

# Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Cancer

## Session 5 Handout

### Gently Being with the Difficult

\* 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.

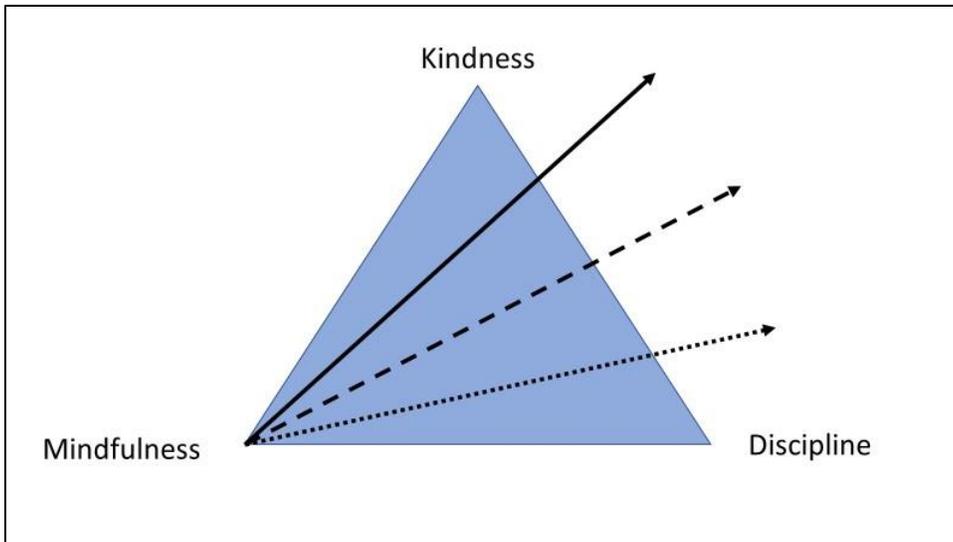
Have mercy on this pain you have carried for so long.  
-Stephen Levine, 1987

In the first four weeks of this program, our primary task has been to develop a close connection to our own experience, while also noticing how “automatic pilot” often takes us someplace else. We have started to appreciate that we all have typical patterns of reacting to events and there are times when these patterns don’t serve us well.

We have learned how our experience can show up as a BLOB—that can overwhelm us during times of difficulty and disappear quickly without even being noticed during more pleasant times. We have learned to deconstruct the BLOB of experience into thoughts, emotions, body sensations, and behaviours or impulses to help us work with that experience skillfully. We have practiced inclining our mind towards pleasant experiences to balance the negativity bias present in all human minds. The short practices introduced in this program, particularly Standing (or Sitting) in Mountain, The Pause, The Physical Barometer, and the Breathing Space, are designed to help us check in with and (on a good day) take a step back from our own experience.

As we move into the second half of the program this process deepens. We turn towards the difficult, to approach painful experiences with kindness and a gentle awareness. We might notice the Vicious Cycle and the Five Fs discussed last week: feed/fuel, fight, flight, freeze, and fix. We might notice common physical sensations that arise using our physical barometer. Awareness of reactivity allows us to be fully present with our own experience, and then respond to that experience in a way that serves us.

## The Kindness and Discipline Model



As we work with difficulty, the invitation is to bring a balance of kindness and discipline to your practice. Remember that practice is invitational, and the choice is always yours. Some of us benefit from using mindfulness practice to support ourselves in rest, and others in a way that brings energy. Some will find support in the longer, formal stationary practices, others in movement or walking practice, and others in the shorter practices.

Some of us benefit from going easier on ourselves, and others might be supported by bringing more structure to our practice. There's no right or wrong. The invitation is to simply notice your own experience, to bring kindness and care to yourself if possible, and then bring mindfulness in to decide what best serves you as a next step. Perhaps you might even bring the attitude of curiosity to your own experience, and "try on" different approaches to see what serves you best.

The story below might provide some interesting reflections on how to use your own "wise mind" and bring a balance between kindness and discipline to your own practice and life.

### THE GARDEN

by Arnold Lobel

from the book of stories "Frog and Toad Together", they are friends who spend a lot of time together

Frog was in his garden.

Toad came walking by.

"What a fine garden you have, Frog," he said.

"Yes," said Frog. "It is very nice, but it was hard work."

"I wish I had a garden," said Toad.

"Here are some flower seeds. Plant them in the ground," said Frog,

"and soon you will have a garden."

"How soon?" asked Toad.

"Quite soon," said Frog.

Toad ran home.

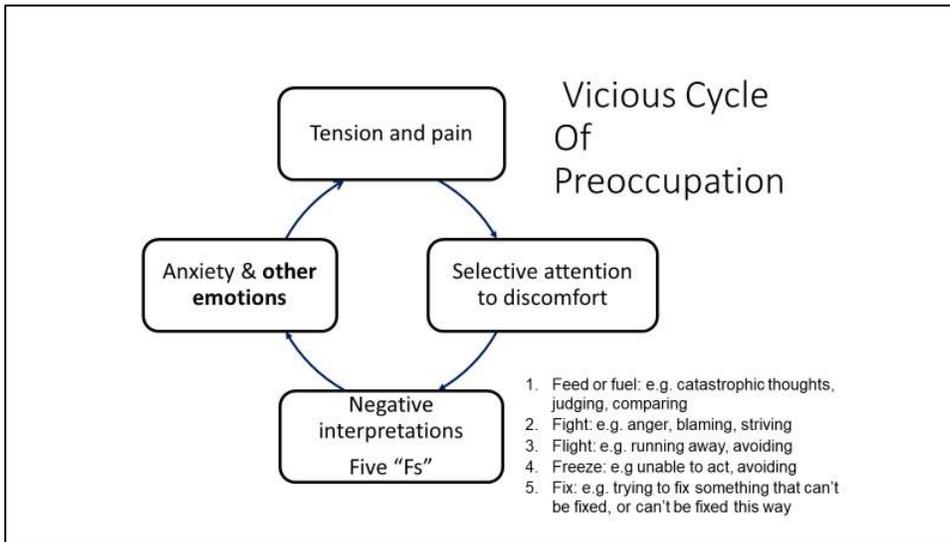
He planted the flower seeds.

"Now seeds," said Toad, "start growing."

Toad walked up and down a few times. The seeds did not start to grow.  
Toad put his head close to the ground and said loudly, "Now seeds, start growing!"  
The seeds did not start to grow.  
Toad put his head very close to the ground and shouted,  
"NOW SEEDS, START GROWING!"  
Frog came running up the path.  
"What is all this noise?" he asked.  
"My seeds will not grow," said Toad.  
"You are shouting too much," said Frog. "These poor seeds are afraid to grow."  
"My seeds are afraid to grow?" asked Toad.  
"Of course," said Frog. "Leave them alone for a few days.  
Let the sun shine on them, let the rain fall on them. Soon your seeds will start to grow."  
That night Toad looked out of his window.  
"Drat!" said Toad. "My seeds have not started to grow. They must be afraid of the dark."  
Toad went out to his garden with some candles.  
"I will read the seeds a story," said Toad. "Then they will not be afraid."  
Toad read a long story to his seeds.  
All the next day Toad sang songs to his seeds.  
And all the next day Toad read poems to his seeds.  
And all the next day Toad played music for his seeds.  
Toad looked at the ground.  
The seeds still did not start to grow.  
"What shall I do?" cried Toad.  
"These must be the most frightened seeds in the whole world!"  
Then Toad felt very tired, and he fell asleep.  
"Toad, Toad, wake up," said Frog. "Look at your garden!"  
Toad looked at his garden.  
Little green plants were coming up out of the ground.  
"At last," shouted Toad, "my seeds have stopped being afraid to grow!"  
"And now you will have a nice garden too," said Frog.  
"Yes," said Toad, but you were right, Frog. It was a very hard work."

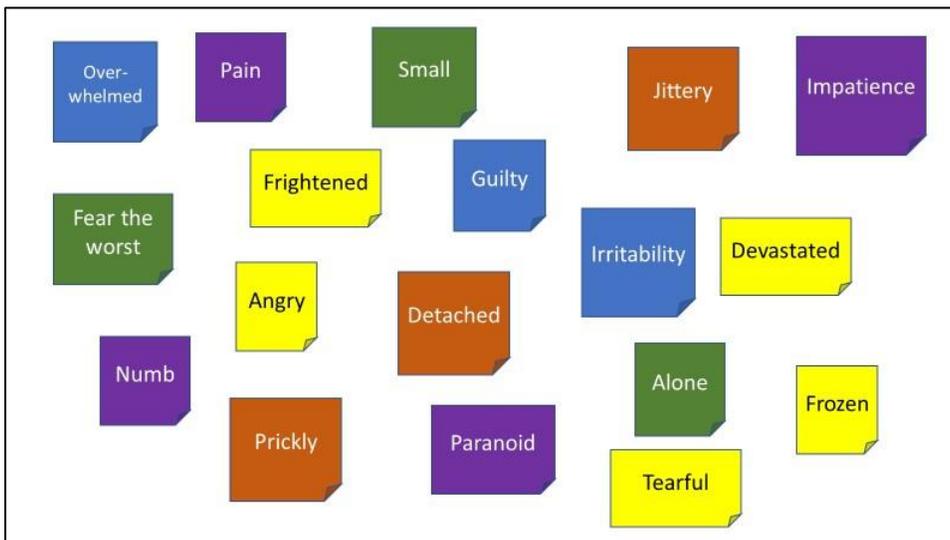
## Sea of Reactions

In Session 4, we discussed the Vicious Cycle of Preoccupation, as noted in the diagram below:



In Session 5, we add to this by exploring our typical pattern or “playlist”—the thoughts and emotions that arise during times of reactivity. Do any of the reactions or emotional responses in the picture below feel familiar to you? The Feelings Wheel at <https://feelingswheel.com/> might also offer some ideas for words relating to emotions that resonate for you, or feel free to use your own words and ideas.

Do any negative thoughts or interpretations (e.g. the Five Fs) show up alongside the emotions that most resonate for you during moments of reactivity? If you check in to your Physical Barometer, what sensations show up alongside these emotions and thoughts?

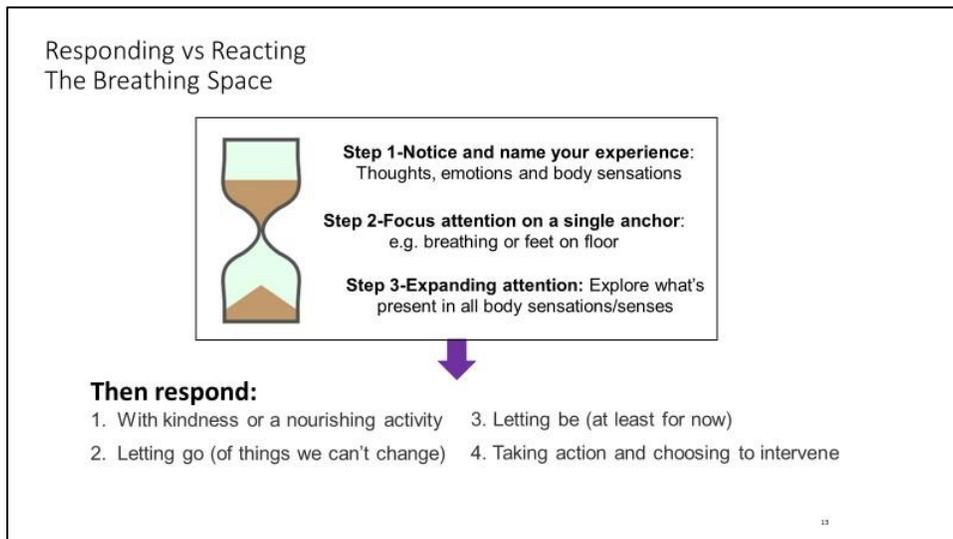


## The Three-Step Breathing Space (Responding to Unpleasant Events), With an Action Step

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. You can also use the phrases of kindness we learned last week.

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.
3. **Step 3:** Having focused the attention, prepare to re-engage with the world. Being 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.
4. **Step 4-Response:** After completing the breathing space, the invitation is to choose an action. These actions might include one of the options below, or something else:

**Bring Mindfulness, Kindness, and Care to your own experience:** Deliberately explore an action that is nourishing, kind, and nurturing to yourself. This might be an activity that brings pleasure, or a sense of accomplishment, or healthy social engagements. It might be an act of self-care or doing less of something that drains your energy.

**Letting go:** In some situations, it might be difficult to decide what to do. In reviewing options, perhaps in the context of something you have been mulling over for a bit for ruminating about, you might come to realize that there is nothing you need to do, at least for right now. In this case, you can let go of trying for the moment and redirect your attention and energy someplace else.

**Letting Be and Trusting Wise Mind:** Sometimes, it is not clear what to do in this moment. This doesn't mean you won't need to come back to the situation, but you can explore using your own wisdom, trusting that an action will present itself if and when the time is right.

**Take Action:** Choosing to intervene in the situation in some way.

## Reading-Dragons and Princesses

*Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet (1934)*

How could we forget those ancient myths that stand at the beginning of all races – the myths about dragons that at the last moment are transformed into princesses?

Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are only princesses waiting for us to act, just once, with beauty and courage.

Perhaps everything that frightens us is, in its deepest essence, something helpless that wants our love.

So you must not be frightened if a sadness rises up before you larger than any you have ever seen; if a restiveness, like light and cloudshadows, passes over your hands and over all you do.

You must think that something is happening with you, that life has not forgotten you, that it holds you in its hand; it will not let you fall.

## Home Practice

1. Body Scan/Anchoring Practice/Breath Body Sounds Thoughts and Emotions/Mindful Movement

If possible, practice for 30 minutes/day. Explore a balance between kindness and discipline in your practice. If you notice difficulty arising in your practice, see if it's possible to bring kindness to that experience, perhaps through the phrases of kindness we discussed in Session 4.

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.

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. Try out one of the action steps described earlier in these notes.

4. The Pause with the Physical Barometer

Try practicing The Pause every day to check in with yourself, including the Physical Barometer and noticing where sensations are showing up in the body.

# Home Practice Log

Day	Practice	Comments and Experiences
Day 1	Stationary or Movement Practice (30 min if possible)  Three Step Breathing Space  Three Step Breathing Space (responding to difficulty with or without an action step)  The Pause with the Physical Barometer	
Day 2	Stationary or Movement Practice (30 min if possible)  Three Step Breathing Space  Three Step Breathing Space (responding to difficulty with or without an action step)  The Pause with the Physical Barometer	
Day 3	Stationary or Movement Practice (30 min if possible)  Three Step Breathing Space  Three Step Breathing Space (responding to difficulty with or without an action step)  The Pause with the Physical Barometer	
Day 4	Stationary or Movement Practice (30 min if possible)	

Day	Practice	Comments and Experiences
	<p>Three Step Breathing Space</p> <p>Three Step Breathing Space (responding to difficulty with or without an action step)</p> <p>The Pause with the Physical Barometer</p>	
<b>Day 5</b>	<p>Stationary or Movement Practice (30 min if possible)</p> <p>Three Step Breathing Space</p> <p>Three Step Breathing Space (responding to difficulty with or without an action step)</p> <p>The Pause with the Physical Barometer</p>	
<b>Day 6</b>	<p>Stationary or Movement Practice (30 min if possible)</p> <p>Three Step Breathing Space</p> <p>Three Step Breathing Space (responding to difficulty with or without an action step)</p> <p>The Pause with the Physical Barometer</p>	