

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Cancer

Session 2 Handout

The Wandering Mind and Coming Back

* Materials adapted from Trish Bartley, 2012, 2017, Wiley-Blackwell; Z. Segal et al, 2013, The Guildford Press, and Patricia Rockman 2017, The Centre for Mindfulness Studies.

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space lies our growth and our freedom.”
Viktor Frankl, 1984

Living in our Heads

Human beings have minds that are wonderfully creative, imaginative, and able. Our minds allow us to navigate complexity, plan, and work with significant problems and challenges. On the other hand, we can sometimes over-use our intellect and our capacity to think to the point where we create problems for ourselves. We use the expression “living in our heads” to describe the wonderful human ability for introspection as well as the challenges that can be created by over-thinking or over-analyzing.

For example, we might experience a thought, an emotion and/or a body sensation, then rush to explain it to ourselves. Our explanations are often negative in nature, and a reaction quickly follows. We have automatic tendencies to judge our experiences, comparing what we have with what we want or don't want. We do this with possessions, relationships, and even personal qualities.

These reactions are often automatic and sometimes we are not even aware of them. We try to push difficult or challenging experiences out of our mind but instead find ourselves obsessed with trying to sort it all out or avoiding something important that we need to deal with. These experiences are universal, and you are not alone. Our thoughts automatically take us down well-worn paths in our minds, and the paths often take us to places we don't want to go.

After a diagnosis of cancer, these automatic thoughts and reactions sometimes bring extra layers of emotional suffering added to the physical burden of illness and treatment. We can easily spiral into future worries and worst-case thinking, or be dragged into a past we can't change, or caught in the web of comparing our situation with the lives of others. When these things happen, it is easy to lose awareness of what is happening in our lives right now.

We regain our freedom if, as a first step, we simply acknowledge what is here without immediately being hooked into automatic tendencies to judge, fix, or ruminate about needing things to be different. Once we see things are they truly are, we then have some space to consider what might be helpful to us.

The body scan practice provides an opportunity to practice bringing a curious and friendly or interested awareness to the way things are in this moment. The body scan also brings an opportunity to be with the natural tendencies of the mind without having to change anything. There is no goal to be achieved other than to bring awareness to sensations in the body and to notice the movements of the mind while doing this.

Coming Back

As you practice the body scan, you will quickly notice the movements of mind away from your intended focus to thoughts, emotions, sounds, or even sensations in other parts of the body. This is normal and you might find yourself noticing the movements of the mind many times during a single body scan.

Coming back, returning your attention over-and-over again to the intended place of focus, is at the heart of the practice of mindfulness. We are not aiming for an empty mind, or perfect focus when we practice mindfulness. We are looking to notice when our attention has moved, so that we can return to our intended place of focus.

When we practice placing our attention where we want it to go during a body scan practice, it becomes possible to place our attention and choose what really matters in other parts of our life as well.

Practice Tips

Any experience is a valid experience. You might notice falling asleep, losing concentration, thinking about other things, focusing on a body part different from where the guidance is, or not experiencing sensations at all. These are your experiences in the moment. Just be aware of them and allow the practice to support you in these experiences.

If your attention is wandering a lot, simply note the thoughts and then, with a sense of kindness, return your attention back to the focus of the meditation. It is normal for this to happen many times during a single practice.

Let go of ideas of success, of failure, of doing it well, or of trying to achieve some idealized state of calm or relaxation. This is not a competition and there's no right or wrong way to meditate. The only discipline involved is noticing your own experience with an attitude of openness, curiosity and kindness, even if that experience isn't one you would have chosen for yourself.

Let go of any expectation about what the practice will do for you. Imagine it as a seed you cultivate over time. The more you poke around and interfere, the less it will be able to develop. It is a practice. Do the best you can and establish a regular and frequent routine.

Try approaching your experience in each moment with the attitude, "ok, that's just the way it is right now". If you try to fight off unpleasant thoughts, feelings, or body sensations, the upsetting feelings tend to grow stronger and distract you from what you from what's important. As best you can, be aware, allow, and make space for what is here so that you have space left over for other important things in your life as well.

The Blob (mapping experience)

In this session, we did the "walking down the street" exercise:

You're walking down the street.

On the other side of the street, you see someone you know.

As they pass you on the street, you smile and wave.

The person does not wave back and keeps walking.

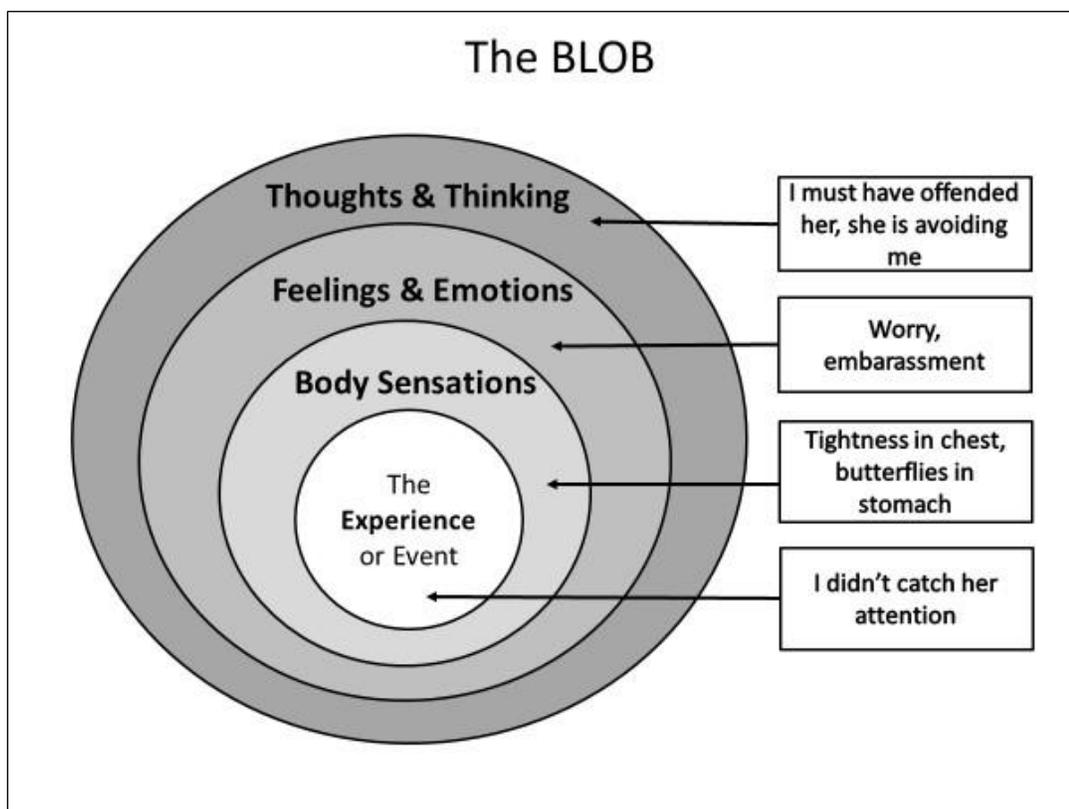
What thoughts are here? What emotions? What body sensations? What behaviours or impulses to act?

When we become aware of the way we interpret events we are better able to understand our reactions to them. Without awareness the “big blob” of experience can seem overwhelming. Breaking an experience into the components of:

- Thoughts,
- emotions,
- body sensations, and
- behaviours, urges, or impulses to act

allows us to step out of automatic pilot and potentially brings new perspectives and ways of exploring our own experience.

Here is an example below of a typical response to the “walking down the street” exercise.



If this is our experience, the automatic behaviour or impulse to act might be to avoid this person in the future or become upset with her. If we can break the experience into different components, then we can potentially explore other perspectives and how we might respond skillfully to this situation.

Anchoring Practice

Formal Stationary Meditation Practice Anchoring Practice



Choosing an anchor for the attention

- **Orient towards your environment:**
e.g. sensations of sound or sight
- **Points of contact between the body and surfaces supporting the body:**
sensations of feet on floor, sitting bones, arms and hands resting
- **Sensations inside of the body:**
sensations of breathing

**Choose an anchor that provides stability. Focusing on the sensations of breathing is one way, and the most common way, but not the only way.

Set up

This meditation practice can be done standing, seated, or lying down. The important thing is to choose a posture that is comfortable and helps you feel supported.

Once you are settled, allow the gaze to soften or close the eyes.

The aim of this meditation practice is not to feel relaxed or calm. Relaxation might be preferred, and at times, experienced, but relaxation is not the purpose of this practice. In this practice, we are training our attention by focusing attention on an anchor, or single point of focus. We notice the qualities of sensation present at this point of focus. We also invite noticing when your attention drifts away from your chosen anchor, often to thoughts.

There are two recordings provided for this practice—one focused on the sensations of breathing as an anchor, and the other focused on the sensations of hearing as an anchor. And please know that the guidance you are hearing is only an invitation. If this practice is challenging for you today or any day, know that you are always able to make a choice to use another anchor altogether, to choose a different practice, or to take a break for today. We always practice in choice and the choice is yours.

Anchoring Practice-Sensations of Breathing

Begin by finding a posture that feels supportive for your body in this moment.

Become aware of the body being supported by the surface holding you up. You might be noticing points of contact between the feet or heels and the floor, the sitting bones or back body, or the sensations of

the hands and arms making contact where they are resting. Invite your attention to be aware of any sensations in the body making themselves known to you, either on the surface of the skin or deeper inside the body.

1. As you pay attention to body sensations in this way, see if it's possible to become aware of the sensations of the body breathing. You might be noticing cooler air entering and warmer air leaving the body through the nostrils or mouth, or the chest and rib cage expanding and contracting with each in breath or outbreath, or you might be aware of the lower belly stretching with each in breath and releasing with each out breath. And choosing the place where the sensations of breathing seem most noticeable and vivid to you right now and remain here for a moment.
2. Breathing is the primary focus of our attention here, but our field of awareness also includes thoughts, and sounds, and emotions, and other physical sensations. And sooner or later, you will wake up to noticing your attention pulled away from breathing to one of these. This is perfectly normal and ok. When this happens, gently guiding your attention back to the primary focus on breathing, wherever you best sense the body breathing right now, using the sensations of breathing as an anchor for your attention.
3. Sometimes, when we bring our attention to the sensations of breathing, we might notice the breath speeding up or slowing down. Try to explore the possibility of not trying to control or influence the breath in any way. Be really interested in your experience, seeing if it's possible to be curious about the sensations of the body breathing at your chosen place of focus, however they are showing up.
4. Inevitably you will notice the mind moving or drifting away to thinking, to sound, or to other sensations. As best you can, seeing the repeated movements of the mind away as opportunities to bring patience, kindness, and gentle curiosity to your own experience. Each breath is a chance to start over, and to practice again.

Anchoring Practice-Sensations of Hearing

Begin by finding a posture that feels supportive for your body in this moment.

Become aware of the body being supported by the surface holding you up. You might be noticing points of contact between the feet or heels and the floor, the sitting bones or back body, or the sensations of the hands and arms making contact where they are resting. Invite your attention to be aware of any sensations in the body making themselves known to you, either on the surface of the skin or deeper inside the body.

1. Bring your attention towards the ears and attend to the sensations of hearing as an anchor for your attention. You might be noticing sounds in your space or sounds further away. Noticing sounds as they come and go. We tend to tell stories about sound—oh there's traffic, or the sound of birds, or the sounds of people or pets. As best you can, try to observe the direct qualities of the sounds you are listening to, such as: volume, pitch, length, rhythm or so on.
2. Hearing is the primary focus of our attention here, but our field of awareness also includes thoughts, and emotions, and physical sensations. And sooner or later, you will wake up to

noticing your attention pulled away from hearing to one of these. This is perfectly normal and ok. When this happens, gently guiding your attention back to the primary focus on hearing, using the sensations of sound as an anchor for your attention.

3. Sometimes, when we bring our attention to the sensations of hearing, we might notice wanting to seek out pleasant sounds or avoid unpleasant sounds. Be really interested in your experience, seeing if it's possible to be curious about the sensations of the hearing, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. You might even explore moments of silence between sounds.
4. Inevitably you will notice the mind moving or drifting away to thinking or to body sensations. As best you can, seeing the repeated movements of the mind away as opportunities to bring patience, kindness, and gentle curiosity to your own experience. Every time you return your attention to the sensations of hearing is a chance to start over, and to practice again.

The Summer Day

Who made the world!

Who made the swan, and the black bear? Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean-the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

The one who is eating sugar out of my hand, Who is moving her jaws back and forth Instead of up and down-

Who is gazing around with her enormous And complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open and Floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is. I do know how to pay attention,

how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,

which is what I was doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done? Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what it is you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?

-Mary Oliver 1992

Home Practice

1. Body Scan

Try out the body scan each day this week using the recording provided. Just let your experience be your experience. There's no such thing as a good or bad body scan and there are no marks assigned. Just do your best with the practice and make note of anything that comes up so that we can talk about it at the next session.

2. Anchoring Practice

Try out this practice once a day over the next week. There are two options—one option is awareness of breathing and the other is awareness of hearing.

3. The Pause

Begin by stopping what you are doing- and asking yourself one of the following questions:

What is going on for me right now?

OR

How am I feeling right now?

Keep this very simple. You might want to adapt the question you ask yourself or create your own question. You are trying to tune into a felt sense of what is happening in this moment- not so much thinking about it.

4. Informal Practice

Bring mindful awareness to a routine daily activity, such as drinking tea, eating, washing dishes, brushing your teeth, opening the car door, or any other activity that you might normally do on "automatic pilot". Try to pick a different activity than the one you picked last week.

5. Pleasant Events Log

Notice one pleasant event each day. It can be something small, and the ask is that you notice it and fill in the Pleasant Events Log once/day. Instructions and

6. Noticing Curiosity

See if it's possible to be curious about your experiences. This might include bringing an attitude of curiosity to your home practice, or to some other part of your life. Curiosity requires paying attention. When we pay attention, we turn off automatic pilot and tune into the present moment. Cultivating curiosity can help us to suspend judgement because we don't need to label an experience as good or bad to be curious about it. When you cultivate curiosity, what do you notice?

Home Practice Log

Day	Practice	Comments and Experiences
Day 1	Body Scan Anchoring Practice The Pause Informal Practice	
Day 2	Body Scan Anchoring Practice The Pause Informal Practice	
Day 3	Body Scan Anchoring Practice The Pause Informal Practice	
Day 4	Body Scan Anchoring Practice The Pause Informal Practice	
Day 5	Body Scan Anchoring Practice The Pause Informal Practice	

Day	Practice	Comments and Experiences
Day 6	Body Scan Anchoring Practice The Pause Informal Practice	