

# Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Cancer

## Session 6 Handout

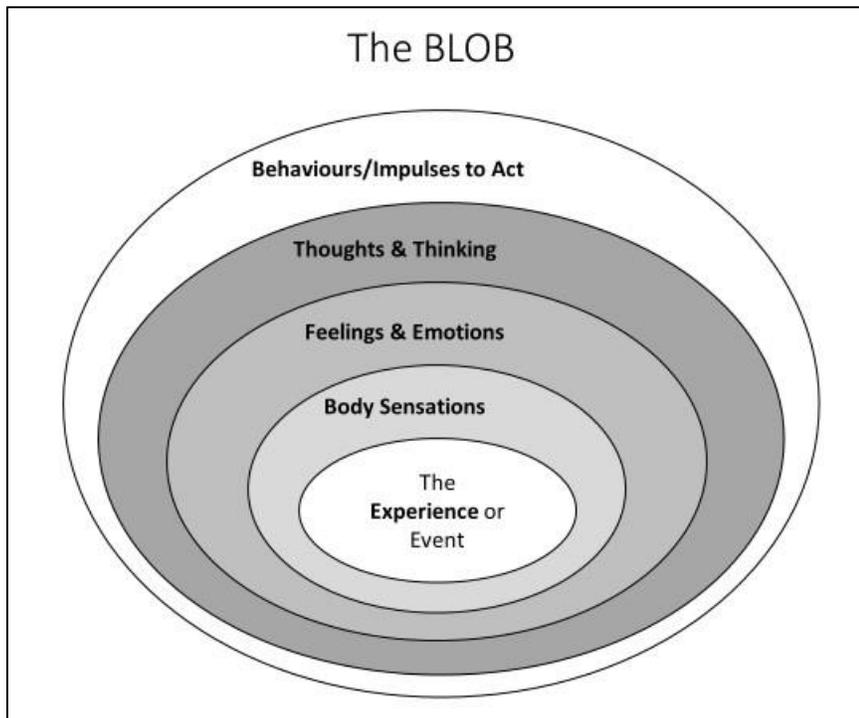
### Thoughts are Not Facts

\* 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.

It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: “Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge.” They have the potential to drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

- Joseph Goldstein

Our thoughts can have powerful effects on how we feel and what we do. Thoughts often occur automatically and when they appear, they seem to be fully in charge of our minds and our bodies. Thoughts can show up as beliefs, ideas, or images. They show up in our BLOB of experience, accompanied by emotions, body sensations, and impulses or urges that are related to the thought.



As we practice awareness of the thoughts passing through the mind, then letting go and returning our attention to our breath or other anchor, it becomes possible to get some distance and perspective on them. Through practice we can explore new perspectives and patterns of mind, freeing us from the tyranny of the old thought patterns that show up in “automatic pilot”.

We may eventually come to realize that thoughts are only mental events or sensations of the mind, and they can, and do change over time. Thoughts are not always true, including the thoughts that insist that they are, and some thoughts are not facts, even if some are. Through practice, we learn that we are

more than our thoughts, and can use this newfound space to skillfully respond to challenging thoughts, and the emotions, body sensations, and behaviours/impulses to act that come with those thoughts.

This example might help bring these ideas to life. Trish Bartley, in her book *Mindfulness: A Kindly Approach to Being with Cancer* notes that our mood and emotions have a very strong influence on how we react to an event. The stories we tell ourselves about an event can change, and often change quite a lot, based on the mood we are in when the event occurs.

Thoughts are not facts (at least not all the time)		
<b>Scenario 1:</b> You slept poorly, feel fatigued and hungry, and have a day ahead filled with unpleasant errands and one appointment.	<b>You are sitting in your doctor's office waiting for your appointment. Your doctor walks by but doesn't make eye contact with you.</b>	Thoughts: Emotions: Body Sensations: Behaviours/Impulses:
<b>Scenario 2:</b> You slept well, enjoyed a favorite breakfast, and have plans for a day filled with pleasant activities and one appointment.		Thoughts: Emotions: Body Sensations: Behaviours/Impulses:

Thoughts and thinking often provide us with an indication of what is going on deeper in the mind. By becoming very familiar with our own habitual, automatic, unhelpful thinking patterns, we can more easily become aware of and, over time even change the processes that may lead us into downward mood spirals or anxious states.

It is particularly important to become aware of thoughts that may block or undermine practice, such as 'There's no point in doing this' or 'It's not going to work, so why bother?' or 'What if this makes me worse?' Such pessimistic, hopeless or catastrophic thought patterns are one of the most characteristic features of depressed mood and anxious states, and one of the main factors that stop us taking actions that would help us to get out of those states. It follows that it is particularly important to recognize such thoughts as "negative thinking" and not automatically give up on efforts to apply skillful means to change the way we feel.  
-Dr Patricia Rockman

This doesn't mean that some thoughts are not true. If we can deconstruct our BLOB of reactivity, and notice the links between situations/events, and our thoughts, emotions, body sensations and behaviours or impulses, we might be able to respond in a way that best serves us, at least on a good day!

From thoughts come actions. From actions come all sorts of consequences. In which thoughts will we invest? Our great task is to see them clearly, so that we can choose which ones to act on and which simply to let be.  
- Joseph Goldstein

## New Ways of Seeing Your Own Thoughts

Here are some of the things you can do with your thoughts:

- Just watch them come in and leave without feeling that you have to follow them. It sometimes helps to visualize your thoughts as images on a screen, or clouds moving across the sky, or leaves floating down a stream.
- See if it is possible to notice the other parts of the BLOB that might give rise to the thoughts including emotions, body sensations and behaviours/impulses to act. Context is important since thoughts are just one link in the chain of events in your experience.
- View your thought as a mental event or sensation of the mind rather than a fact. It may be true that this event often occurs with other components of experience like emotions or body sensations. It is tempting to think of it as being true. It is still up to you to decide whether to believe it is true and how you want to deal with it.
- Write your thoughts down on paper, type them, or say them out loud. This lets you see them in a way that is less emotional and overwhelming. Also, the pause between having the thought and writing it down or giving it voice can give you a moment to reflect on its meaning.
- Ask yourself the following questions:
  - Perhaps I am confusing a thought with a fact?
  - Perhaps I am jumping to conclusions?
  - Perhaps I am thinking in black-and-white terms?
  - Perhaps I am condemning myself totally because of one thing?
  - Perhaps I am concentrating on my weaknesses and forgetting my strengths?
  - Perhaps I am blaming myself for something that isn't my fault?
  - Perhaps I am judging myself?
  - Perhaps I am setting unrealistically high standards for myself so that I will fail?
  - Perhaps I am mind reading/crystal ball gazing?
  - Perhaps I am expecting perfection?
  - Perhaps I am overestimating disaster?
- You might also consider:
  - What are the consequences of thinking this way?
  - How would I have thought about it at another time, in another mood?
  - Are there alternatives, even if I don't believe them right now?

For particularly difficult thoughts, it may be helpful to take another look at them intentionally in a balanced, open state of mind, as part of your mindfulness practice. Let your 'wise mind' give its perspective, perhaps labeling the feeling out of which it arises, and holding a sense of curiosity, as best you can. You might say to yourself, for example: "Sadness is here", or "Here is the voice of anxiety", or "Here is the self-critical voice". See if it's possible to bring attitudes of kindness and curiosity to your own experience.

## Words of Inspiration

In this section, we have included a number of quotes and stories that might help you in exploring your own automatic thinking patterns and ways of working with them more skillfully.

### Stepping Back From Thought

...the simple act of recognizing your thoughts as thoughts can free you from the distorted reality they often create and allow for more clear-sightedness and a greater sense of manageability in your life.

This liberation from the tyranny of the thinking mind comes directly out of the meditation practice itself. When we spend some time each day in a state of non-doing, observing the flow of the breath and the activity of our mind and body, without getting caught up in that activity, we are cultivating calmness and mindfulness hand in hand. As the mind develops stability and is less caught up in the content of thinking, we strengthen the mind's ability to concentrate and to be calm. And if each time we recognize a thought as a thought when it arises and register its content and discern the strength of its hold on us and the accuracy of its content, then each time we let go of it and come back to our breathing and a sense of our body, we are strengthening mindfulness. We come to know ourselves better and become more accepting of ourselves, not as we would like to be, but as we actually are.

- Jon Kabat-Zinn

### The Train of Associations

The thinking level of mind pervades our lives; consciously or unconsciously, we still spend much or most of our lives there. But meditation is a different process that does not involve discursive thought or reflection. Because meditation is not thought through the continuous process of silent observations, new kinds of understanding emerge.

We do not need to fight with thoughts or struggle against them or judge them. Rather, we can simply choose not to follow the thoughts once we are aware that they have arisen.

When we lose ourselves in thought, identification is strong. Thought sweeps our mind and carries it away, and, in a very short time, we can be carried far indeed. We hop a train of association, not knowing that we have hopped on, and certainly not knowing the destination.

Somewhere down the line, we may wake up and realize that we have been thinking, that we have been taken for a ride. And when we step down from the train, it may be in a very different mental environment from where we jumped aboard.

Take a few moments right now to look directly at the thoughts arising in your mind. As an exercise, you might close your eyes and imagine yourself sitting in a cinema watching an empty screen. Simply wait for thoughts to arise. Because you are not doing anything except waiting for thoughts to appear, you may become aware of them very quickly. What exactly are they? What happens to them? Thoughts are like magic displays that seem real when we are lost in them but then vanish upon inspection.

But what about the strong thoughts that affect us? We are watching, watching, watching, and then, all of a sudden – whoosh! – we are gone, lost in a thought. What is that about? What are the mind states or the particular kinds of thoughts that catch us again and again, So that we forget that they are just empty phenomena passing on?

It is amazing to observe how much power we give unknowingly to uninvited thoughts: ‘Do this, say that, remember, plan, obsess, judge.’ They have the potential to drive us quite crazy, and they often do!

The kinds of thoughts we have, and their impact on our lives, depends on our understanding of things. If we are in the clear, powerful space of just seeing thoughts arise and pass, then it does not really matter what kind of thinking appears in the mind; we can see our thoughts as the passing show that they are.

From thoughts come actions. From actions come all sorts of consequences. In which thoughts will we invest? Our great task is to seem them clearly, so that we can choose which ones to act on and which simply to let be.

-Adapted from Joseph Goldstein

John was on his way to school  
He was worried about the math test  
He wasn't sure if he would be able to control the class  
It wasn't part of a janitor's duty.

-Segal, Williams, and Teasdale, 2013

## **Attitudinal Foundations of Mindfulness-Patience**

Patience you must have.  
-Yoda (Return of the Jedi)

Patience is a form of wisdom. It demonstrates that we understand and accept the fact that sometimes things must unfold in their own time. A child may try to help a butterfly to emerge by breaking open its chrysalis. Usually, the butterfly doesn't benefit from this. Any adult knows that the butterfly can only emerge in its own time, that the process cannot be hurried.

In the same way we cultivate patience toward our own minds and bodies when practicing mindfulness. We intentionally remind ourselves that there is no need to be impatient with ourselves because we find the mind judging all the time, or because we are tense or agitated or frightened, or because we have been practicing for some time and nothing positive seems to have happened. We give ourselves room to have these experiences. Why? Because we are having them anyway! When they come up, they are our reality, they are part of our life unfolding in this moment. So, we treat ourselves as well as we would treat the butterfly. Why rush through some moments to get to other, “better” ones? After all, each one is your life in that moment.

When you practice being with yourself in this way, you are bound to find that your mind has “a mind of its own.” We have already seen in Chapter 1 that one of its favorite activities is to wander into the past and

into the future and lose itself in thinking.

Some of its thoughts are pleasant. Others are painful and anxiety producing. In either case thinking itself exerts a strong pull on our awareness. Much of the time our thoughts overwhelm our perception of the present moment.

They cause us to lose our connection to the present.

Patience can be a particularly helpful quality to invoke when the mind is agitated. It can help us to accept this wandering tendency of the mind while reminding us that we don't have to get caught up in its travels.

Practicing patience reminds us that we don't have to fill up our moments with activity and with more thinking in order for them to be rich. In fact it helps us to re-member that quite the opposite is true.

To be patient is simply to be completely open to each moment, accepting it in its fullness, knowing that, like the butterfly, things can only unfold in their own time.

-Jon Kabat-Zinn, Full Catastrophe Living

## 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 (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.

3. The Pause with the Physical Barometer (and bringing kindness)

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. If possible, bring kindness to your own experience.

## Home Practice Log

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

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