

Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Cancer

Session 4 Handout

Learning to Respond

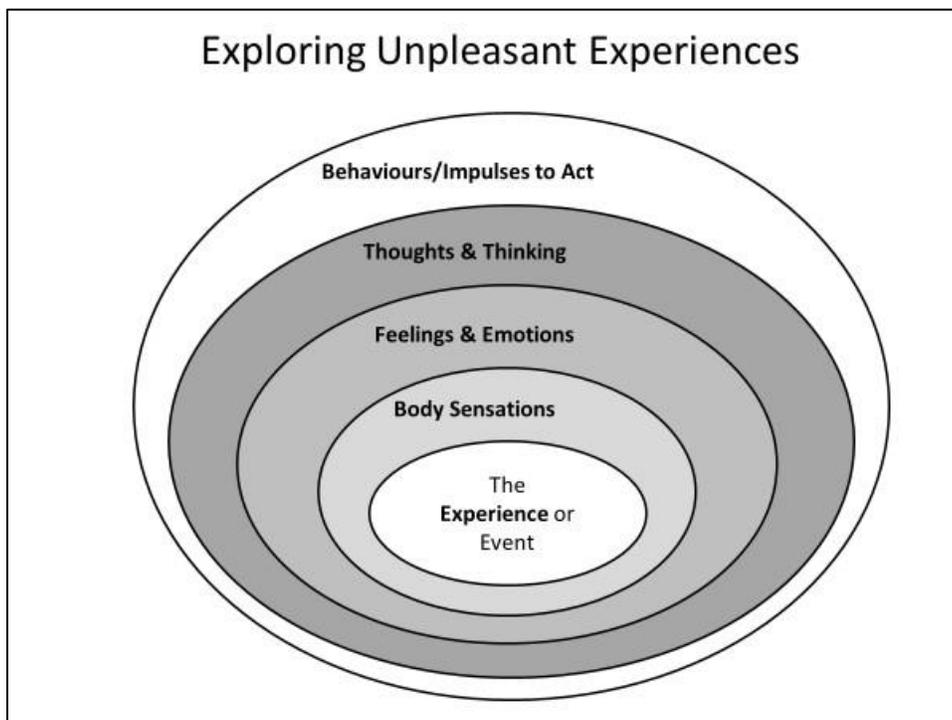
* Materials adapted from Trish Bartley, 2012, 2017, Wiley-Blackwell; Z. Segal et al, 2013, The Guildford Press, and Patricia Rockman 2017, The Centre for Mindfulness Studies.

“When we let go of our battles, and open our heart to things as they are, then we come to rest in the present moment.”-Jack Kornfield, 2008

In Session 4, we work directly with difficulty. Everyone in this program knows that life brings difficult experiences. How we relate to and work with difficult experiences makes the difference between whether they control our lives completely or whether we can find ways of relating to them.

We all try to avoid unpleasant experiences. We have a natural fight/flight instinct towards what is unwanted or difficult. Distress is triggered by the tendency of the mind to judge, to want things to be different, to blame, to move into catastrophic thinking and/or to compare. These tendencies add extra on top of unpleasant or difficult experiences. Reactivity creates or increases our suffering. However, while the unpleasant experience is often unavoidable, with practice we can learn to change our reactions.

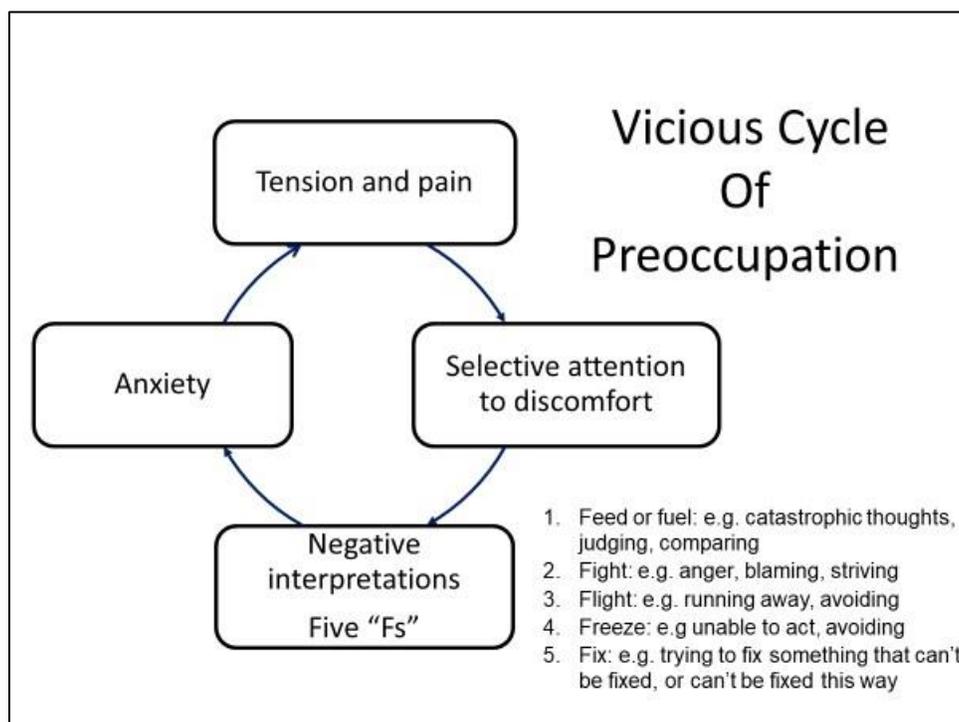
We often experience the unpleasant as an overwhelming “BLOB”. In this program, we work with difficulty by becoming aware of the individual components of experience—the body sensations, emotions, thoughts, and behaviours/impulses/urges that arise for us when a difficult situation presents itself. If we can notice habitual, automatic and unhelpful reactions in this way, we might then be able to explore responses that prove to be more helpful to us.



Our own thoughts can “fan the flames” of aversion and reactivity and make our suffering bigger than it needs to be. Trish Bartley (2012) talks about the five “F words” that have the potential to turn an unpleasant experience into overwhelm. They are:

1. Feed or fuel: e.g. catastrophic thoughts, judging, comparing
2. Fight: e.g. anger, blaming, striving
3. Flight: e.g. running away, avoiding
4. Freeze: e.g. unable to act, avoiding
5. Fix: e.g. trying to fix something that can't be fixed, or can't be fixed this way

The Vicious Cycle of Preoccupation is a model of suffering that might particularly speak to those living with Cancer. It describes how the thoughts and impulses/urges/behaviours brought by the Five F's work with our body sensations and emotions to increase suffering



In this session, we work with techniques to allow us to work with unpleasant experiences in a new way, however those unpleasant experiences show up in your life.

Staying Present

In mindfulness practice, we use our own bodies as a tool for increasing awareness and for training our “noticing muscle”. This can be as simple as noticing your posture. You are probably sitting or reclining as you read this. What are the sensations in your body in this moment? Where is your body in contact with the surface holding you? Do you notice the sensations of your clothing? Of temperature or the air on your skin? Notice the sensations of standing up, or of walking or moving.

Practice again and again, bringing your attention back to your body. This basic effort, which paradoxically, is a relaxing into the moment, gives us the key to expanding our awareness from times of formal meditation to living mindfully in the world. Aversion and reactivity often show up in the body, and tuning into the body allows us to tune into our own “emotional weather”.

Awareness of body sensations helps us to interrupt our patterns of reactivity and explore more helpful responses and ways of relating to our experiences.

The Physical Barometer

If you have a barometer or have seen someone consult one, you will know that you gently tap on the glass front. We then use the direction the needle moves to help forecast the weather.

We can use our bodies in a similar way to give us sensitive information about the “emotional weather” arising for us. Here is how you do this:

1. **Recognize a part of your body that is especially sensitive to stress.** This is often in the torso, potentially in the shoulders, the chest or abdomen, between the two, and for some of us in the back.
2. **Once you have found the place, it can be your ‘Physical Barometer’.** Tune into this part of the body regularly and notice what sensations might be present at different times. When you are under pressure, feeling anxious, or frustrated, you may notice sensations of tension, tightness, shakiness, or discomfort. The intensity of these sensations might vary depending on the level of your difficulty.
3. **Practice.** As you get more practiced at this, you might find yourself noticing more subtle sensations. These might serve as an early warning system, telling you that trouble is brewing long before you are aware of this in your mind.
4. **Respond.** If you wish, you can practice a Breathing Space to help you respond to what is happening. Alternatively, you might choose just to monitor the sensations in your ‘barometer’, moment by moment, to be with them as they are, and notice if there are any changes over time.

The Three-Step Breathing Space (Responding to Unpleasant Events)

The Three-Step Breathing space can be used in a way that assists us in building tolerance for unpleasant events. It is a way of developing a different relationship to difficult emotions, to step back and observe our own experience. This approach, often referred to as decentering or defusing from difficult emotions, makes space for the possibility of a new response that might be more skillful and supportive than our habitual ways of reacting.

Intentionality is extremely important to this practice This is not about fixing or feeling better after you have practiced. Rather, this practice is about caring for ourselves in the face of challenges. We start by acknowledging what we are facing, not turning away from it, but encountering it from a place of being grounded and in the present moment.

From this, insight **may** arise around whether the problem needs addressing and if so, how we might approach it. We might also discover that our best, and sometimes only path forward, is to be **with** the experience as it is, bringing kindness and care to our own experience. We also begin to learn that difficult emotions are manageable and can be tended instead of avoided.

Beginning this breathing space meditation by making a deliberate and definite change in posture helping you to come into the present moment quickly. Use a posture that, for you, brings a sense of being alert and paying attention.

1. **Step 1:** Turning your attention inward, noticing what is going on for you right now. Noticing what thoughts are present. Seeing if it's possible to observe thoughts as sensations of the mind, and just noting them.

And noticing any emotions here right now. If difficult emotions or challenging feelings are present, exploring the possibility of turning towards them, rather than trying to push them away or shut them out, just notice and name them. For example, saying "anger is present" or "sadness is here", not needing your experience to be different than it is.

And noticing any physical sensations arising in the body, focusing attention on any part of the body where you might be noticing challenging or strong sensations. If it's supportive for you, using the breath as a vehicle to assist in directing your attention to this part of the body, expanding your attention into the area on an in-breath, and releasing and softening on an out breath. You might notice awareness of tension or holding and allowing yourself to be with whatever is here. You might say to yourself -"This is a moment of difficulty. It's ok to feel this, because it's already here".

The invitation is staying in awareness of any thoughts, emotions or body sensations and your relationship to them, noticing if they change over time.

Optional: If it's supportive for you, feel free to bring kind touch to the body, perhaps by placing a hand over the heart or resting your chin in your hands or bringing kind touch to an area of the body where you notice challenging sensations.

2. **Step 2:** Having acknowledged what is here, moving to step 2 of the breathing space, gathering and focusing your attention on a single anchor. This might be the sensations of breathing in the lower belly, or it might be the sensations of the feet resting against the floor, or any other anchor that supportive in stabilizing your attention. Choose an anchor for your attention and spend a few

moments here.

- Step 3:** Having focused the attention, prepare to re-engage with the world. Begin by expanding attention around the breath to include the entire body. You might notice the outline of the body in space, posture or facial expressions. Take note of any regions where intense sensations are present. Are there sensations that are revealing themselves to you? If there are, see whether you can move your attention into that area. Perhaps investigate or observe these sensations by noticing their qualities.

When you are ready to bring this practice to a close, expand your attention further to take in what you see around you, and what you hear in your space, turning your attention outward. Take a moment to care for yourself in some way, then bringing this expanded awareness into your day.

The Breathing Space Practice



Step 1-Notice and name your experience :
Thoughts, emotions and body sensations

Step 2-Focus attention on a single anchor.
e.g. breathing or feet on floor

Step 3-Expanding attention: Explore what's
present in all body sensations/senses

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Reading-Shared Compassion

From the book A Lamp In the Darkness-Illuminating the Path Through Difficult Times by Jack Kornfield (2011)

One recent student of mindfulness was a young army lieutenant who had been remanded to an eight-week class of mindfulness training by his commanding officer because of his inability to control his temper. After about six weeks of learning the practice of mindfulness and bringing a kind and compassionate attention to his experience, he found himself in a hurry, shopping at a local supermarket on his way home one evening. The market was crowded and the checkout lines were long. He had a full cart and noticed that the woman in front of him had only one item in her basket. This lieutenant was the kind of person who wanted things to be done right. She was in the wrong line. She was supposed to be in the express line. Worse than that, she was carrying a baby in her arms, and when she got up to the checkout clerk she held the baby up and the clerk began to coo and talk to the woman about the baby. And then, the woman handed the baby across the counter so that the clerk could hold him! A long line of people was waiting. The annoyance the lieutenant had been feeling built to a point where he was about to lose control and say something in anger to the two women. But after six weeks of training in mindful awareness, a part of him became aware that he was triggered.

The lieutenant decided to use this as an opportunity to try some of the mindfulness and attention practices he'd been learning. Bringing his attention to his breath, he began to experience a sense of spaciousness and release from his feelings of being overcome by his strong emotions. He did not push the irritation away; rather, he became aware of his anger and by honoring and accepting it, he felt enough of a release from his strong feelings to notice the waves of pain and heat and energy and judgment that were filling his body. And, after taking a few more deep breaths, he felt a kindness begin to flood him and surround his pain and suffering until they slowly diminished. As he became filled with compassion, he looked up and realized that even though the woman was chattering and holding up the line, the child was cute and the three of them seemed to be enjoying this pleasant social moment. So when he got up to the checkout counter he'd calmed down enough to say graciously, "That was kind of a cute kid, wasn't it?" And the checkout clerk looked up at him and said, "Oh, do you think so? He's my boy. You see, my husband was in the army and he was killed in the Middle East last year. Now I have to work and my mom stays home to take care of my baby. She tries to bring him in once a day so I can see him."

You are more than this hurt. Remember who you really are.

Thought on a Thread-Bringing Kindness to your Own Experience

In Session 4 we invite you to work with the red bead on a black cotton thread provided to you either in person or by mail. The thread links to a project called Thoughts on a Thread, a project linked with community support for an HIV and AIDS NGO in South Africa. You can learn more about this organization at <https://www.wozamoya.co.za/>.

The red bead, similar to the dots or stars provided in Session 2, reminds us to pause and come back – perhaps moving into a Three-Step Breathing Space or other short practice like The Pause or Feet on Floor.

The thread invites another important aspect of responding. The red bead was used to introduce simple mindfulness exercises to people in rural Africa affected by HIV & Aids. By connecting in this way, we invite a sense of community amongst those affected by life threatening illness. We link to a shared human experience of suffering. In the end, we all struggle with illness and/or death.

This Thought on a Thread represents how we are all linked together, and a path towards compassion for ourselves and others through our shared common humanity.

1. Contact with the Ground Exploring

Feeling the feet on the ground and exploring detailed sensations in toes, balls of the feet, and heels. Noticing texture, contact, pressure, pain (if there is any), ease, and weight. Doing this for a few moments This can be linked to a daily activity, such as getting out of bed, or finishing a meal. We can also practice this when awake in the night or sitting, by bringing awareness to the contact of the body with the surface supporting you.

2. Hand on the Belly Breathing

Placing the hand on the belly and bringing awareness to the breath moving under the hand. Doing this for a little while – noticing when the mind wanders to something else (which is quite normal and not a problem) then gently returning to the breath and the hand on the belly. Try this during times when you might feel stressed or anxious.

3. Touching the Bead Connecting

Touching the red bead opening to the possibility of sending kindness to ourselves. Not forcing this, just opening to the possibility. Breathing from an open heart.

Repeating one of these phrases if you would like – or adapting your own:

‘May I be safe and protected’

‘May I be peaceful’

‘May I live with kindness’

We can also think of others, and send well wishes to others who might be ill or suffering in some way.

‘May you be safe and protected’

‘May you be peaceful’

‘May you live with kindness’

Exploring Acceptance and Non-Striving

There is no controlling life.
Try corralling a lightning bolt,
containing a tornado. Dam a
stream and it will create a new
channel. Resist, and the tide
will sweep you off your feet.
Allow, and grace will carry
you to higher ground. The only
safety lies in letting it all in –
the wild and the weak; fear,
fantasies, failures and success.
When loss rips off the doors of
the heart, or sadness veils your
vision with despair, practice
becomes simply bearing the truth.
In the choice to let go of your
known way of being, the whole
world is revealed to your new eyes.

Allow by Danna Faulds

Acceptance

Acceptance requires an active turning toward a situation and realizing “this is the way it is right now”. Acceptance does not require that we like what we’re accepting, but it asks for the honesty to say:

“Yes, I don’t like it and this is the way it is right now”.

Until we can do that we continuously try to force things into the way they are not, which in turn is creates additional stress and suffering. Acceptance is different from resignation. Acceptance doesn’t mean that we stop trying to change a situation, but the effort behind it is much healthier and may come from a wiser place.

-Wolf and Serpa 2015

Non-striving

Non-striving means being fully present with things as they are, stepping away from the need to change or fix things in this moment. It means moving from our constant habitual “doing” mode into the more open and receptive “being mode”. Being mode allows this moment to be “good enough”, not perfect, and potentially stressful or painful. But when we learn to be with the only present moment that we have right now, we often find an experience of restoration and ease. Non-striving does not mean we cannot have goals or aspirations. It is simply an opportunity to take pause and to cultivate present moment awareness and acceptance.

Home Practice

1. Anchoring Practice (20 min) and Mindful Movement on alternate days

For Mindful Movement, you can do Mindful Walking, Mindful Movement, or bring mindful attention to any movement you are doing. Bring mindful attention, care, and kindness to challenging sensations as we practiced in today's session.

2. Three Step Breathing Space

Continue to try out the Three Step Breathing Space at least once/day, and three times/day if possible. You can schedule these practices, or use the "dots" or "stars" to remind you.

Session 4 focused on working with difficulty. When we check in with ourselves regularly, using the Breathing Space, The Pause, or any other tool, we might notice difficulty, but we might also notice pleasant experiences, or times when an experience is not as unpleasant as we thought it was.

Barbara Fredrickson, a well-known researcher in positive psychology, has stated: "The negative screams at you but the positive only whispers." See if you can use the the Three Step Breathing Space and The Pause to notice both pleasant and unpleasant experiences in the course of your day.

3. Three Step Breathing Space (Responding to Difficulty)

Try using the Three-Step Breathing Space when noticing moments of difficult thoughts and emotions or the Vicious Cycle of Preoccupation. A suggested script is provided in this session's notes.

4. Responding with Kindness

When noticing moments of reactivity, try responding with phrases of kindness as we did with the Thoughts on a Thread practice. You can practice this on it's own, or at the end of the Three Step Breathing Space.

Home Practice Log

Day	Practice	Comments and Experiences
Day 1	Anchoring (with challenging sensations) Mindful Movement Three Step Breathing Space Three Step Breathing Space (responding to difficulty) Responding with Kindness	
Day 2	Anchoring (with challenging sensations) Mindful Movement Three Step Breathing Space Three Step Breathing Space (responding to difficulty) Responding with Kindness	
Day 3	Anchoring (with challenging sensations) Mindful Movement Three Step Breathing Space Three Step Breathing Space (responding to difficulty) Responding with Kindness	
Day 4	Anchoring (with challenging sensations)	

Day	Practice	Comments and Experiences
	Mindful Movement Three Step Breathing Space Three Step Breathing Space (responding to difficulty) Responding with Kindness	
Day 5	Anchoring (with challenging sensations) Mindful Movement Three Step Breathing Space Three Step Breathing Space (responding to difficulty) Responding with Kindness	
Day 6	Anchoring (with challenging sensations) Mindful Movement Three Step Breathing Space Three Step Breathing Space (responding to difficulty) Responding with Kindness	