Mindful Self-compassion Teleclass October-December 2011

Session Four Notes

Three-minute Breathing Space Meditation

The following section is inspired by Mindfulness: a practical guide to Finding Peace In A Frantic World (Mark Williams & Danny Penman 2011). You have a link to a recording of the three-minute breathing space meditation so you could listen to that if that helps to hear it in practice. Ultimately you can just run through the three steps yourself at any time of the day e.g. before a meeting, when you’re making a coffee, standing in a queue to pay, when you’re feeling tired or stressed etc.

Allow about a minute for each Step.

Step 1

So adopt an erect and dignified posture (whether you’re sitting or standing) and if possible close your eyes. Then, bring your awareness and attention to your inner experience and ask yourself what is my experience right now?

- What *thoughts* are going through your mind? Just notice these thoughts as best you can –you don’t have to believe them

- What *feelings* are here? See if you can turn towards any uncomfortable or difficult feelings, allowing them to be present without trying to change them in any way

- What *body sensations* are here right now? Just quickly scan your body to pick up any sensations of tension, tightness or discomfort, again allowing the sensations to be here and not trying to change them in any way
Step 2
Now bring your attention to the physical sensations of your breath; noting the sensations of the breath in your abdomen…expanding as the breath comes in … and falling back as the breath goes out. Bring your attention to your breath …all the way in and all the way out. And if your mind wanders, as it surely will, gently escort your attention back to the breath.

Step 3
Now, expand the field of awareness around the breathing so it includes a sense of the body as a whole, your posture and facial expression as if the whole body was breathing. If you notice any discomfort or difficult feelings in the body then you can always bring your attention right in to the discomfort and imagining that the breath could move into and around the sensations; just befriending the sensations not trying to change them in any way. And if the sensations stop calling for your attention, then just return to sitting, aware of the whole body, moment by moment.

Your Options
After completing the 3 Minute Breathing Space you have the following options;

1. Carry on with what you were doing before you began the meditation but now with enhanced awareness
2. Consciously ‘drop into’ your body to help you deal more skilfully with difficulties
3. Note your thoughts and feelings for a few moments and then see if you can relate differently to your thoughts through:
   • Writing down your thoughts
   • Watching your thoughts come and go
   • Viewing your thoughts as thoughts not as The Absolute Truth
   • Naming your thought patterns e.g. ‘anxious thoughts’, ‘sad thoughts’, or just ‘thinking, thinking’
   • Asking yourself: Am I overtired? Am I jumping to conclusions? Am I over-generalising? Am I exaggerating the importance of this situation or unreasonably expecting perfectionism?

   There’s a 4th option – see later!

Let’s start singing & dancing again*
*Anthropologists have reported that in some indigenous cultures when someone comes to the medicine man or woman with symptoms of depression they ask ‘When did you stop singing and dancing?’

Professor Marie Asberg is an expert on burnout and she has devised the Exhaustion Funnel to illustrate how burnout can happen to anyone.

As our lives get busier we tend to give up things in order to focus on the things that we feel are ‘important’. The funnel is created as the circle of our life gets narrower in order to focus on solving our immediate problems. As we spiral down the funnel we give up more and more of the enjoyable things in life (we tend to start seeing these things as ‘optional’) in order to create space and time for the more ‘important’ things such as work. As you slide further down the funnel “you give up even more of the things that nourish you, leaving yourself increasingly exhausted, indecisive and unhappy. You are eventually spat out at the bottom, a shadow of your former self” (p 212 Williams & Penmann 2011).

It’s also worth noting that Professor Asberg suggests that those of us who continue down the funnel the most are those whose self-confidence is linked to their performance at work i.e. frequently the people who are seen as the ‘best’ workers, not the ‘lazy’ workers.

Do you know how to play?

Some activities aren’t just relaxing or enjoyable, they actually nourish us on a deeper level. They help to develop our resilience to the challenges that life throws our way and enhance our capacity to savour life. Other activities deplete us, slowly sucking our energy, weakening us and increasing our vulnerability to the stresses and strains of life. They can also drain our capacity and enthusiasm for enjoying life. It doesn’t take long before these depleting activities can start to dominate our lives and we let go of the nourishing activities almost without realising until we’re in the very depths of the Exhaustion Funnel.
So now is an opportunity for you to assess how much of your day to day life is spent in nourishing or depleting activities. First run a mental checklist through the things you do in an average day (include anything that you do regularly but only on certain days of the week). If it helps you can close your eyes to get a picture of all the activities you do in a day. If you like you can break your day down into smaller activities such as talking to colleagues, eating lunch, answering emails, cooking, watching TV, going to the gym etc. You’re looking for a list of between 10-15 items. Write all the activities down in the left hand column:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities you do in a typical day</th>
<th>N/D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now that you have your list in front of you ask yourself the following questions (Taken from Williams & Penman, 2011):

1. Of the activities that you have written which nourish you? What lifts your mood, energises you, makes you feel calm and centred? What increases your sense of
actually being alive and present, rather than merely existing? These are nourishing activities.

2. Of the things that you have written, which deplete you? What pulls you down, drains your energy, makes you feel tense and fragmented? What decreases your sense of actually being alive and present, what makes you feel that are merely existing, or worse? These are depleting activities.

Now complete the exercise by putting an 'N' for 'nourishing’ or a ‘D’ for depleting on the right hand side, corresponding to each activity. If an activity is both, put down your first reaction, or if you simply cannot choose, put N/D or D/N. You may find that you want to say ‘It depends’, and, if so, it may be useful to notice what it depends on.

The idea is not to attain perfect balance between Ns & Ds – one nourishing activity may far outweigh several depleting ones. However it’s wise to have at least several nourishing activities (and ideally do at least one a day) to balance those that deplete you.

Ideas for nourishing activities:

- Taking a long bath
- Taking a walk
- Reading a book just for pleasure with no ulterior motive (self-improvement os is that just me?)
- Participating in a favourite hobby
- Chatting to a friend
- Completing a crossword/Sudoku puzzle
- Listening (and just listening, not multi-tasking!) to music

Choosing to play

It’s one thing to know how much of your life is taken up with depleting activities but it’s another to actually take action to either reduce the amount of time you spend on them or put more effort into nourishing activities.

Finding balance in your daily life

Looking at the activities table you’ve just completed, can you see how to redress the balance between the nourishing and depleting activities? It may be that the source of your difficulties is something that can’t be changed (e.g. a job and in this economic client we all need a job). If it feels impossible to change a situation then you have 2 options. One: Try, as far as possible, to increase the time and wise effort you put in to nourishing activities and reduce the time and effort you spend on depleting ones. Or Two: try a different approach with the depleting activities such as practising being fully present with them , even when you find them dull or difficult. See if you could bring mindfulness to them by not judging them or wishing them to be different than they are. It may be that actually your depleting
activity isn’t quite as draining when you allow yourself enough time to do it. And why not allow yourself just a little pause (take a deep breath and notice the air come into and out of your body) before and after each depleting activity – so that it has space of its own within your busy life, rather than merging into a general sense of rush, drain and irritation.

Three Minute Breathing Space – Option 4

The Breathing Space can be a powerful tool in helping you to decide on the right action for you to take to help you enhance your life and deal with stress. **Watch out** – when you feel low in mood, tired, stressed or anxious waiting until you feel motivated to do something is unlikely to be the wisest course of action. That’s because at our low points we actually need to take action **before** we get motivated (motivation follows after action). So after you’ve used the Breathing Space

**Pause and ask yourself what do I need for myself right now? How can I best take care of myself right now? You can:**

- **Do something pleasurable** - wake up the pleasure centres in the brain by selecting activities that you used to enjoy or that you think you might enjoy. Experiment with what works for you. **Be kind to your body** or **do something that you enjoy**

- **Do something that will give you a sense of satisfaction or mastery over your life** – when we feel out of control in one area of our life research shows that this feeling can spread to other areas too (like dropping black ink into a glass of water—the water turns grey). We end up feeling helpless and hopeless. A way to combat this is to **select the smallest of actions that can be done**; it’s giving a message to the deepest parts of our self – look we can achieve something, all isn’t lost. So it could be cleaning/tidying up for 5 -10 minutes, writing a letter, taking some exercise, paying a bill. Whatever you do – congratulate yourself on this achievement, really enjoy the sense of satisfaction and control this gives you.

- **Enhance your mindfulness** - return to your senses and notice what you can see, feel, smell; notice what your body is doing. What’s happening just in this moment? E.g. now I’m sitting typing at the PC, now I’m taking a sip of coffee; notice what you feel in your body – the contact of your feet on the floor as you walk or stand.

“The truth is that often, tiny changes in what you do—whether you feel like doing them or not—can fundamentally alter the way you feel. You can become re-energised, de-stressed or have your spirits lifted by taking a few baby steps forward”

(Williams & Penman 2011)

Here’s to **BABY STEPS!!**
Mindfulness and pennamnd p 201 if we are to find true peace, we have to listen to the quiet voice of compassion and ignore the bellowing ones of fear and guilt and shame. Meditation can help us to do this, but we have to imbue it with kindness, otherwise we run the risk of finding temporary respite, but not the true peace that lies beyond the ups and downs of daily life. We end up dampening down the noise, but remain deaf to a better, more wholesome way of living. Many studies have now shown this to be true. Kindness transforms things: the ‘aversion’ pathways in the mind are switched off and the ‘approach’ ones switched on instead.

This change in attitude enhances openness, creativity and happiness, while at the same time dissolving the fears, guilt, anxieties and stresses that lead to exhaustion and chronic discontent’.