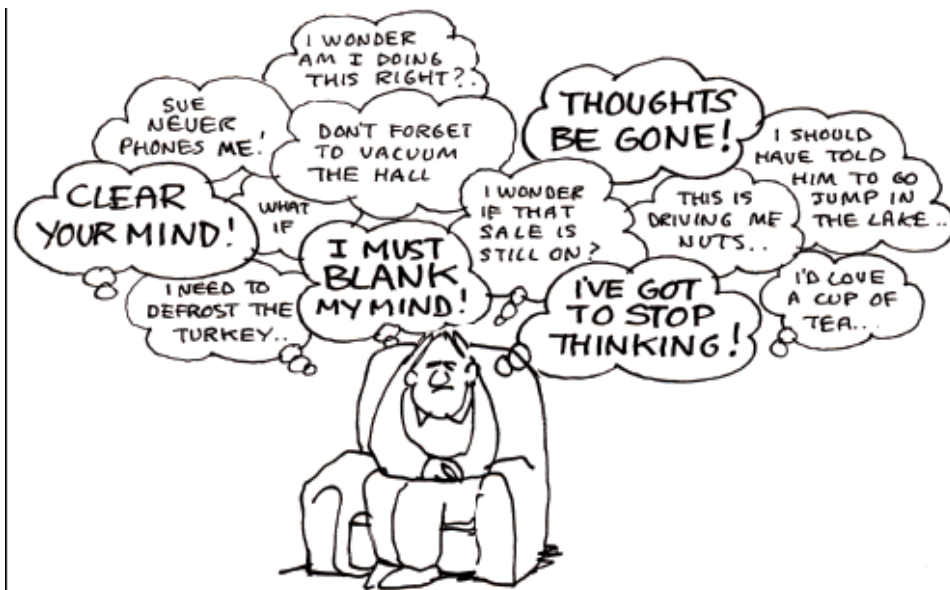
Thoughts can be a part of vicious destructive cycles that can also include emotions, behaviours and the way our body feels. Sometimes the types of thoughts that lead to us feeling miserable or unnecessarily anxious are called toxic thoughts because of their debilitating impact.



Sometimes thoughts seem to get out of control.



And the more we try to stop them or blank the mind the more they grow and grow.....



## Mindful Investigation

According to meditation teachers, the ability to investigate helps to dispel confusion (Pandita, 1992). Investigation can involve realistic and logical discursive enquiry, like we are talking wisely to ourselves about the truth of something. Investigation can also involve curious and penetrative questioning that is not discursive. The latter type of enquiry involves penetrative insight into the nature of the object being investigated. This type of enquiry is not the same as being lost in thinking about something. It refers to contemplating, with clarity the nature of phenomena including that which we call our self. Contemplating something can involve tracking changes so that we get a clear picture of the phenomena we are tracking. Helpful enquiry often involves looking at cause and effect, action and consequence relationships. Helpful

investigation often involves asking WHAT is happening and HOW it is happening. When we ask WHAT is happening, it could involve subjective experiences such as hearing and sounds, thoughts, sensations or states of mind. Sometimes as we are asking WHAT and HOW we may also discover reasons for things arising. Generally, however, mindful investigation does not ask the question WHY. Though asking the question WHY something has arisen is sometimes very helpful, such questioning can often get entangled in inaccurate interpretations, misconstructions and unhelpful blaming. Thus, such questioning is not generally followed.

Sitting mindfully with thoughts often clarifies any underlying deeper fears or beliefs



Mindfulness and investigation work together. Mindfulness includes noticing what is happening and how it changes. Mindfulness and investigation cultivate wisdom because we learn about the types of actions that lead to being entangled in anguish, anxiety and depression and the types of actions of body, speech and mind that lead to happiness and being free.

When we bring attention to present moment experience we may also notice how the experience changes and what factors are related to the change. If thoughts are the object of mindfulness, then we can notice how "thinking" changes and also notice the factors related to the arising and passing of the thought, such as triggers or associated emotions.

When we are calm, it is possible to purposely explore or investigate thoughts in an objective manner. Initially it best to begin with only short periods of time (such as 5-10 minutes), because it is very easy to lose an objective perspective with thoughts where we get entangled with the stories. When we get entangled and enmeshed we may lose a perspective that leads to knowing and understanding our experience. With practise it is possible to maintain longer periods of time of observation and investigation without getting lost and hijacked. With distressing thoughts and emotions, you can use curious investigation to ask yourself, “What is really happening here?” or “What is the truth of these thoughts?” or “What is the connection between thoughts and emotions?”, or “How do I behave when I am hijacked by this particular emotion?” or “How does this experience change?” or “What triggered these thoughts?” or “What are the underlying states or mind related to these thoughts and how do I experience these states” and so on. With curious enquiry it is very important that we bring a quality of open minded kindness and care to what we are investigating. When we bring kind enquiry to our experience we generally get to know this experience. Sometimes this can resolve day to day problems we may have been mulling over. It can also go deeper so that we discover more fundamental characteristics of thought. With enquiry we can discover that thoughts change, they are not who or what we are, and that a thought about something does not necessarily represent the truth of that thing. These realisations about thoughts can liberate us from whatever suffering that thinking may bring.

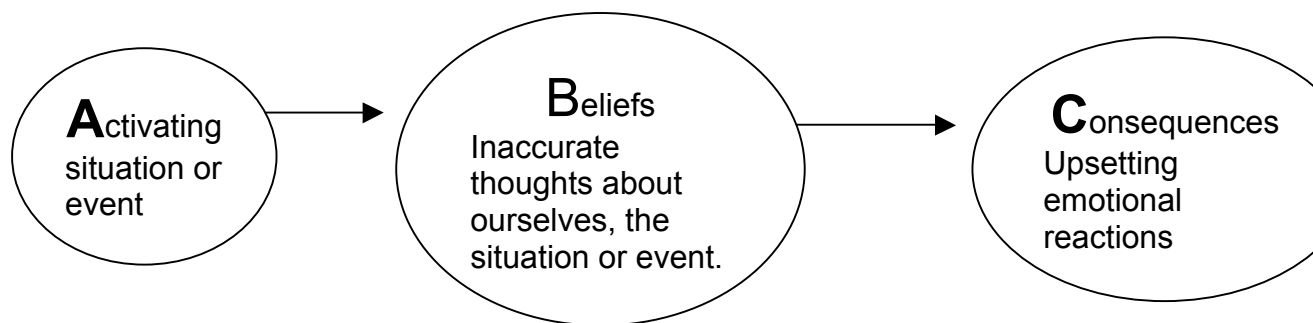
## Managing stressful or problematic thoughts and thought processes

Two ways to work with difficult thoughts that involve mindfulness are:

1. Changing what we think or the content of our thoughts and
2. Changing our relationship to thoughts

Both ways involve altering the believability of unhelpful thoughts. A cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) model considers that it is not a situation that causes us emotional distress but our beliefs and assumption or the way we think about it.

According to CBT or Cognitive Therapy (CT) the responses we have to events in life are mediated by the way we think about them, or our beliefs. Cognitive therapists often talk about the ABC of thinking. In the ABC of thinking A refers to Activating event or experiences, B refers to Beliefs or the interpretation of events and C refers to Consequences. Many upsetting emotional consequences are mediated by beliefs and unrealistic assumptions.

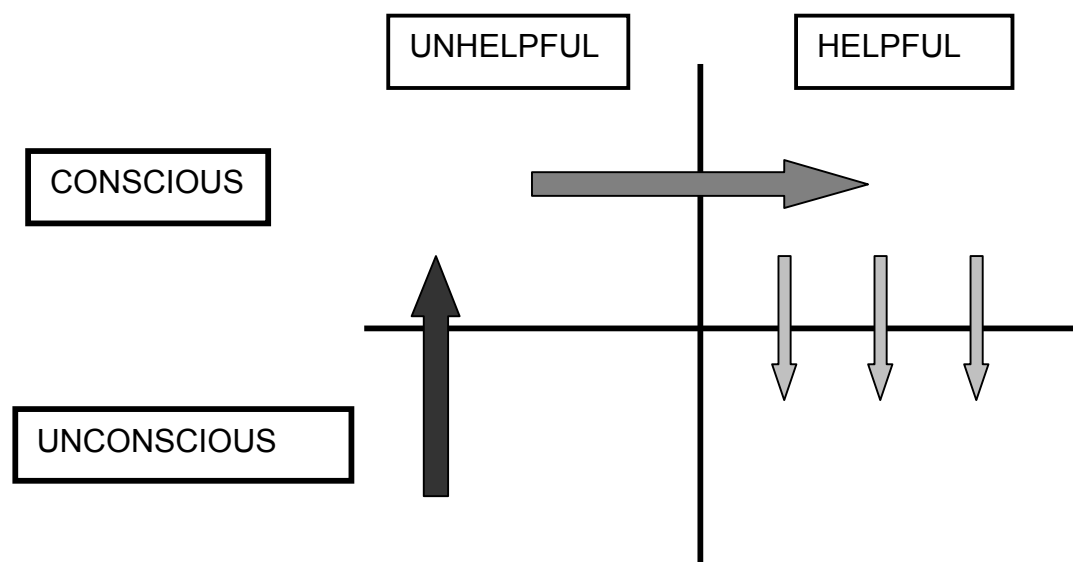


It is helpful to understand and manage thoughts and thinking styles. Mindfulness can help us identify the types of thoughts that may be problematic in our lives. Mindfulness helps us to clarify how different types of thoughts may trigger different types of emotional experiences and vice versa. Much of our thinking is automatic. That is, it seems to be involuntary, uncontrollable and appears to just “pop” into our heads. Sometimes it seems as if an endless babble of commentary, evaluation, discussion, judgments, messages and so on is taking place. Often the seemingly endless babble has underlying themes. These themes may reflect assumptions and core beliefs about the world and ourselves. Beliefs and assumption can help us to cope with life in an effective way or they can hinder and be maladaptive.

Unrealistic or unhelpful thoughts are often catastrophic, inaccurate, inflexible and self-defeating. Unhelpful thoughts tend to have inflexible and absolute words such as: should, have to, must, ought, can't, always, never etc. If our beliefs are distorted and not in line with the way things actually are, we are more likely to experience some type of stress. Mindfulness coupled with

curious investigation can help to uncover maladaptive beliefs so that we choose to be less driven by negative interpretations. Mindfulness enhances our ability to identify depressive and anxiety producing thoughts so that we can replace them with something more helpful if we wish.

If our mind is disturbed we can track back, with enquiry, to ask ourselves what our perception of the trigger was. Once discovered, we may be able to change our disturbance by seeing alternative perspectives. Sometimes it is possible to use concentrated investigation to inquire about what seems to be the content of underlying beliefs that may be causing distress. For example, if certain thoughts keep returning, you can ask yourself, or reflect on, what might be driving these thoughts. With investigation, you may notice a core belief or discover that clinging, attachment or aversion to a view, concept or experience is often behind thought pattern. If you are kind and gentle it is possible to go deeper layers of the experience, such as the currents of mind states below the surface thinking patterns. Sometimes concentrated investigation can uncover the origins of beliefs as coming from significant life event, such as a traumatic childhood experience. However, as a cautionary note, it is better to let this type of memory arise naturally rather than asking WHY and running the risk of negative and inaccurate projections. Furthermore if such connections are uncovered the process is best managed by asking WHAT and HOW the memory is experienced in the present moment. If memories are uncovered and this is distressing it is often best managed with a supportive friend or therapist. With mindfulness we can move from the unconscious to the conscious and the unhelpful to the helpful.

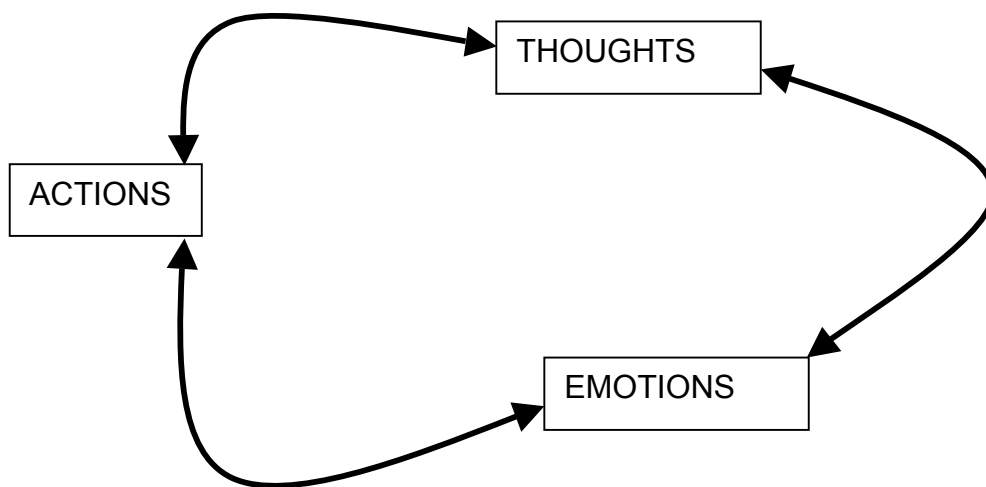


## MINDFUL ATTITUDE TO THOUGHTS

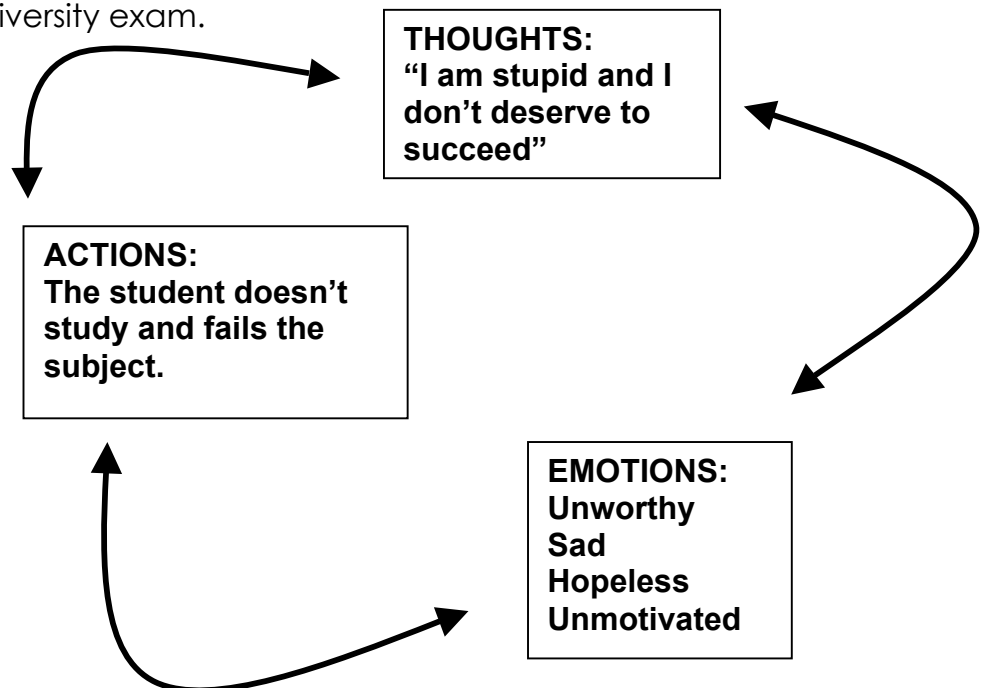


It is important to remember that even though thoughts influence our sense of being we are not our thoughts and that even though thoughts can be powerful and lead to action we can choose to not act on them.

**A cognitive behavioural model, where thoughts, emotions and actions interact**



Eg: Failing a university exam.



## THOUGHT CHALLENGING SUMMARY

1. Look for the evidence to support the belief,
2. See alternatives to the unhelpful beliefs,
3. Question the probability of the belief being true
4. Consider the cost, or whether it really mattered if what we believed was true or not.

Unhelpful Thought	Believe it (1-100%)	Challenge	Helpful Thought	Believe it (1-100%)

## Unhelpful ways of thinking

- **Overgeneralisation**, which refers to the tendency to over exaggerate. For example, interpreting failure at one task to mean failure at everything.
- **Polarised thinking**. This is thinking in extremes of black or white judgements. Things are either totally good or bad and there are no shades of grey.
- **Mental filtering**. In CBT this unhelpful pattern is where one tends to just focus on the negative rather than seeing alternatives or the bigger picture.
- **Catastrophising**. This pattern is very common with worry and refers to over estimating the probability that something “terrible” will happen and focusing on the worst possible outcome.
- **Minimising and magnifying**. This pattern refers to minimising the positive and magnifying the negative (usually in reference to ourselves and our own qualities or capacities).
- **Mind reading**. This pattern refers to making inferences and assumptions about how other people feel and think without evidence.
- **Personalising**. In CBT this refers to taking personal responsibility for events where such responsibility is not due, or relating events to oneself when there is no basis to do this.

Being mindful of thoughts, seeing thoughts from a space of awareness helps you move unconscious thoughts into awareness and transform them from being unhelpful to helpful.



### **Changing the relationship to thoughts with insight**

Another way that mindfulness can be used with unwanted, difficult or problematic thoughts is not to change their content but to change the way we relate to them.

Control is often considered as having power over something. It may be difficult to control thoughts. The more you try not to think a thought, for example, the more it may surface. It is possible however, to manage thoughts so that they have less control over us. Developing a relationship of openness and kindness with thoughts is one way to manage them. If we begin to recognize how, in many circumstances, we have choice in how we respond to events then we may begin to feel that we have more power and control in our lives.

When we are mindful of thoughts we have more opportunity to choose how to respond to them. We can also utilise thoughts in a way that may reduce mental distress. Once we can identify different types of thinking patterns, it is possible choose to disengage from the types of thoughts that may be unhelpful and choose to engage with the types of thoughts that may be helpful. Choosing to engage with healthy thoughts can include reflecting on happy themes and thinking about people that that inspire us or have been

kind to us. This type of positive reflection can promote a sense of peace and joy.

When we identify unhelpful thinking patterns we can note them accordingly, such as: “judging” “condemning”, “worrying” “ruminating” “obsessing” and so on. If particular patterns of thought driven by maladaptive beliefs can be identified they can also be noted accordingly. Some people find it helpful to put particular “notes” on habitual themes. Like, for example, “the relationship tape”, the “needing to be acknowledged tape”, “the self critic” and so on.

It has been said, “that which gets your attention gets you”. Focusing on something increases the likelihood of becoming absorbed in that “thing”. When we are sensitive to the types of thoughts we are having we are more able to choose to focus on the positive or neutral and not focus on the negative. This does not mean that we deny or suppress unhelpful thoughts, but rather, see them for what they are and not engage with them. One way to disengage from unwanted thoughts or thinking styles is to note or acknowledge a thought or pattern of thoughts, but then anchor oneself in the present moment by being attentive to present moment experience. This may include focusing on what one is doing, or being attentive to the way one experiences the world through bodily experiences (sight, sound, smell, touch and taste or bodily sensations).

With Calm meditations the way to deal with unwanted thoughts is to not pay attention to them. By not paying attention to them they do not disturb you. Just if you were in a train reading a really interesting book and in the same carriage a young child was having a tantrum a few seats away, people moving past you, the train rocking around etc., yet you are not disturbed by these things. Because the story in the book is so interesting you notice these other things but they do not get your attention.

Another way to disengage from difficult thoughts is to not react to them or to struggle with, resist, try to control or suppress them. Rather, allow them the space to “be”. In this way we can be attentive to thoughts but from a frame of

reference that is distanced from them. Some calm meditation practices make the contents of the mind (including thoughts) the object of focus. These types of calm meditation can be very helpful to change a destructive and harmful relationship to thoughts and thinking processes.

Disengaging from thoughts is also like observing and stepping back from them. This “stepping back” occurs within oneself and NOT outside oneself. If it feels as though you are stepping outside yourself, this is called dissociation. Mindfulness is not dissociation. Stepping back can be considered as the opposite to “falling into” and getting entangled.

Linehan (1993, p.67) used the following metaphor to explain the difference between going outside oneself and stepping back and observing. “Imagine that the place you go outside yourself is a flower. The flower is connected to your centre by a long stem. The centre is the root of the flower. Imagine coming down the stem to the root”.

Choosing to cultivate wholesome thoughts and disengage from unwholesome thoughts takes time and practice. Related to this ability to choose, is insight about the nature of thoughts. Thoughts can be illusionary and it is easy to misidentify with the content of our thoughts. Thoughts are not however, what they advertise themselves to be. An interpretation of something may not reflect the truth of that thing. In other words, thoughts are not facts. Thoughts are thoughts and they do not necessarily define or accurately describe the world around us, or who or what we are.

With insight meditation thoughts can become object of attention and being mindful with thoughts leads to insight or wisdom. Insight means that we can perceive and understand thoughts as they actually are. This means we can know thoughts as changeable, contingent and unreliable. Insight can liberate us from the burden of believing illusive thoughts as truth.

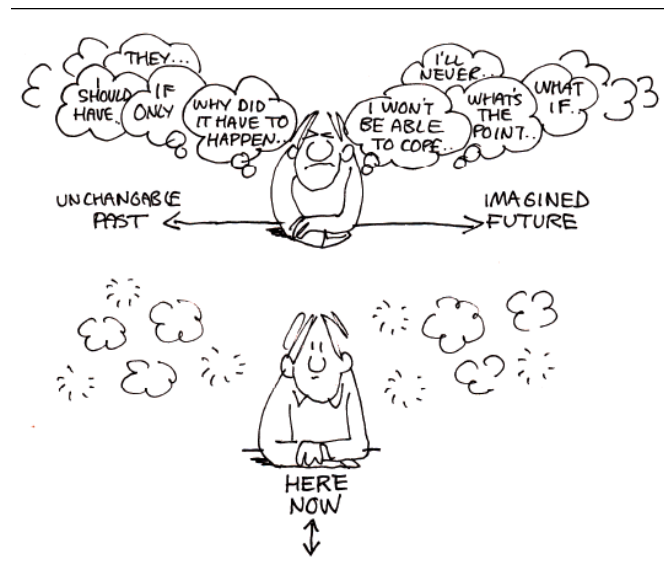
Mindfulness can help protect us from being intoxicated with pleasant thoughts and can also help create a sense of humour or spaciousness with unpleasant

thoughts. By being aware, we can often see a new perspective on our problems. By not engaging with unhelpful thoughts the belief in their content is not strengthened. In this way, the content of unhelpful thoughts are challenged and changed via a process of acceptance rather than by a struggle for control.

Noting and naming is often good to catch negative thoughts before they get out of control.



Anchoring yourself in the reality of what you are doing and remembering to remember to be here now is possibly the most powerful way to find some peace with disturbing thoughts.



## **Mindfulness of hearing**

Sound, like any experience, can be an object of mindfulness. Further more it is possible to make sound a primary object of mindfulness meditation. Sound meditation can be practised during formal meditation times or during one's day-to-day activities, as part of one's general mindfulness repertoire. Making sound the object of meditation is very helpful when there is restlessness, as it can be pleasant and gives a sense of spaciousness.

As with any object of mindfulness you notice the WHAT and HOW of sound and hearing. You notice how the sounds change and what factors were related to the change. When you practice mindfulness of sound, allow sounds come and go. Try not to judge sounds as good or bad but try to hear sounds as vibrations coming to you, and simply “be” with them. Hear sounds as if they are music, being attentive to the nuances of the sounds. Pictures or concepts related to the sounds may come into your mind. Allow these ideas to be, but direct your attention to sounds. Be attentive to the changing nature of sounds



and how one sound leads into another. Some sounds may be unpleasant and some sounds may be pleasant. With unpleasant sounds it is helpful to direct attention as if it is going inside the sound (Martine Batchelor, 2004) and notice the insubstantial nature of the sound. With pleasant sounds it is useful to notice how they arise and pass away.

## **Listening to thoughts with mindfulness**

At times it seems as if our mind is overwhelmed with unwanted thoughts. Even though our mind may be flooded, we try, as much as possible, not to follow or get “caught up” in, or involved with these thoughts. As with all objects of mindfulness we notice the WHAT and HOW of thoughts. As much as possible we try to step back from the thoughts and develop what Linehan (1993) calls a “teflon” mind, or a mind that can let the thoughts go and change according to their natural conditions. It is helpful to notice the changing nature of thoughts. As with other objects of mindfulness it is also helpful to develop an objective and non-condemning stance about thoughts. In this way we begin to study and know thoughts and understand how they can lead to other thoughts, emotions, feelings, or bodily experiences.

In the same way you that you hear sounds with a passive and open-minded manner, allow your attention to shift to thoughts. Allow thoughts to come into the spaciousness of your mind. See thoughts as clouds in the sky, leaves in a river, waves on the ocean, placards in a parade. Sometimes people see thoughts as if they are like buses coming down the road. Each bus has its destination clearly displayed and stops to allow you to get on board. If the destination says “road to misery” you can choose not to board. If on the other hand the sign says “road to happiness” you can choose to board and figuratively engage in those thoughts.

After a formal meditation period you can spend some time reflecting on the thoughts that came up during that time. Remember to be reflective and objective and not get entangled thinking processes. Yet, notice the types of thoughts you had, perhaps also noting what you were thinking about and what the underlying feeling tones were in relation to the thought. In this way you

build up a form of understanding about thought and their relationship to deeper states of mind and the things that are happening in your life.

## **Mindfully watching thoughts**

For some people the comparison to listening to thoughts may not be as appropriate as the idea of watching or observing thoughts. With this perspective, it is as if you passively observe the movie of your mind. There may be all sorts of mental constructs, stories, memories, fantasies and imaginings passing through your mind. The challenge with this exercise is to watch the movie without getting lost and caught up in the story. Sometimes it may seem as if the stories are never ending, one thought after another. The thoughts may come and go very rapidly without you being fully aware of their content. Sometimes the thoughts may have a high emotional charge. Other times they are just random memories, images, pictures, ideas, and more. Sometimes the thought may be frightening other times they may be amusing or boring. Whatever the content of thoughts may be, it is important to remember that they are just thoughts and are not necessarily facts to be believed. With this exercise it is helpful to leave your eyes slightly open. You don't look around of course. But, you let your focus be diffuse, not really looking at anything, except the contents of your mind. When your eyes are left open it helps you to realise that thoughts are just constructs of the mind.

## **Activities to do between sessions**

- Continue with a regular routine of meditation. Utilise mindfulness of body practices as your foundation (e.g., mindfulness of breath, mindful walking, or body scan). If thoughts arise, note them accordingly.
- Experiment with your repertoire by listening to the “mindfulness of sounds and thoughts” recording.
- Practice disengaging from thoughts by purposely focusing attention on what you are doing or experiencing.
- If you are feeling concentrated and calm, experiment objectively with examining thoughts for very short periods (only a few minutes). Play particular awareness to how they change and how they relate to other experiences.
- At the end of the day, recollect the day’s events. Use a diary to record some experiences throughout the day and notice thoughts. Begin to notice thoughts or thinking styles that may lead to suffering, and thoughts or thinking styles that may lead away from distress (do not get too analytical).
- Notice particular patterns of thought, such as “catastrophising” “overgeneralisation” “minimising”, and note them as they arise.
- Try not to be afraid of thoughts, and try stepping back and being accepting of thoughts. Let thoughts come and go without unwarranted reaction.
- Try, on occasions, to listen to the babble of judging, evaluating, comparing etc., without getting caught up in the stories. Step back and listen to thoughts just as if you were listening to a babbling stream.
- If you are comfortable, begin to increase the length of time you do formal mindfulness exercises to longer than 30 minutes.
- It is recommended that after a formal meditation period you spend a few minutes recollecting the meditation and the things that occurred during this period. In particular pay attention to the types of thoughts and thinking patterns you may have experienced, and the themes of thought you may have experienced. Remember to be objective, honest and curious about what happened and not get entangled in being over critical or condemning

about your experienced. If you find it useful you could start to keep a journal about your meditation experience.

## **Mindfulness of sounds and thoughts**

- Make yourself comfortable, sitting upright and relaxed.
- Scan your body and release whatever tension you may feel.
- Make the determination that for the period of this exercise, you will not follow concerns about things other than being here and now and what you are doing. Remember that for 20-30 minutes you don't have to do anything other than practising mindfulness of sound and thoughts.
- Also make the intention to maintain a stance of willingness, receptivity and openness to experience as it comes to you, arising and passing away.
- Now turn your mind to sound.
- Be attentive to sound as sound or vibration.
- Be alert but relaxed and receive sound as it comes to you. There may be sounds of birds, cars, traffic, air conditioning, wind, rain or just the hum of silence.
- Notice how you may create images and labels around the sound such as: dog barking, traffic, birds or whatever. Don't struggle with the labelling and the pictures but distinguish the sound from the label. Let the labelling or pictures be on the periphery of your awareness and direct your attention to sound as vibration.
- Notice also how some sounds are pleasant, some sounds are unpleasant and some sounds are neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Notice and note the judgements and without struggle let them go by bringing attention back to sound as sound.
- Now arising .....now changing...now passing away. Notice, if you can, the beginning, middle and end of each sound. Listen closely, attentive to every nuance, every subtle shift and change. Notice how vibration may itself also be made up of other vibrations.
- Let your mind be as if it is the sky, open, expansive and clear, and let sounds arise and pass through.
- With the same open and spacious perspective, now shift your awareness to thoughts.

- Notice thoughts as if they are clouds passing across an expansive sky, arising, changing, passing and disappearing from view.
- Or, observe thoughts like birds flying across the sky, sometimes flitting around then moving on, sometimes just gliding through space. They leave no trace.
- Thoughts are just changing objects against the backdrop of spaciousness.
- Use noting to help you be aware of the changing nature of thoughts.
- Note commenting, evaluating, appraising, judging, planning, calculating, day-dreaming, remembering, catastrophising, overgeneralising, personalising or what ever type of thinking you may experience.
- Sometimes there are too many thoughts to note. Sometimes it is as if thoughts babble on like a never-ending stream. Step back from the stream and notice the stream pass by. Notice the thoughts but resist the temptation to dive in and follow the thought.
- Sometimes, thoughts are like placards in a parade. Each having a message, each inviting you in to join the parade. Resist the urge to join the parade and notice messages as thoughts just passing by. There is no need to get caught up in the drama.
- Let the thoughts come and go. Step back to a place of witnessing and watching the show.
- Notice how some thoughts are pleasant and some thoughts are unpleasant. Notice how some thoughts have a charge and others don't. Notice thoughts about the past or the future. Notice thoughts seem to come back again and again and again. Notice how thoughts may tell a story, like a drama, and how we are always in a leading role.
- Notice how we may desire to think because not thinking may be unfamiliar and frightening.
- Notice how some thoughts lead to emotions and some emotions lead to thoughts. Notice and be receptive even to those thoughts that may lead to fear.

- Try not to struggle with thoughts, no matter how frightening they may be. They are only thoughts. Thoughts only have the power of action if we choose to give them this power.
- Try as best you can to be open to thoughts without preference or condemnation. Develop a curious interest about the passing parade.
- They are not you. You are not your thoughts. Thoughts are thoughts. And they change. Let painful thoughts change without getting caught up in the struggle.
- Step back into awareness. Step back from being caught up and entangled.
- At the end of the formal cultivation of mindfulness, go about your daily activities using thinking as a helpful tool but remembering not to be deceived by the sometimes illusive nature of thoughts and harmful thinking patterns.

