



Penn Program for Mindfulness

Week 3: Exploring Reactivity

Putting Mindfulness to Work

Each of the mindfulness techniques you are practicing provides you with a different way to bring mindfulness to life. The first practice, the “20 Breaths” exercise, allows you to bring all of your attention into the present moment over and over. Longer sessions, like the 15-minute meditation exercises that you practiced last week, give you a chance to practice coming back into the present moment as many times as you wander and help you to notice moments of deeper settling and rest.

Now you are ready to take the next step. Abraham Lincoln is reported to have said, “Give me six hours to chop down a tree, and I will spend four hours sharpening the axe.” You may not think that your axe is all that sharp at this point, but it is time to take the next step. It’s time to put your mindfulness to work.

At this point it might seem as if you are more stressed than ever. Because you are more aware of your experience and your state of mind, you could be noticing stress in places where it would have been overlooked before. Even though you have learned to return to the present moment, what if that moment is right in the middle of a very unpleasant situation? What happens when you return to a moment that you didn’t want in the first place?

This is exactly where mindfulness can change everything. To understand how, you need to investigate what happens when you experience difficulty or stress, and then see how mindfulness can help. Let’s use a single stressful event as an example to notice the role that mindfulness can play during a difficult moment.

The Event and the Reaction

How does stress begin? It’s hard to generalize because so many things can be stressful. What is most difficult for one person may be no big deal for the next, and the thing that completely pushes us over the edge on one day might not seem so difficult tomorrow. We can say that stress occurs when something unwelcome and undesired happens, possibly something that is going to frighten you or make you unhappy or take something from you. It could be a moment of pain or loss, a situation that is out of control, a demand that can’t be met, a diagnosis or a goodbye. We represent the event by the blue arrow to the left. This arrow has two relevant qualities: it has a very sharp point, and it is headed right at you. It’s going to hurt if it hits.

In short, it is a threat. The arrow could represent a threat to your physical safety, like a saber-tooth tiger bounding through the jungle, looking for dinner. More likely, in our day and age, it might represent a threat to something like your comfort, security, self-esteem, social standing or relationships. It might have been the guy who cut you off in traffic on the way home, or the coworker who got promoted ahead of you. When something like this threatens you, you react. Your reaction comes from inside you, it is something that you do. We represent the reaction with the red arrow to the right. It is deeply biological, almost but not quite a reflex. Your muscular system tenses, you pull up your shoulders, tighten your fists and clench your jaw. Inside the body there is surge of activity that prepares you for battle or flight. Adrenaline and steroids and other hormones that maximize physical

strength and mental focus shift the balance of biology away from rest and healing, and towards physical and psychological battle.



There isn't a lot that you can do to stop the event. By the time you notice it, the event has already happened. But, you might be able to do something about the reaction that follows.

As stated above, the stress reaction is "almost but not quite a reflex". You don't decide to have a stress reaction, it seems to happen on its own, like a reflex, because you don't notice it at the beginning. Reactivity has an automatic, reflex-like quality when it happens outside of our awareness. Much of your life happens like this as if you were living on "automatic pilot". You walk through your days without paying much attention to anything.

Mindfulness gives you a way to manage your automatic reactivity. If you activate mindfulness right at the beginning of the reaction you turn off the automatic pilot by replacing it with awareness. In fact, mindfulness is really the opposite of the automatic pilot. From one point of view, nothing has changed. The event that provoked you is still there, and you can experience all the components of your reactivity. But your awareness provides a kind of space, a buffer, the softens the impact of the event. You are not moving quite so fast; thinking replaces reflex. When you look closely at the situation you may see that things are more workable than you thought. You may realize that you can make better choices if you turn off the automatic pilot.

Now you have an essential stress management tool that was missing before: choice! You don't choose an automatic pilot behavior; it's a habit. You drive home the same way, eat the same way, and start to argue or sulk the same way that you always have. But as soon as you notice, you can make a choice about what will happen next.

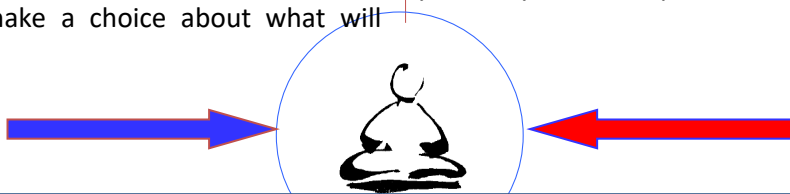
The automatic pilot always heads in the same direction, which is the way that it's already going. With mindfulness, you can change your course. Instead of plowing full speed ahead, you can decide to go somewhere else. Maybe the best thing to do is to get out of there, to head in the other direction as fast as possible. If you thought about it, maybe you would do something completely different, something you've never tried before. Of course, you don't always figure it out in advance; if you did, you wouldn't be making a choice. You have to catch it right in the moment, right when it happens!

Mindfulness helps you to learn about your stress reaction from the inside. You learn by being there, not by figuring it all out or reading about it in a book. You begin to see how stress builds on itself, how thoughts and emotions and sensations in the body amplify stress until the whole system melts down.

During the next week use your mindfulness to learn about your reactivity. Instead of trying to eliminate stress, try to find it. Look for the first sign of reactivity, right at the beginning. If you catch it earlier it will be easier to redirect. What is the first thing you notice? Do you tense a part of your body?, Feel an emotion, or sensation of tension or constriction in the body, or do you notice that your thoughts are churning with anxious forecasts for the future or unpleasant memories?

Whatever you find, be sure not to make it go away. Explore it, learn from it, and look for the same kind of reactivity in other situations. See if you can discover the earliest sign of stress, and identify the patterns of thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations that are part of your reactivity.

Then stop, take a breath, and be there for a moment. Explore your choices. What can you do, right then, that will make a difference? Stay there in the present, and keep looking, feeling, and being. Take advantage of every opportunity to learn, and every choice. Each time you do you will experience less distress and reclaim more freedom.



Week Three Homework

Daily Mindfulness Practices:

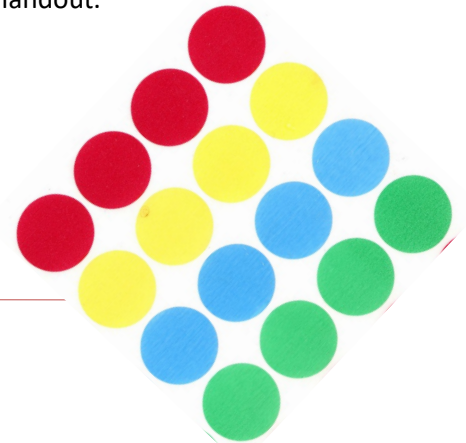
- Each day, practice with one of the Sitting Meditation Practice recordings (Sitting 3a or Sitting 3b).
- Each guided meditation lasts 20 minutes; together they make a single 40 minute practice. Experiment with practicing both recordings together in one longer practice session.
- You may substitute the Body Scan practice for the 20-minute session of sitting meditation.
- Continue to practice the “20 Breaths” at least three times a day.
- Use this worksheet and the dots handed out in class to practice “Stop, Breathe, Be” as often as you can.
- Fill in the Daily Practice Guide. This will help you to schedule your practices and to keep track of the completion of each.

Informal Practice:

- Complete the “Mindfulness of Stressful Events” Calendar included in this handout.

OPTIONAL Readings: Full Catastrophe Living

- Chapter 9: Really Doing What You’re Doing: Mindfulness in Daily Life
- Chapter 19: Stuck in Stress Reactivity
- Chapter 20: Responding to Stress Instead of Reacting



The Practice: Stop, Breathe and Be

Stop

Come to a complete and full stop.

Do this deliberately. Make it full and complete. Don’t move on to the next step until you have felt your body stop fully. Wait for that stop, and take long enough to feel it from the inside.

Breathe

Bring all of your attention to the breath. Try using either one, two or three breaths.

Don’t just notice the breath. Enter it fully, with all of your attention.

Be

At the end of the breath, rest in the awareness of stillness for a moment. Just be there.

Then open your eyes. Let any stillness, silence or relaxation that you found radiate out and saturate your environment. Allow that sense of the present moment, and its quiet center, to stay



Mindfulness of Stressful Events

Instructions: Each day during the upcoming week, when a stressful event or experience occurs, focus your awareness on the event while it is happening. At a later time, record the details about that event and its components: thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations or reactions.

Day One

What was the stressful event? _____

Describe your reaction to the stressful event. Try to notice the details of the reaction as the event happens.

Thoughts: _____

Emotions: _____

Physical Sensations: _____

As you remember the event now, is there any remaining reactivity? What is it, exactly in this moment?

Day Two

What was the stressful event? _____

Describe your reaction to the stressful event. Try to notice the details of the reaction as the event happens.

Thoughts: _____

Emotions: _____

Physical Sensations: _____

As you remember the event now, is there any remaining reactivity? What is it, exactly in this moment?

Day Three

What was the stressful event? _____

Describe your reaction to the stressful event. Try to notice the details of the reaction as the event happens.

Thoughts: _____

Emotions: _____

Physical Sensations: _____

As you remember the event now, is there any remaining reactivity? What is it, exactly in this moment?

Day Four

What was the stressful event? _____

Describe your reaction to the stressful event. Try to notice the details of the reaction as the event happens.

Thoughts: _____

Emotions: _____

Physical Sensations: _____

As you remember the event now, is there any remaining reactivity? What is it, exactly in this moment?

Mindfulness of Stressful Events

Day Five

What was the stressful event? _____

Describe your reaction to the stressful event. Try to notice the details of the reaction as the event happens.

Thoughts: _____

Emotions: _____

Physical Sensations: _____

As you remember the event now, is there any remaining reactivity? What is it, exactly in this moment?

Day Six

What was the stressful event? _____

Describe your reaction to the stressful event. Try to notice the details of the reaction as the event happens.

Thoughts: _____

Emotions: _____

Physical Sensations: _____

As you remember the event now, is there any remaining reactivity? What is it, exactly in this moment?

Practice	Date:	Date:	Date:	Date:	Date:	Date:
Guided Sitting Meditation	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____
Body Scan	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____
20 Breaths (1)	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____
20 Breaths (2)	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____
20 Breaths (3)	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____	Time: _____ _____
Stop, Breathe, Be	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____	_____ _____ _____

