

SOURCE LINES

Mindfulness Meditation: Effective Strategies for Managing 'Worrying and Troubling Thoughts'

Author's note: This is the second of a three part series on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction. The first newsletter 'Mindfulness@Work' introduced the benefits of mindfulness meditation in the workplace. The third newsletter will discuss how mindfulness enhances emotional intelligence by helping you increase awareness of your own and others emotions.

Imagine yourself to be on your 'dream vacation', perhaps on a pristine beach on some South-Sea Island or maybe on a luxurious cruise in the Mediterranean. You are enjoying yourself immensely, feeling happier than you have in years, but then somebody does or says something that angers you and in an instant your joy and happiness disappears. *But wait a minutethe beach and sun haven't changed and the people surrounding you are still enjoying themselves---the only thing that HAS changed is YOUR 'state-of-mind'!* Happiness, sadness, fears, worry and anger are all states of mind we experience in this life. Sometimes the thoughts of anger, sadness, and worry can consume us so that we are unable to think of anything else. We may feel powerless to change the way we think and feel. Fortunately we don't have to be immobilized by these troubling thoughts. We can learn ways to manage the intensity of negative thinking and lower our levels of distress through *Mindfulness Meditation*.

Being 'Mindful'

Mindfulness Meditation is a method of self-awareness training. To be 'mindful' is to be aware of what is happening in the 'moment' without making judgments about what we are experiencing. It is about developing the capacity to 'notice' our thoughts, feelings and sensations without assumptions about what the experience says about others or us. This may sound simple but our minds are like untrained puppies chasing thoughts all over the place and chewing and digging up 'worries'. It takes practice to bring your mind peacefully back to a focus point and allow calmness to prevail. Many women

who have given birth may remember using a focus point on a wall and concentrating on breathing to manage the physical pain of labour. Similar strategies of mindfulness meditation can help us manage the emotional pain of persistent and troubling thoughts.

How Mindfulness Meditation can help

You can get started today with simple mindfulness exercises that will help you *stop* troubling thoughts from *stealing your peaceful state of mind*. You don't have to buy any supplies or sign up for any courses. You only need to find a few minutes of quiet each day to practice. Think about trading in the time you already use to 'worry' and replacing it with mindfulness exercises, you won't be sorry!

Practice Exercises Maintaining 'Focus of Mind'

- Find a comfortable and fairly quiet spot to sit back. You can do this exercise for five minutes up to fifteen minutes if you have the time. First of all you need to 'check your breathing' by placing one hand on your upper chest and one hand on your abdomen. Take in a deep breath and watch which hand moves first. For this exercise we want the hand on your abdomen to move first. This means that you are breathing from your diaphragm.
- Move your hands to rest comfortably in your lap. Close your eyes. Take in a deep breath through your nose so that your abdomen fills up first and then exhale through your mouth. Notice the sensations of the air moving through your nostrils into your lungs and out through your mouth. What does the tem-

perature of the air feel like? How do the muscles in your chest and abdomen feel when they are contracted, relaxed?

As you breathe in, say to yourself 'Breathing in'. As you breathe out, say to yourself 'Breathing out'. Notice how after a few breathes that your mind may begin to wander from the focus of the breathing. This is perfectly okay. Notice the thought to yourself. For instance you may say to yourself 'I am noticing some noises around me' or 'I am thinking about work I still need to do around the house'. Try and notice the thought without judging (i.e. 'I wish those people in the next room would be quiet' or 'I am never going to be able to get all those chores done'). Try and guide your thinking back to paying attention to how you are breathing. Begin again to say to yourself 'Breathing in', 'Breathing out'.

This is a 'beginner's' exercise to help train your mind to focus on a specific moment, in this case the 'moment of breathing in and out.' It also helps train your mind to 'label' wandering thoughts without judgment and to then redirect your attention back to the moment of breathing.

Practice Exercise for Letting Go of Troubling Thoughts

- This exercise is a continuation of the above 'maintaining focus' exercise. You can use this exercise to help yourself stop worrying or to at least reduce the impact or intensity of troubling thoughts. You begin by doing the 'breathing exercise' above. Pay attention to where your mind wanders to and the thoughts that present themselves. Label these thoughts as 'worrying or troubled thoughts', for instance say *'this is a worry thought about work'* or *'this is a worry thought about my relationship with...'*
- Try and re-direct your focus back to the breathing again. If the same worrying thought keeps coming up again and again, think to yourself *'there was a time before I had this thought and there will be a time after I had this thought. This thought is NOT a part of me, it is just a thought.'*

- Now here is where you begin to take yourself on a guided imagery exercise of imagining yourself doing something with this thought. Use your creativity to develop a 'scene' that fits best for you. Perhaps you imagine yourself slowly putting on a special insulated suit made of Teflon and you watch the 'worry thought' coming towards you and then sliding right off of you. Imagine the thought bouncing on the floor and breaking into little tiny pieces. You might also imagine yourself standing on a bridge over a big river that flows to the ocean. Try and picture yourself there, take time to imagine what you are wearing and what time of day it is. Think about yourself wearing a backpack that is filled with the 'worrying thoughts' and how heavy it feels. Imagine how strained your muscles are and how wonderful it will feel to remove that weight from your shoulders. Now picture yourself removing that backpack and slowly emptying the 'worrying thoughts' over the railing so that they fall into the water moving below. Watch as those thoughts slowly move further and further away from you standing on the bridge. Watch them become smaller and smaller as they travel from your sight, as they travel to the ocean and beyond. Notice yourself taking a big breath in and how wonderful it feels to be free from that weight of worrying and troubling thoughts.'

This exercise may seem deceptively simple but research has shown that 'guided imagery' can be a powerful tool in helping us manage troubling thoughts and feelings. The more you practice these exercises the more you will be able to achieve a 'peaceful and calm' mind. An even more effective strategy is to combine these mindfulness exercises with 'cognitive restructuring' of negative thoughts.

For more information about Cognitive Behaviour strategies go to the Source Line website at www.sourceline.ca and read the newsletters from 2003 entitled 'Reduce Stress by Untwisting your Thinking' (parts one and two).

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